

Competitive Performance, Media Attention, and Commercial Value: An Analysis of the Differences Between Chinese Men's and Women's Football

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Abstract: Football is one of the most influential sports in the world, and it also has a wide mass base in China. However, in China, there is still a significant gap between men's football and women's football in terms of competitive performance, media attention and commercial value. As far as the Chinese men's national team is concerned, their performance in international competitions is not ideal; while the women's national team has not only achieved good results, but also maintained strong competitiveness. Nevertheless, the media coverage and commercial support of the men's football team not only far exceed that of the women's football team, but due to the long-term lack of continuous exposure, the women's football team has not received continuous exposure and sufficient investment. This study believes that traditional gender stereotypes are the root cause of this inequality. In response to this problem, we put forward policy support, improved the way of media coverage, and accelerated the marketisation process, hoping to promote the more balanced development of Chinese women's football and promote gender equality in the field of sports.

Keywords: Chinese women's football; Competitive performance; Media attention; Commercial value; Gender equality

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1. Introduction

When it comes to football, as one of the most influential sports in the world, it has a large mass base in China^[1]. However, there is a real problem in front of us: the gap between the Chinese men's football team and the women's football team is not only reflected in the competitive performance, but also in the media attention and commercial value.

As far as the men's football team is concerned, their performance in international competitions has been sluggish in recent years. In the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, the Chinese men's football team failed to advance to the final stage, which actually exposed their lack of competitiveness in Asia and even the world. On the other hand, the performance of the women's football team is eye-catching. Whether in the AFC Asian Cup or the World Cup, they have achieved good results. It is worth mentioning that they won the AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2022 and successfully qualified for the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup.

Although the women's football team has achieved such outstanding results in the international arena, their media exposure at home and abroad is far lower than that of the men's football team. Regardless of the result, the men's football team can always attract more media attention, while the women's football team, although they have excellent results, even in regular games,

can get very limited attention. At the same time, the gap between the two in terms of commercialisation is also quite large. Specifically, the commercial value of men's football in terms of sponsorship scale, advertising revenue and brand cooperation is obviously higher than that of women's football^[2]. We have to admit that although women's football has the potential to become a commercial field, its marketisation process is still lagging. Sponsors and competition broadcasting income are small, and there is a lack of sufficient financial support, and its commercial potential has not been fully exploited.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to systematically sort out the specific differences between Chinese men's and women's football in terms of competitive performance, media attention and commercial value, and try to analyse the role of gender factors. Through these analyses, this article strives to reveal how gender inequality affects the overall development of Chinese football. On this basis, some targeted suggestions are put forward to better promote the development of women's football.

2. Difference analysis

2.1. Gap in competitive performance

When it comes to the Chinese men's football team, their performance in international competitions has not been ideal for a long time. Take the men's football team in the World Cup final stage in 2002 as an example. It was the first and only time that the men's football team entered the World Cup final stage. However, the result was that they lost all three games and did not score a goal, failing to enter the knockout stage^[3]. This example clearly illustrates the problem: the performance of the men's football team in world-class competitions has indeed not been good. But surprisingly, even so, the men's football team has received a lot of financial support and resource investment. Whether it is the youth training system or the professional league, it continues to obtain development funds. But the problem is that due to some institutional factors, their overall competitive level has never really reached the requirements of top international teams^[4].

In contrast to the Chinese women's football team, their performance on the international stage is completely different from that of the men's football team. For the Asian Cup, the women's football team has won a total of 9 championships, and the results are quite brilliant. Especially in the 1999 Women's World Cup, they won the runner-up and became one of the top women's football teams in the world at that time. Especially in Asia, women's football has almost no rivals. In 2022, they won the Asian Cup again, and then advanced to the 2023 World Cup smoothly. Of course, we can't avoid the fact that compared with the world's top women's teams, the Chinese women's football team still has a gap. But judging from the performance at the Asian level alone, they are obviously much better than the men's football team, and now they are moving towards a higher goal step by step.

So, why does the men's football team get more money and resources, but the performance is not as good as the women's football team? Obviously, the root cause is the uneven distribution of resources^[5]. Although the men's football team has occupied the advantage of capital and resources for a long time, its performance is not worthy of these investments on the field. In fact, the resources of the women's football team have been relatively tight, but relying on more refined management and stronger hard work, they have used the limited resources to the extreme and achieved better results than the men's football team. This phenomenon is worth reflecting on.

2.2. Differences in media attention

When it comes to media attention, there is also a significant gap between Chinese men's and women's football. Although the men's football team has not performed well in international competitions, their media exposure has far exceeded that of the women's football team. Whether it is the Chinese Super League (CSL) or the national team, the men's football-related events are always in the headlines, attracting a lot of media coverage every season. It can be said that men's football has always been in the spotlight of the mainstream media, with high reporting frequency and attention. A study on Chinese sports media consumption points out that traditional gender norms largely affect which sports can get more media attention - people always feel that men's sports are more masculine and are more willing to consume this content^[6].

In contrast to the women's football team, the situation is completely different. Although they have achieved quite bright results in competitions such as the AFC Asian Cup and the FIFA Women's World Cup, media exposure is often only concentrated during the competition, and there are very few reports in ordinary leagues or ordinary games. What's more problematic is that even if there is a media report on women's football, it often focuses on the image or personal story of the players, rather than their competitive performance. To be honest, this biased reporting method further limits the public's attention to women's football. Academic research has also confirmed this point: including China, female athletes are more likely to be emphasised in personal or non-competitive attributes in media coverage than sports performance itself, which naturally leads to inequality in media attention ^[7].

Besides, on social media, the situation is similar. The attention of men's football fans is obviously higher than that of women's football. The fan base of the men's football team is huge, and the topic popularity and interaction level on the social platform are far higher than those of the women's football team. In the women's football team, the influence of social media is much weaker. Research shows that gender norms and consumption patterns do affect the participation of sports media: male sports dominate online discussions, and the participation of women's sports is relatively limited, even if they achieve good results on the field ^[6,7]. Generally speaking, men's football relies on continuous media coverage to consolidate its social status, while women's football still faces considerable challenges in terms of exposure and recognition.

2.3. Differences in commercial value

In terms of commercial value, the degree of industrialisation of Chinese men's football is obviously higher than that of women's football. This gap is mainly reflected in sponsorship, broadcasting rights and advertising revenue.

Take the Chinese Super League (CSL) as an example, it has attracted a large number of sponsors of well-known brands at home and abroad. At the same time, broadcasting rights and ticket sales have also provided considerable economic returns for clubs and players. Some studies have pointed out that CSL is regarded as one of the most commercially successful leagues in China, not only winning rich broadcasting contracts, but also attracting many head sponsors ^[8]. Speaking of players' salaries, the annual salary of top male football players is often several times higher than that of female football players. Research has also confirmed this: the income of top male players in CSL is obviously higher than that of female players, which actually reflects the higher market value and more mature business model of men's football ^[9].

In contrast, the situation of women's football is completely different. Although the Chinese women's football team has performed quite well in international competitions, they are far behind the men's football team in terms of commercial income. Specifically, the broadcasting rights and advertising income from women's football events are very limited. Combined with low media attention, the market potential of women's football has not been fully exploited this means the market potential of women's football remains largely untapped. At present, women's football teams still face many difficulties in winning media attention and attracting sponsorship, among which gender bias is also an important reason, which directly lowers their overall commercialisation level ^[7].

3. Strategies and paths

3.1. The root cause of gender inequality

The root cause of gender inequality in Chinese football lies in traditional social culture and stereotyped gender role concepts. Although football has a long history, it has long been regarded as a "male sport". In such a cultural context, it is generally felt that men are more suitable for those projects with high physical requirements and fierce competition, while women are often framed in some relatively gentle and traditional activities ^[10]. The impact of this social and cultural prejudice exists in all aspects. It directly leads to significant gaps in resource allocation, media attention and social recognition. These gaps have directly led to the obvious advantages of men's football in terms of capital investment, infrastructure construction and training opportunities, while women's football has long been at a relative disadvantage, where it is difficult to compete for resources.

3.2. Strategies for improving women's football

Policy support: To promote the development of women's football, government support is a key part. First, the government should increase its financial investment in women's football, especially in the areas of grassroots youth training and infrastructure construction, to ensure that the hardware conditions of women's football can reduce the gap with those of men's football. Second, the government should introduce relevant supportive policies to encourage enterprises and all sectors of society to invest in women's football. For example, giving sponsors some exemption policies through tax incentives can attract more enterprises to enter this market to a certain extent. In general, policy support helps to change the current gender inequality and can also really promote the overall development of women's football.

Media improvement: The media is very important in improving society's recognition and attention to women's football. To change the current gender bias in the media, first of all, it is important to increase the frequency of coverage of women's football matches. You can't just remember to report during the competition, and you have to ensure that they have enough exposure at ordinary times. Secondly, the media should pay more attention to the competitive performance of women's football, and pay more attention to the technical ability and tactical execution of athletes, instead of emphasising their appearance or personal stories. In addition, social media and emerging media platforms are good channels to enhance the influence of women's football. It is suggested to encourage more content production related to women's football, especially through short videos and live broadcasts, which are easier to attract the attention of young audiences.

Marketisation suggestions: Promoting the commercialisation of women's football is a key step to improving its overall value. First of all, we should make more efforts to build the brand image of women's football and improve market recognition. The brand effect can be enhanced by planning the endorsement of star players or holding related activities. At the same time, the commercial operation of the competition also needs to become more professional and diversified, so as to attract more sponsorship and broadcasting resources from enterprises. Only when TV broadcasting, ticket sales and other revenue channels are stabilised can the commercial potential of women's football be truly released. In addition, it is equally important to strengthen the cooperation between women's football and commercial brands. We can position women's football as an important platform for brand promotion and attract more international brands to sponsor, so as to further enhance their competitiveness in the market.

3.3. Ways to promote gender equality

- (1) **Cultural change in concept:** To truly solve the problem of gender inequality, the key is to start from social concepts and change those traditional views on gender. Through education, media publicity and other channels, the public can become more aware of and accept gender equality. As far as football is concerned, society should respect the efforts and achievements of female athletes more, and try to avoid making unfair comparisons between female athletes and male athletes. Only when the conceptual level has really changed will the long-term development of women's football have a relatively positive social environment.
- (2) **Policy and public opinion support:** Policy support and public opinion guidance also play a key role in promoting gender equality. The government can introduce fairer sports policies, encourage the equal development of men's and women's sports, and provide more opportunities and platforms for women's football. The media should also take on the responsibility of guiding public awareness, take the initiative to create an environment to support the development of women's football, and ensure that social resources can be distributed more fairly in women's games. These two aspects are actually indispensable.
- (3) **Continuous social investment:** Continuous social investment is the key to ensuring the long-term implementation of gender equality policies. It is worth emphasising that whether these investments come from the government, enterprises, or ordinary fans, they are very necessary for women's football. With the slow improvement of the social influence of women's football, its commercial potential and competitive level will also have more room for development, which can not only promote gender equality but also promote the diversified development of the entire sports industry.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that there is indeed a significant gap between Chinese men's and women's football in terms of competitive performance, media attention and commercial value.

Although the men's football team has obvious advantages in terms of resources and social identity, it has not broken through the bottleneck in competition for many years. On the contrary, the women's football team has shown a higher level of competitiveness in Asian and international competitions, which is worth pondering. However, the problem is that deep-rooted gender inequality has led women's football to lag far behind men's football in terms of resource investment, media exposure and commercialisation. Gender stereotypes and socio-cultural prejudices are the root cause of this inequality.

In order to change this situation, for the development of Chinese women's football, this study puts forward several directions: strengthening policy support, increasing media exposure, and promoting the commercialisation process. These efforts can gradually improve the status quo of women's football and further promote gender equality in sports.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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