

Institutional Constraints and Reform Pathways for the Revitalization of Chinese Women's Football

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Abstract

To address the developmental challenges hindering the revival of Chinese women's football, this study employs documentary analysis and interviews to investigate the underlying factors from an institutional perspective. The findings reveal that the core issues stem from the dual failure of the state-led "whole-nation system" and the market mechanism. These are manifested through four institutional dilemmas: ambiguous division of responsibilities among governance bodies, a fractured youth training system, a pseudo-professional league structure, and inadequate athlete support mechanisms. These factors are intertwined, creating a path-dependent cycle that perpetuates systemic inefficiencies. Accordingly, the study proposes institutional reconstruction as the fundamental solution, encompassing: 1) establishing a polycentric governance model with shared responsibilities; 2) deepening the integration of sports and education to rebuild talent pipelines; 3) advancing genuine commercial operation of leagues; and 4) strengthening athlete protection and incentive systems.

Keywords

Chinese Women 's Football; Institutional Dilemma; Development Path; Institutional Mechanisms.

1. Introduction

The Chinese women's football team, once globally renowned as the "Steel Roses," carries historic achievements that embody the collective memory of generations. However, the team has reached a bottleneck in its revitalization, evidenced by the national team's fluctuating performances and a palpable "talent gap" in recent years[1]. Concurrently, global women's football is undergoing a profound transformation characterized by professionalization and commercialization. Elite European leagues, exemplified by the English Women's Super League (WSL) and Spain's Liga F, have achieved leaps in competitive standards, commercial value, and societal impact through resource integration with men's clubs and market-oriented operations. This stark contrast raises a critical question: why has the revival of Chinese women's football repeatedly faltered, and what are the fundamental, institutional barriers behind this stagnation? Current research reveals a notable divergence between domestic and international scholarship. International studies have developed mature analyses of institutional models, emphasizing the systemic interplay between policy, societal factors, and markets[2]. In contrast, domestic research predominantly focuses on technical/tactical analyses, historical reviews, or isolated issues like youth training, with the assimilation of international experience often remaining superficial[3]. A significant gap exists in the domestic literature: a lack of a holistic institutional perspective and insufficient analysis of deep-seated structural obstacles like "path dependence" and institutional mechanisms. This limitation has consequently restricted the understanding of the core challenges and the effectiveness of proposed solutions. Therefore, it is imperative to systematically re-examine the institutional environment and mechanistic

barriers hindering Chinese women's football, and to thoroughly investigate the fundamental institutional reasons for its stalled revival amidst the global wave of professionalization. This study aims to provide a theoretical foundation and decision-making support for achieving a genuine resurgence.

2. Institutional Constraints in the Development of Chinese Women's Football

2.1. Governance Predicament: The Dual Failure of the "Whole-Nation System" and Market Mechanisms

The core governance challenge impeding the revitalization of Chinese women's football lies in the dual failure of the state-led "whole-nation system" and market mechanisms. This represents not merely the breakdown of a single system, but the outcome of two conflicting governance logics operating within the same framework, resulting in mutual friction and systemic inefficiencies. These manifest at both structural and operational levels.

Structurally, overlapping functions and ambiguous responsibilities among administrative bodies lead to frequent regulatory interference in market operations. The Chinese Football Association (CFA), as the industry regulator, is tasked with establishing rules and supervising the market. However, its close institutional ties with the General Administration of Sport impede its operational autonomy. This dual identity creates inconsistent policy making: while advocating for club commercialization, the CFA simultaneously intervenes directly in club operations through player requisitions and schedule adjustments to meet administrative objectives like the "Olympic Strategy." This conflict of interest, akin to "acting as both referee and player," undermines fair competition and discourages private investment.

Operationally, this dual failure manifests most acutely in the conflict between extended national team training camps and club league interests. Driven by the "whole-nation system" mentality, prolonged centralized training disrupts the Women's Super League schedule, diminishes its brand value, and directly harms club interests-clubs bear player development costs without receiving proportional competitive returns. This tension highlights the fundamental contradiction between short-term national team objectives and long-term league development under the current institutional arrangement[4].

Consequently, this dual failure leaves Chinese women's football trapped in a system that captures the advantages of neither central planning nor market mechanisms. Therefore, any sustainable revival must be predicated on clarifying administrative boundaries and fundamentally redefining the relationship between the "whole-nation system" and market mechanisms.

2.2. Youth Training System Dilemma: Disconnection in Talent Selection and Development

The paramount challenge within the Chinese women's football youth training system lies in the "structural disconnection" and "systemic deficiencies" plaguing its talent development pathway. This problem permeates the entire chain from selection and cultivation to transition, leading to a dwindling talent pool, which manifests in two key dimensions: institutional architecture and socio-cultural perceptions.

At the institutional level, the traditional "three-tier training network" of sports schools is in decline, while an effective new bridging mechanism integrating "school football" with "professional club academies" has yet to be established, creating an institutional vacuum for talent development. School football primarily focuses on mass participation and lacks high-level, specialized training systems. Conversely, professional clubs, constrained by resources, struggle to build nationwide elite youth networks for younger age groups. This structural

disconnect causes a significant attrition of promising players at critical educational transition points[5].

At the socio-cultural level, the pervasive binary choice between pursuing football and formal education severely constricts the talent selection base. Within the prevailing education evaluation system, specialized football training is perceived as detrimental to academic progression. Compounded by the low social visibility and uncertain professional prospects in women's football, most families are reluctant to allow their daughters to pursue this career path. Consequently, talent selection remains confined to specific regions or social groups, resulting in a critically small base of potential elite players. Further exacerbating the problem, underdeveloped training models and a narrow evaluation criteria system lead to a low player development rate.

The youth training system is thus trapped in a vicious cycle: structural disconnection leads to scarce competitive opportunities and an unclear development path -> this uncertainty intensifies familial concerns -> a shrunken participation base undermines the construction of a robust competition system -> ultimately diminishing the output efficiency of elite talent.

2.3. Competition System Dilemma: The Pseudo-Professionalization and Lack of Appeal of the League

The core predicament of the Chinese women's football competition system lies in the "pseudo-professionalized" status of the Women's Super League (WS League). This condition stems from a systemic dilemma where multiple factors-schedule arrangements, societal attention, commercial value, and club sustainability models-mutually constrain one another, preventing the league from establishing a virtuous, self-sustaining cycle.

At the operational level, insufficient professionalism and stability severely hinder the enhancement of the league's brand value. Unlike major European women's leagues that employ fixed-calendar, cross-year formats, the WS League often utilizes tournament-style formats or abbreviated single-round robin systems. Its schedule is both short and frequently compromised by national team training camps. This instability impedes the development of consistent fan viewership habits, undermines media rights value, and damages league brand identity[6].

Commercially, the WS League performs poorly in core revenue streams such as media rights, ticket sales, and merchandise development. This forces clubs to be heavily reliant on direct financial injections from their parent companies. Collectively, these issues result in slow improvement of the league's competitive standard, making it unappealing to top-tier talent and further cementing its marginalized status. A league lacking stability and commercial appeal struggles to retain skilled players, thereby limiting overall improvements in both the level of play and spectator appeal.

In summary, the women's football competition system is trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle: operational instability damages brand value → low brand value constrains commercial development → commercial difficulties force clubs to depend on financial subsidies → insufficient investment restricts league quality → ultimately further eroding brand value.

2.4. Support System Dilemma: Lack of Athlete Rights Protection and Post-Career Transition Support

The deficiencies in the support system for Chinese women's football directly impact the fundamental interests of athletes and represent a critical barrier to the sport's sustainable development. This issue permeates the entire career cycle of players, profoundly affecting their rights to livelihood and long-term development.

During their playing careers, athletes face a dual disadvantage in both income and institutional safeguards. Compared to their male counterparts, female footballers generally receive significantly lower remuneration, with most earning only around the average societal wage

level. This economic disparity reflects both the market's undervaluation of women's football and structural flaws in revenue distribution mechanisms. More critically, a stark contradiction exists between the high injury risks inherent in intensive training and competition and the underdeveloped medical and health insurance coverage. This profile of "high investment, significant risks, and limited returns" substantially undermines the sport's appeal.

The challenge of post-career transition presents another major obstacle. With professional careers typically lasting only about ten years, players often face retirement lacking adequate formal education and possessing limited transferable skills. Although education exists in principle, its implementation remains constrained, with quality positions scarce and re-employment channels narrow. This pervasive uncertainty directly influences parents' willingness to support their children's participation in football[7].

Collectively, these challenges foster a social expectation that discourages participation. When a career path is widely perceived as a short-term pursuit with uncertain long-term prospects, rational families are likely to deter their children from this option. Consequently, the support system predicament creates a self-reinforcing cycle: inadequate protection reduces participation willingness → talent scarcity diminishes league quality → low commercial value restricts investment in player support.

3. The Deep-Seated Roots of Institutional Constraints

The systemic challenges facing Chinese women's football are rooted in structural contradictions inherent to the nation's sports governance transition. Through the theoretical lenses of "path dependence" and "lock-in effects" from institutional economics, these challenges emerge as the inevitable consequence of friction between the inertia of the traditional "whole-nation system" and the newly introduced market-oriented mechanisms.

Firstly, the "Olympic Gold Medal Strategy" has established a powerful path dependence, leading to a severe skew in resource allocation toward short-term national team outcomes. For women football, this means finite resources are concentrated on supporting a select few elite national team players and short-term tournaments, while long-term fecundation projects-such as the youth training system and professional league development-are neglected due to their inability to directly translate into medals. This "gold medal pathway" has locked in a decision-making logic that starves reforms aimed at cultivating a sustainable long-term ecosystem of essential resource support[8].

Secondly, the incomplete reform of football's governance structure has resulted in the coexistence of old and new institutions, generating "institutional friction" and "institutional voids." In practice, key elements of the old system-characterized by administrative dominance and the primacy of the national team-persist fundamentally unchanged, while the new system, intended to establish club autonomy and market-based resource allocation, remains underdeveloped[9]. Consequently, women football is trapped in a vicious cycle: pressure for national team results → intensified administrative intervention → a debilitated league → weak commercial value → inadequate player support → low societal participation → a talent development gap → further intensification of performance pressure.

In summary, the predicament of Chinese women football originates from an institutional system that is both dependent on the "Gold Medal Strategy" and locked in by incomplete reforms. A profound institutional redesign, fundamentally altering incentive structures and power dynamics, is therefore imperative to pave the way for its genuine revival.

4. Pathways for Breakthrough

4.1. Restructuring the Governance Framework and Clarifying the Roles of Government, Market, and Society

The revitalization of Chinese women football necessitates a fundamental restructuring of its governance framework. This involves establishing a concentrically co-governance model characterized by "government oversight, professional management by the football association, Incorporated operation of clubs, and participation from societal forces," thereby transitioning from administrative control to strategic governance.

Within this framework, the government's role should be redefined to focus on macro-level regulation and policy support, providing institutional guarantees through legislation and service procurement. The Chinese Football Association (CFA) must undergo DE-bureaucratization, concentrating its efforts on professional domains such as competition system design, technical standard development, and youth training promotion. Clubs need to operate as genuine corporate entities, establishing sustainable business models. Concurrently, societal forces—including educational institutions, private enterprises, and community organizations—should play a vital supporting role in areas like youth development, public engagement, and athlete welfare.

This proposed design is grounded in modern governance theory, which emphasizes collaboration and synergy among multiple stakeholders. Research indicates that clarifying the relationships between government, associations, and the market, and constructing a "meta-governance" framework, is crucial for resolving systemic challenges in sports governance. Therefore, creating institutional synergy through clearly delineated responsibilities and authority constitutes the paramount prerequisite for overcoming the existing dilemmas in Chinese women football.

4.2. Establishing a New Integrated Sports-Education System for Youth Women Football Development

Addressing the talent gap in women football youth training requires establishing a deeply integrated sports-education system. The core of this approach lies in breaking down institutional barriers between the sports and education systems to create a seamless "primary school-secondary school-university-professional club" talent pipeline.

Implementation should proceed in phases: At the basic education level, develop football-focused schools and introduce professional coaching resources from clubs. At the secondary and tertiary levels, expand program scale, incorporate football excellence into academic advancement evaluations, and establish player scholarship programs to ensure parallel development of academic and athletic pursuits. These measures aim to eliminate concerns about "unemployment after retirement" and broaden the talent selection base.

Research indicates that successful youth training models must facilitate the holistic development of athletes. Domestic experience demonstrates that the key to effective sports-education integration lies in establishing shared value objectives and coherent policy implementation mechanisms that enable effective resource circulation and complement between the two systems. Therefore, building an integrated system anchored in the education framework and supported by specialized sports resources represents a sustainable strategy for ensuring the continuous emergence of women's football talent.

4.3. Promoting Genuine Professionalization and Commercialization of the League

To transition the women's football league away from its "pseudo-professionalization" predicament, a systematic commercial reconstruction is imperative. The core strategy involves

implementing stringent to standardize club operations, mandating compliance in areas such as youth training investment, financial health, and facility infrastructure to ensure the quality of competing entities. Concurrently, reforms promoting are essential to introduce diverse social capital, reduce reliance on, and establish modern corporate governance structures. This facilitates a crucial shift from dependence on external "transfusions" to internally generated "hematologists" -achieving a sustainable developmental model.

Business model innovation serves as a critical breakthrough point. Initiatives should include with Amen's football clubs to leverage shared branding and commercial resources. Furthermore, concerted efforts are needed to cultivate the value of independent media rights. Simultaneously, fostering local fan communities through initiatives like community culture development and youth training programs can open up diversified revenue streams.

Research underscores that the healthy operation of a professional sports league is contingent upon the financial sustainability and commercial innovation capacity of its constituent clubs. Therefore, the commercialization of omen's football must transcend a mere sponsorship mentality and instead construct a value system fundamentally centered on enhancing fan experience and building strong community identification.

4.4. Establishing a Comprehensive Athlete Support and Incentive System

To promote the sustainable development of omen's football, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive athlete support and incentive system. This should begin with implementing standardized player contracts that clearly define minimum standards for compensation, insurance coverage, and other fundamental rights. A dual protection system combining mandatory social insurance with commercial insurance should be introduced to address occupation-specific risks, particularly sports-related injuries.

Concurrently, it is recommended that the football association take the lead in establishing a omen's Football Development Fund, with its returns dedicated to athlete bonuses, medical subsidies for injuries, and post-career transition support. Research demonstrates that robust support systems are crucial for enhancing athletes' professional commitment and competitive performance. Academic consensus emphasizes the need to establish risk-sharing mechanisms aligned with professional athletic careers, conceptualizing athlete protection as "human capital investment" rather than mere cost. Through institutionalized safeguards, the attractiveness of the sport can be enhanced, thereby stabilizing the talent pipeline.

5. Conclusion

The revitalization of Chinese omen's football constitutes a complex systemic endeavor, necessitating a departure from short-term, outcome-focused mentality and a commitment to profound institutional innovation. A sustainable future for the sport must be built upon a foundation of reconfigured systemic rules and incentives.

This study has examined the obstacles and pathways for this revival from an institutional analysis perspective. The findings indicate that the core challenges stem from systemic institutional failure, manifesting as four interconnected dilemmas: a dual failure in governance, a fractured youth training system, a non-self-sustaining competition league, and an underdeveloped athlete support system. These elements reinforce each other, creating a low-level equilibrium of path dependence.

Addressing these requires systematic institutional restructuring: establishing a concentrically governance model, deepening sports-education integration to create seamless talent pathways, advancing genuine league commercialization, and fortifying the athlete support framework. The synergistic implementation of these four strategies is crucial for breaking the current vicious cycle and laying a new institutional foundation for renewal.

This research acknowledges its limitations, primarily relying on documentary analysis and interview data, which constrains the depth of micro-level institutional mechanism analysis. Future research could employ longitudinal case studies or quantitative analyses to track development, and further explore the influence of informal institutions on the sport's ecosystem.

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