

Causes and Solutions to the Current Dilemma of Chinese Youth Women's Soccer

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Abstract: Chinese teenage women's soccer is often overlooked in China's overall efforts to improve sports literacy and develop soccer talent. This research paper explores the reasons for why Chinese girls' soccer has not expanded in popularity. My research methods included an online survey with over 100 respondents and extensive literature review, covering Chinese sociology and studies on Chinese soccer. This paper will argue that Chinese girls soccer's development is hindered by traditional ideas in society around gender and insufficient government support. These social elements limit the popularity of amateur female soccer, and also creates unfriendly sports policies for female athletes, and slows down the development of Chinese girls' soccer. Based on the current situation and needs of change and innovation in Chinese women's soccer, this paper examines the existing problems and offers detailed solutions for improving the imbalance between men and women's soccer.

Keywords: Chinese youth women's soccer, gender discrimination, professional training, exposure, power structure, solution

1. Introduction

In 2020, the Chinese Football Association issued Several Measures of the Chinese Football Association on Further Promoting the Reform and Development of Football, which included "formulating the guidelines for Youth football Training and the training plan for elite players". It shows the importance of youth football training, of which the girls' youth training is an important part. However, current researches find that the attention paid by the society to Chinese women's soccer is far less than that of men's soccer, same applies to youth soccer.

Changing the current problems is an important step to achieve gender equality at present. Only by cultivating young female football talents and laying the groundwork for the development of women's football, can we have the opportunity to increase the exposure of women's football and achieve greater goals such as equal pay for equal work between men and women in the future.

1.1. Background

Women's soccer appeared in England in the 16th century and was first played in 1890. In 1921, the English Football Association (FA) banned women from playing football and entering club facilities. They said the game was "inappropriate for women" and "should not be encouraged". The ban has

completely shattered emerging women's soccer. In 1971, the same year the ban ended, the first National Women's Cup was held in England. With more and more women players overturning cultural restrictions, women's soccer became popular and normal.

The 1990s witnessed the rapid development of women's football in the world. In 1991, FIFA officially held the first World Women's Soccer Championship. Five years later, the International Olympic Committee listed women's soccer as the official event of the 26th Olympic Games, and women's soccer fully entered the world arena. Until now, women's World Cup is held every year. Currently, 29 million women and girls play soccer around the world. In the UK, ratings for the Women's Premier League (WSL) are set to grow by more than 350 per cent a year thanks to a new broadcast deal for the 2020/21 season.

The FIFA Women's World Cup has undoubtedly had a huge impact on promoting and expanding women's soccer. With each successive Women's World Cup, the number of spectators has climbed. The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France was watched by more than 1.12 billion people, making it the most prominent women's sporting event in the world.

1.2. Problems

Women's soccer is booming all over the world, but in China, is nascent. Men's soccer receives financial support from the Chinese government, however, they have failed to win major global tournaments.

Although the Women's Super League has been held, it has not successfully expanded the population of Women's soccer players in China. So far, the number of professional women's soccer players in China is less than 1,000. In the Women's Premier League, for example, there are 16 teams with more than 20 players each and fewer than 400 players in the highest women's league. In comparison, currently, there are 30,000 women in Japan, 1 million in Germany, a staggering 3 million in the United States.

Chinese women's soccer team is now facing two problems. First, the traditional beliefs still exists. The elder generation still believes that women are not suitable for this kind of sport, which is socially defined as being "masculine". [1]Therefore, teenage women's soccer training is facing deficiency. Second, there is no strong exposure and attention, nor attendance rate, resulting few amounts of capital and development potential. For a long time, the value of women's soccer has been used to reflect the futility of men's football and to express patriotic feelings. Most of the time, women's soccer remains unknown and neglected. Also, it was not until 2015 that women's Super league and Women's Super League came back to the public again. The women's Super League did not have a formal broadcast contract until the same year.

1.3. Methods

The research methods used for this research was survey distribution and literature review. This research is shaped by identity as a Chinese high school student who plays soccer and is interested in gender studies. After designing the questionnaire, I forwarded the website of the questionnaire in the Wechat group to obtain rolling samples. I used two questionnaires, one aimed at teenagers at my age and one to middle-aged parents. Each questionnaire has 5-6 questions, mostly multiple choice, allowing respondents to choose yes or no. The main content of the questionnaire for young people is: whether the school supports women's football, such as whether it has a competition or a club. With questions such as "Does your school have a women's soccer club"; "Does your school have a women's soccer tournament"; "If you are a female, did you ever practice soccer in school growing up"... The main content of the questionnaire for parents is: whether they support the development of Chinese women's football team and whether they are willing to let their daughters participate in football

training. With questions such as “Do you support Chinese women's soccer”; “Do you support the development of youth girls' soccer in China”; “If you would like your daughter to have soccer practice”...

There were restrictions on the participants' age/family status—they must be teenagers to answer the first questionnaire, and they have to have children to answer the second one.

A total of 110 responses were collected, including 54 for adolescents and 56 for parents.

At the same time, I also collected a wider range of secondary data. By searching the data of Chinese women's football on the web, looking up the research materials related to the development status of Chinese women's football, as well as the domestic and foreign literature on the cultivation of youth football, I combined this previous research with my survey results to answer the research question "Why has Chinese girls' soccer not gained in popularity?".

2. Literature Review

According to the search engine of CNKI (Chinese National Knowledge Internet), there are 10,712 papers published from 1998 to 2022, and 1,222 papers are related to "Chinese women's soccer", but only 33 papers related to "Chinese youth women's soccer".

Research on female youth soccer in China is still in its initial stage, and the time and attention spent on it is insufficient. From reading existing research, it is found that some paper's foci are superficial: they only lay out the data available online, then make sweeping analyses, and list existing problems, and only analyze data and graphs, but do not analyze the reasons for this status quo or propose solutions. Some papers proposed solutions for how to develop Chinese youth women's soccer, but the solutions are generalized, without specifying the solutions or providing solutions to specific problems. For example, a few of them talked about the government should make new policies to support the development without detailing specific aspects. Also, most of the solutions are not forward-looking or insightful, or feasible.

My research builds off of two key articles, "Value appeal and strategy of the construction of integrated training system for Chinese youth Women's Soccer Team" published in April 2022, written by Min Dong and Guozhong Zou [2]; and "Research on current situation and trend of development of adolescent female football in China" published in 2014, written by Bao Qi [3]. My research builds off of the research in these papers, which had in-depth analyses of how to improve this situation, such as the matching strategies to each problem with specific reasons. At the same time, these papers span a large period of time, with only three relevant papers published from '21 to the present, and there is little difference between the '08 paper and the '22 paper talking about the "current situation", which shows that Chinese youth women's soccer has not developed much in more than a decade. This research situation shows that the reform of Chinese soccer is imminent, and the attention and research on Chinese women's football and youth women's football should be more in-depth. My research builds off of their research, and expands it to include primary data collected from a survey.

3. Analysis

3.1. Social Attitude & Traditional Ideas

Based on my research, a primary reason for the lack of popularity of girls soccer is the persistence of traditional Chinese beliefs. According to questionnaires distributed for this research, gender stereotypes play a major role and people believe that academics is the only way to achieve success. This mindset stops young girls from pursuing professional sports career. Lastly, a general social attitude towards women's soccer hinders girl's soccer.

The first questionnaire targeted middle-aged parents. A total of 56 people answered the questionnaire. This questionnaire contains questions about whether they support Chinese women's soccer, or whether they want their children to participate in soccer training, etc.

95% of the survey respondents answered that they support the development of women's soccer%; but only a small number of parents checked the box "Would you choose to send your daughter to soccer training as a long-term hobby", which is 38%. While people are interested in women's soccer flourishing, they are also concerned about the lack of exposure and attention to women's soccer. However, few people are able to break the gender stereotypes of soccer. Chinese traditions still exist everywhere around us, and gender stereotypes are implicitly engraved into our lives [4].

Soccer is in opposition to traditional ideas of femininity. Physical collisions, intense competition, strength and speed are characteristics that define playing soccer. Therefore, in traditional Chinese society, soccer is supposed to be played by men. Whether it is in campus sports brochures, or in illustrations related to soccer in magazines or web pages, men are generally represented by these images. Such a subtle influence will lead to such gender stereotypes still exist and cannot be overturned.

It is not only because of gender stereotypes that the popularity of women's soccer among Chinese youth is low. Another traditional Chinese mindset around the importance of academics and success also hinders girls in soccer. While most parents offer their children a good education and a stable job as their future route, a career in sports is traditionally perceived as a high-risk, low-income occupation. Society pays more respect to well-educated people than athletes [5].

Chinese society separates sports from leisure, therefore, sports are professionally oriented in China. The general attitude in China is that "All things are inferior, only education is superior", quoted from the a poet Wang Zhu from the Song Dynasty, this belief stays the same from imperial examination system to the college entrance examination in today's society. Chinese students can only rely on institutionalized systematic learning, by good grades to break the class fortress. At the same time, the social system and common cognition of the Chinese people put better education in the first place, and the way to get a good education is to study hard, so they separated physical education from cultural education [6]. Children in youth training do not have the opportunity and time to receive a good education, so a career in sports is socially conceived as an uneducated profession, contrary to the stable life that most people seek. Therefore, parents are more reluctant to send their children to sports activities.

Similarly, the Chinese women's soccer team is not valued by society only for its own sake. The poor performance of the Chinese men's soccer team is inversely proportional to the government's investment in it, which has led to social ridicule. The dazzling results of the Chinese women's soccer team serve as the best comparison to mock the Chinese men's soccer team because the Chinese women's soccer team is fighting on its own without any corresponding help from the government. Most people who comment on the women's soccer team always add insults to the men's soccer team at the end of their sentences, which makes the focus on the women's soccer team not about women's soccer itself, but as a comparison to men's and unimportant role to set off the men's soccer team. In addition, the Chinese women's soccer team carries patriotic sentiments, and most people do not care what the women's soccer team does, only what they can contribute to the national honor. The big fluctuation in the ratings for the Women's Asian Cup final can show this trend. The Chinese women's soccer team started with a headwind, and after scoring two goals in a row, the ratings fell from the original 1.78% to 1.37%, while after the women's first goal, the ratings climbed to 1.6% and reached 2.21% in overtime. This suggests that most people's interest in women's soccer is not about women's soccer itself, but about what value women's soccer can bring, and when they think women's soccer cannot bring value, they stop paying attention to them.

3.2. Insufficient Government Support on Policy & Finance

The Chinese government support for girl's soccer, both in terms of policies and financial support, is insufficient.

Resulting from the data collected in the questionnaire, the majority of my peers do not have girls' soccer games in their schools, and soccer club and varsity tryouts are limited to boys. According to data collected in my questionnaire, with 54 respondents, 83% indicated that "my school does not hold women soccer matches" and "my school does not have women soccer clubs". In addition, Chinese middle schools and high schools can have special placement in elite athletes, allowing them to enroll in top schools without having high scores in exams. However, according to the recruitment of students' information that those schools show online, most of the list recruit boys only. In one city's admission season in 2021, 34 high schools have this special enrollment project, 32 of them have the program for soccer athletes; however, only 3 of them listed requirements for women soccer.

As data searched from Baidu showed, the popularity of youth women's soccer in China is relatively low, with only two youth women's soccer clubs in Sichuan province, and basically no amateur women's soccer in addition to professional training. Teenage females interested in soccer cannot find training venues or trainers because female soccer players of the same age are headed for a professional path, and the only ones whose level matches are younger girls who are also headed for a professional path in the future. There are basically no women's soccer clubs or training opportunities that support the sport as a hobby. Due to this scarcity of knowledge, it is easy for parents and society to misunderstand it and believe that learning to play soccer is a tiring and painful path of no return. However, the perception at the social level is also based on the government policy, from the beginning to the end, the Chinese women's football training system is professionally oriented, and the general sentiments is that performance is what matters. The fact that China's women's soccer team was once at the top in Asia made the trend of professionalization prevalent, but such reforms did not significantly improve the performance of women's soccer, but rather enhanced the pursuit of results, solidifying the grassroots youth women's soccer training to the professional path of only pursuing results. Premature specialization is not conducive to the physical and mental development of young people, and it is not conducive to the long-term development of youth training, which also isolates young people who are interested in soccer. [7] The overall success rate and efficiency of professional training is low, and the vicious circle of the status quo needs support from new government policies and financial subsidies to normalize playing the sport.

However, the rate of attention given to women's soccer by the government is not high either. The government has spent billions to improve the poor performance of the men's soccer team and has created a series of policies to help the development of youth soccer in China. The government and the Chinese Football Association (CFA) will provide CNY5 million (US\$782,000) to CNY10 million (US\$1.57 million) per city every year to support development and each city's government should invest at least CNY30 million (US\$4.7 million) into soccer every year if it joins the programme.[8] As a result, the Chinese men's soccer team is well-funded, with players earning an average of about \$5 million per year, with the highest annual salary reaching \$84 million. The average player starts at about \$2 million. But the highest annual salary of women's soccer is only about 1 million, and the average annual salary is 110,000. Compared to the financial expenditure of men's soccer, the government's expenditure and energy given to women's soccer is insufficient. At the same time, the exposure of Chinese women's football has started to grow since 2015 when the FA signed a deal with a company for the broadcasting rights of the Women's Super League, and Chinese women's football was able to appear on TV for the first time. However, this company was forced to cancel the broadcasting rights for financial reasons, so for almost two years from 17-19, women's soccer was unattended, and some unimportant matches of men's soccer were broadcasted, while the finals of the

Women's Super League were not even seen. At that time, women's soccer had almost zero exposure on the internet, fans had no idea about the progress of the schedule, and only certain local TV stations would broadcast these games. It wasn't until 2019 that an official app finally took over the broadcast rights of women's soccer, which gradually gave Chinese women's soccer exposure. It was also in '19 that the FA made rules related to supporting women's football, requiring all clubs with men's teams in the Chinese Super League to have a women's team in order to be eligible to participate. It was not until May 2022 that the National Football Association and the Education Bureau issued a program on the development of women's youth soccer in China, effectively promoting the development of women's soccer in China. Compared to men's soccer, Chinese women's soccer is lagging and developing slowly, with the government not responding to protests about equal pay for equal work between men and women.

However, there are always fewer female coaches than male coaches. Using a database of 30 million profiles, Zippia estimates demographics and statistics for soccer coaches in the United States. The results show that 36.4% of all soccer coaches are women, while 63.6% are men.

In addition, sports and coaching have not been what women should pursue under the traditional Chinese concept, resulting in the lack of female coaches. Yet the government does not care too much about training and recruiting female coaches. This stems from path dependency, as the power structure that makes the rules relies on men to make it up. Historically, sport has been traditionally perceived as a male-only activity and a male-dominated ideology. The result is that it is mostly men who make the rules, and the rules made from a male perspective have many loopholes and do not consider the issues women face through a female perspective.

4. Solution & Conclusion

In 2015, the Ministry of Education established the National Youth School Football Leading Group with the aim of popularizing soccer in all aspects of the nine-year compulsory education system and establishing special soccer schools. However, this policy was not gender specific, so socially constructed gender stereotypes prevented special soccer schools from developing women's soccer, and instead invested more of the government-issued funds in men's soccer. On the news, many specialty soccer schools "feature" a women's soccer team, suggesting that women's soccer remains rare and unpopular. The government should make it mandatory for specialty soccer schools to have their own women's teams, even if few will participate at first, there will be an organization that can be used to popularize women's soccer. Or develop new policies to safeguard and support youth women's soccer, which the government first developed in May 2022 specifically for youth women's soccer, but more is needed in the future to balance the disproportionate participation of boys and girls in soccer and to allow more people to embrace girls playing soccer in the same way boys do [9]. Similarly, there are very few amateur youth women's soccer clubs, and aside from professional training, girls who enjoy soccer have little chance of finding like-minded peers and a suitable place to develop their hobby. The scarcity of resources leads to insufficient penetration, and insufficient penetration does not create the appropriate resources. This vicious cycle requires external government funding to establish youth women's soccer clubs at the municipal level or below to provide direct access to soccer for girls, or to provide funding to companies or organizations that are willing to start clubs to give companies more incentive to create women's soccer clubs. The future of Chinese women's soccer will only flourish when more teenage girls are exposed to soccer, and more people will understand more about women's soccer and the goal of making Chinese women's soccer more equal. This is an important step in advancing from youth women's soccer to overall women's soccer development.

At the same time, the prerequisite for training women's soccer is good and sufficient teaching resources, but the current situation is that the training of female coaches is weak. There are fewer

coaches and teachers with professional qualifications in women's soccer, and some regions will hire foreign coaches for training, but due to language problems, the teaching effect will not be obvious. Women's soccer training is inevitably different from men's soccer, such as physical fitness, training intensity, and teaching psychology. The government needs to train professional women's soccer coaches and cannot perfunctorily allow men's soccer teachers to train women's soccer directly. The government needs to fund the training of schools or provide learning opportunities to increase teaching resources for women's soccer training and speed up the training of women's soccer.

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