

# England lose but women's football triumphs

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**Solidarity:** Ellen White comforts Steph Houghton after England's defeat by the USA last night.

Will the success of the Women's World Cup help in the wider battle for women's rights and equality? Many hope that millions of new fans will become a powerful movement for social justice.

First, the bad news if you're reading this in Britain: England lost.

Now, for the good news wherever you are: a new sport has taken its rightful place on the world stage. Many believe that it marks a tipping point in the long march to equality for women — not just in sport, but in every area of life.

The game itself had a bit of everything. England's familiar heartbreak over a missed penalty, that might have sent the game into extra time and a chance to make it to the final.

The glory of an equalising goal — and then the terrible sinking feeling as the Video Assistant Referee ruled it **offside**.

The uphill struggle of playing what was simply a stronger and better side: superb, physical athletes, brimming with confidence and a ruthless will to win.

Flowing, swift, daring moments of footballing poetry in motion. Ugly spells of fouling and scrapping.

And of course the final score: 2-1 to the USA.

But for many of the experts and commentators this morning, the bigger picture is this: the sport of women's football has surely come of age.

Exactly when that happened doesn't matter. At some point over the past few days, millions of men and women around the world have shed their resistance to the idea that women could be as entertaining as men when playing the world's most popular game.

They have set aside their prejudices and given it a go. And the evidence is that nearly all have been converted.

The estimate for last night's game is that over 10 million were watching. That makes it the biggest TV event of the year, exceeding the season finale of *Line of Duty*, which had 9.6 million viewers in June.

"The unprecedented popularity of this World Cup reflects two encouraging trends. First, the quality of play in the women's game has improved drastically, especially since the last tournament. Second, money is starting to flow into women's teams, making professional careers more viable. The two patterns are linked, and reinforce each other," says *The Economist*.

Above all, there is evidence that the sheer scale of the sport and its ability to cut across age, race, gender, politics and nationality is proving a huge boost in the battle for **equality** and social justice.

The US journalist Bridget Gordon writes today about the US team: "They've become a symbol for women's liberation, for feminism writ large [...] current and former players, from **Mia Hamm** all the way to **Alex Morgan**, are hailed as feminist icons [...] when the Women's National Team step out onto the pitch, they are also representing their gender."

### **Flash in the pan?**

It will take a lot more than an entertaining football tournament to make any serious changes in the battle for real equality, say some. History proves that waves of enthusiasm are soon over, and life quickly returns to normal.

Not at all, say more hopeful voices. These players represent something far more important in a world where the views of women are still too frequently ignored by men in power. Perception is everything. And millions are thinking differently about women this morning.