

'Parity' at the 2023 Women's World Cup

Shortly after USA defeated the Netherlands to win the 2019 Women's World Cup, FIFA announced unanimous support from its Council to [expand the 2023 tournament field](#) from [24 to 32 nations](#). Citing the success of the 2019 event in France, FIFA's press release suggested the eight additional qualifying slots would grow women's football with more incentive for national federation support.

The expansion reaches far beyond the eight additional participating teams; it means that, from now on, dozens more member associations will organise their women's football programme knowing they have a realistic chance of qualifying. The FIFA Women's World Cup is the most powerful trigger for the professionalization of the women's game, but it comes but once every four years and is only the top of a much greater pyramid. In the meantime, we all have a duty to do the groundwork and strengthen women's football development infrastructure across all confederations.

-[Gianni Infantino, FIFA President](#)

First contested in 1991, only 12 nations competed at the Women's World Cup in China. Expansion to 16 nations in 1999, followed by an increase to 24 for the 2015 event in Canada, slowly widened the pool for Women's World Cup qualification. But with enlargement [came concerns about parity and quality](#) - would the game benefit from including teams (particularly from the Global South) with little to no football infrastructure and playing levels below the top sides from the Global North? Would new opportunities outweigh the possible embarrassment of lopsided competition? Thailand, for example, lost 13-0 to the United States and 5-1 to Sweden during the 2019 group stage in 2019. With CAF (Africa), CONCACAF (North/Central America, Caribbean), and CONMEBOL (South America) guaranteed one new slot each (Europe added 3 qualifying opportunities), nations from the Global South with limited women's football heritage and infrastructure were certain to fill many of the additional places in the 2023 tournament.

Expectedly, 6 of the tournament's 8 debutants were from the Global South:

Tournament Debutants - Global South		Tournament Debutants - Global North	
Haiti (CONCACAF)	Morocco (CAF)	Ireland (UEFA)	Portugal (UEFA)
Panama (CONCACAF)	Philippines (AFC)		
Viet Nam (AFC)	Zambia (CAF)		

Considering the FIFA rankings heading into the Group Stage of the World Cup, it was expected most tournament newcomers - and most Global South participants - would be eliminated early. 12 of the lowest ranked 13 nations are considered representatives of the Global South:

FIFA Ranking World Cup Participants (Overall)	Participating Nation	Geopolitical Region
1 (1)	United States	Global North
2 (2)	Germany	Global North
3 (3)	Sweden	Global North
4 (4)	England (UK)	Global North
5 (5)	France	Global North
6 (6)	Spain	Global North
7 (7)	Canada	Global North
8 (8)	Brazil	Global South
9 (9)	Netherlands	Global North
10 (10)	Australia	Global North
11 (11)	Japan	Global North
12 (12)	Norway	Global North
13 (13)	Denmark	Global North
14 (14)	China	Global South
15 (16)	Italy	Global North
16 (17)	South Korea	Global North
17 (20)	Switzerland	Global North
18 (21)	Portugal	Global North
19 (22)	Ireland	Global North
20 (25)	Colombia	Global South
21 (26)	New Zealand	Global North
22 (28)	Argentina	Global South
23 (32)	Viet Nam	Global South
24 (36)	Costa Rica	Global South
25 (40)	Nigeria	Global South
26 (43)	Jamaica	Global South
27 (46)	Philippines	Global South
28 (52)	Panama	Global South
29 (53)	Haiti	Global South
30 (54)	South Africa	Global South
31 (72)	Morocco	Global South
32 (77)	Zambia	Global South

However, the 2023 Women’s World Group [stages concluded with multiple surprise results](#) and close matches, as well as [unexpected qualifiers for the Round of 16](#) knockout phase of the tournament.

Lower Half Ranked Teams Progressing	Top Half Ranked Teams Eliminated
Morocco (31)	Germany (2)
South Africa (30)	Canada (7)
Jamaica (26)	Brazil (8)
Nigeria (25)	China (14)
Colombia (20)	Italy (15)
Switzerland (17)	South Korea (16)

Subsequently, a revised rankings table for the Round of 16 shows both the unexpected qualifiers from the group stage (5 of 8 bottom ranked teams advanced) and the dominance of the Global North – particularly with the only 2 Global South nations in the World Cup’s top 16 ranked nations (Brazil and China) eliminated:

FIFA Ranking World Cup Round of 16 (Overall)	Participating Nation	Geopolitical Region
1 (1)	United States	Global North
2 (3)	Sweden	Global North
3 (4)	England (UK)	Global North
4 (5)	France	Global North
5 (6)	Spain	Global North
6 (9)	Netherlands	Global North
7 (10)	Australia	Global North
8 (11)	Japan	Global North
9 (12)	Norway	Global North
10 (13)	Denmark	Global North
11 (20)	Switzerland	Global North
12 (25)	Colombia	Global South
13 (40)	Nigeria	Global South
14 (43)	Jamaica	Global South
15 (54)	South Africa	Global South
16 (72)	Morocco	Global South

Heading into the Round of 16, it is expected Global North (GN) nations be favoured to advance with the 5 remaining Global South (GS) representatives the bottom ranked teams. But the Global South is guaranteed one (surprise) entry into the Quarter Finals, with Colombia (ranked 25th by FIFA) facing Jamaica (FIFA ranking 43rd). The matchups for the Round of 16 are:

Switzerland (GN) v Spain (GN)	Australia (GN) v Denmark (GN)
Netherlands (GN) v South Africa (GS)	France (GN) v Morocco (GS)
Japan (GN) v Norway (GN)	England (GN) v Nigeria (GS)
Sweden (GN) v USA (GN)	*Colombia (GS) v Jamaica (GS)

A long-term question remains - will the success of these Global South nations lead to enhanced football infrastructures as FIFA President Infantino suggests? And more widely, will the performance of nations that rank amongst the lowest World Cup participants in metrics such as the [United Nation's Gender Inequality Index](#) (Nigeria last; Morocco 29/32; Colombia 28/32; South Africa 26/32; Jamaica 23/32) [impact ideas about gender in "beyond sport" ways?](#)