Systemic Resource Inequity and the Marginalization of Black Women in Soccer

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Despite the global expansion and professionalization of soccer, Black women remain significantly underrepresented at elite collegiate, professional, and leadership levels. This commentary explores the systemic barriers that sustain this disparity. Central to the analysis is the profound resource gap between Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Using Resource Dependency Theory as a framework, the article illustrates how chronic underfunding in HBCU athletic departments leads to substandard facilities, smaller staff sizes, and a critical lack of essential equipment. From a sport social work perspective, the article argues that playing under these conditions negatively impacts mental well-being, athlete confidence, and perceived safety. This work advocates for a multi-faceted approach to equity, calling for targeted investment and specialized research into the unique needs of Black female soccer players to ensure their health, performance, and long-term participation in the sport.

Key words: Black women in soccer; HBCU athletics; Resource inequity; Sports social work; Athlete well-being

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Introduction

The underrepresentation of Black women in soccer, particularly at elite collegiate, professional, and leadership levels, represents a fundamental equity challenge (Gonzalez, 2023). Research indicates a clear disparity in participation rates compared to White counterparts (Lapchick et al., 2023). Systemic barriers, most notably socioeconomic disparities, play a significant role, as the financial prerequisites for elite development, such as access to quality coaching, training facilities, and expensive travel teams, disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Furthermore, cultural factors and a lack of media visibility for Black female soccer players can limit positive role models and discourage participation among young Black girls (Baxter, 2023). The consequences of this lack of diversity extend beyond statistics, impacting team dynamics and failing to fully reflect the diverse communities that the sport aims to serve.

The purpose of this commentary is to acknowledge the systemic barriers that hinder the participation and success of Black women in soccer. Specifically, resource inequities among college settings (i.e., HBCUs and PWIs) exist which lead to athletes playing in inadequate footwear replaced at a substandard frequency leading to athletes' feelings of marginalization and not mattering, as well as perceptions of physical pain and risk of injury (Pennington et al., 2026ab; Prempeh & Pennington, 2026ab). In response to this article, a sports social worker would (1) recognize soccer players at economic disadvantage experience feelings of 'otherness' and marginalization; (2) recognize mental health and mental well-being are negatively affected by playing under the above conditions; and (3) advocate for equity in the soccer space.

Inequitable Working Conditions and Facilities

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have long served as vital centers for education, culture, and social mobility, often operating under conditions of systemic capital deprivation compared to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (HBCU Money, 2025). This chronic underfunding of the institutions as a whole cascade directly into their athletic departments, creating profound and persistent resource disparities that hinder competitiveness, impede facility maintenance, and limit the capacity to support student-athletes fully (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). Academic literature consistently frames this resource gap using theoretical perspectives, such as Resource Dependency Theory, which posits that an organization's resources determine its overall power and sustainability, demonstrating that HBCUs are the most under-resourced members of the NCAA (Elliott & Kellison, 2019).

A key theme in the literature is the vast difference in annual athletics expenditures and revenue generation between HBCUs and PWIs. Studies comparing athletic budgets confirm that HBCU peer groups spend significantly less than their PWI counterparts across all major categories, including operating expenses, head coach salaries, recruiting, and athletic aid (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). For example, annual athletics expenditures for MEAC and SWAC institutions often average between $11 million and $12 million, figures that are dwarfed by the budgets of Power Five conference schools, which can exceed $150 million (HBCU Money, 2025).

The under-resourced nature of HBCU athletics manifests tangibly in substandard facilities and aging infrastructure. Scholars and coaches have noted that the difference in facilities (e.g., fields, weight rooms, training centers) is a visible consequence of systematic underfunding, with HBCU teams often unable to provide the same resources that are "second

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nature" at well-funded PWIs (Elliott, Kellison, & Cianfrone, 2019). This lack of funding for long-term initiatives, such as facility renovations and additions, can negatively affect recruitment and the overall student-athlete experience (Southern Regional Education Board, 2023).

Furthermore, administrators and coaches at HBCUs often operate with smaller staff sizes and are forced to take on more responsibilities (e.g., coaching/teaching alongside administrative duties) and are paid significantly less than their PWI peers (Elliott & Kellison, 2019). The lack of dedicated marketing or external relations staff is also cited as a barrier to maximizing revenue generation and engaging potential sponsors (Elliott, Kellison, & Cianfrone, 2019).

Factors in Decreased Representation on HBCU Rosters

There are various factors contributing to limited representation of Black women in soccer at all levels of competition. However, a frequently discussed contributor is the “pay-to-play” system. Not just the existence of a barrier that keeps Black women from being able to play club soccer due to financial hardships, but a pathway that has long-since served as a major pool of visibility, development, and opportunity. Within women’s soccer, there are several club leagues in which many of today’s collegiate and professional athletes participated growing up. These leagues most notably include Elite Clubs National League and the Girls’ Academy. To play in these leagues, parents pay several thousand dollars annually over years in hopes of increasing the likelihood of their daughters playing collegiately.

Recruitment: Visibility, Talent evaluation, and Development

High school soccer holds little to any value to current college recruiters and coaches. Coaches rarely attend high school soccer games, instead turning attention to players competing in club soccer, which receives both national and international visibility for talent to be evaluated (Select Generation, 2025). This means that many of the Black women who play soccer only for their high school team due to financial reasons are rarely being evaluated by college scouts. As a result, the window of both exposure and opportunity is diminished for a large percentage of Black women. College recruiting is about evaluating the most talented prospects. Women playing club soccer play the sport year-round. Meaning they are not only being evaluated year-round, but are continuously improving, as opposed to women playing exclusively high school soccer within a short, narrow season (Select Generation, 2025). Women who can only afford to play high school soccer will consistently be at a disadvantage compared to women in systems that include the best coaches and developmental staff.

International Recruiting

Women of Color are at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunity to play college soccer, representing just 9% of all collegiate women’s soccer rosters (NCAA, 2026). Over the last few years, the sport has seen a growing trend in soccer programs recruiting in Asia, Europe, Central America, and Canada, as international players account for 45.5% of women’s college soccer rosters. Of those international players, 19.5% play in the National Athletic Intercollegiate Association (NAIA), the league in which all HBCU’s play (RosterWise, n.d.). Therefore, Black women are being recruited against an increased pool of international candidates who have surpassed overall representation within the sport. With the trend of international recruitment

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growing and socioeconomic and financial difficulties faced by young Black women, disproportionate representation will continue to grow.

Competitive and Policy-Related Disadvantages

Resource limitations directly impact HBCU athletic competitiveness and create unique policy challenges: (a) "Guarantee Games" and Competitive Disparity: HBCU football programs often participate in "guarantee games" against higher-resourced PWIs to generate much-needed revenue, receiving a payment for an almost guaranteed, demoralizing loss (Journey Magazine, 2019). While this provides financial intake, research suggests the contracts may not be as lucrative as they should be, and the talent disparity remains a key issue, primarily driven by the ability of PWIs to offer better resources and exposure to recruits (Journey Magazine, 2019; Elliott & Kellison, 2019); (b) NCAA Policies: NCAA policies, such as the Academic Performance Program (APP) and its metrics (Academic Progress Rate and Graduation Success Rate), have been criticized for unfairly penalizing under-resourced HBCUs (SLR, 2022). By holding institutions to standards without accounting for the inherent disparities in institutional resources available to support student success, the policy can inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequalities and threaten postseason eligibility, further limiting revenue opportunities (SLR, 2022); and (c) Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL): Recent policy changes surrounding NIL and scholar-athlete compensation pose a new challenge for HBCUs, which must find ways to compete for top talent in a landscape where PWIs can leverage their massive resources and alumni networks to establish lucrative deals (Southern Regional Education Board, 2023).

Policy Recommendations

From a sport social work perspective, addressing the inequities experienced by Black female soccer players requires more than providing individual counseling or helping athletes adapt to challenging environments. These observations and interactions with athlete distress should serve as catalysts for policy reform. When multiple athletes report concerns regarding inadequate equipment, unsafe playing conditions, limited access to medical care, or feelings of marginalization, these experiences should not be conceptualized solely as individual psychosocial concerns. Instead, recurring themes represent important indicators of structural inequities that merit organizational intervention. This systems-oriented approach reflects the social work profession's commitment to social justice and advocacy by addressing environmental conditions that contribute to individual well-being (Newman et al., 2024).

Accordingly, collegiate athletic departments (or the NCAA as a whole) should move beyond broad commitments to equity and establish measurable standards for athlete health, safety, and resource allocation. Rather than expecting historically under-resourced institutions to replicate the budgets of highly resourced Power Four institutions, governing bodies should establish minimum standards of care that ensure every student-athlete has equitable access to essential resources. These standards should include appropriate athletic training coverage, strength and conditioning services, mental health resources, injury-prevention programming, safe playing and training facilities, and access to sport-specific equipment. Recent NCAA Mental Health Best Practices emphasize that student-athlete well-being is influenced by several levels of the athletic environment and recommend institution-wide plans that address risk and protective

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factors while ensuring access to licensed mental health professionals (National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA], 2026).

In addition to establishing minimum standards, institutions should implement annual resource equity audits that evaluate the lived experiences of student-athletes rather than relying solely on overall athletic expenditures. Audits should examine athletic trainer-to-athlete ratios, equipment and footwear replacement practices, access to rehabilitation services, facility quality, strength and conditioning resources, mental health availability, travel conditions, and staffing patterns across programs. When disparities are identified, athletic departments should be required to develop measurable corrective action plans with timelines for implementation. Such accountability mechanisms acknowledge that organizational conditions (not simply athlete resilience) shape health, performance, and psychological well-being (Coombs & Bagley, 2025).

Because this commentary highlights footwear as a tangible demonstration of structural inequity, athletic departments should also adopt written policies governing equipment evaluation and replacement. Decisions regarding footwear should be based on fit, wear patterns, injury history, and medical need rather than predetermined budget cycles. Student athletes should have confidential mechanisms to report equipment-related concerns without fear of negative consequences related to playing time or team status. Repeated reports of equipment deficiencies should trigger administrative review and resource allocation rather than relying on athletes to continue competing under potentially unsafe conditions (Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Sport social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge individual clinical practice with macro-level advocacy. Beyond providing counseling services, sport social workers can identify recurring psychosocial concerns, conduct organizational needs assessments, collect anonymous athlete feedback, participate in athletic department health and safety committees, educate coaches and administrators regarding culturally responsive care, and advocate for equitable institutional policies. Rather than viewing athlete distress solely through an individual lens, sport social workers are ethically obligated to examine how organizational policies, resource allocation, and institutional culture contribute to psychological well-being. This approach aligns with the NASW Code of Ethics, which identifies social justice and advocacy for vulnerable populations as central professional responsibilities, and reflects current NCAA guidance emphasizing that healthy athletic environments require coordinated institutional commitment rather than isolated clinical intervention (Beasley et al., 2022).

Ultimately, the responsibility for addressing inequity should not rest on Black female athletes' ability to demonstrate resilience in under-resourced environments. Resilience is undoubtedly a strength, but it should never become a substitute for equitable resources. Sustainable change requires institutions, governing bodies, and policymakers to create systems that ensure all athletes have access to the resources necessary to participate safely, perform optimally, and thrive throughout their athletic careers (Ojemaye et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The resource challenges faced by HBCU athletic departments are inseparable from the historical and systemic underfunding of the institutions themselves. While these programs hold immense cultural pride and serve as vital engagement tools for alumni and the community, their financial sustainability is constantly threatened by inadequate operational budgets, aging facilities, and policies that fail to account for the deep-seated financial inequalities in American higher education (HBCU Money, 2025). The underrepresentation of Black female athletes

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underscores the systemic challenges related to access, resources, and culturally appropriate support (Pennington et al., 2025a, b). Addressing the systemic barriers that limit the participation of Black women requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing initiatives to increase access to quality training, promote equitable talent evaluation, and foster inclusive and supportive environments. Research specifically examining the footwear needs and experiences of Black female soccer players is notably scarce, highlighting an important area for extension to an often unheard and unseen, yet vital, athlete population (Prempeh & Pennington, 2025a, b).

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