

# Analysis of Gender Differences in Sports — Taking American Professional Women’s Soccer as an Example

Jiwen Fan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Graduate School of Education, United States

Correspondence: Jiwen Fan, Harvard Graduate School of Education, United States.

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## Abstract

This article delves into the multifaceted realm of gender disparities in sports, focusing on the enduring challenges faced by female soccer players, notably within the United States. Highlighting the intertwined complexities of gender biases, treatment discrepancies, and resource inequalities, it underlines the pervasive gender gap prevalent in various facets of sports, encompassing pay differentials, sponsorship limitations, and unequal access to training facilities. This research aims to explore the multifaceted demand for equal pay in professional women’s soccer through sociological and feminist lenses. It scrutinizes implications not only for female soccer players but also for broader gender equality pursuits in global sports. This investigation endeavors to illuminate pathways toward achieving parity between male and female athletes, envisioning inclusivity and equity in the sporting world. The study concludes with a series of recommendations to achieve equal pay for women in sport, emphasizing the importance of transparency, sponsorship, recognition, media representation and advocacy in collective bargaining agreements and governance. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on gender equality in sport and provides insights into potential solutions to the pay gap.

**Keywords:** gender differences in sports, equal pay for equal work, American professional women’s soccer, gender pay gap, feminism in sports

## 1. Introduction

The realm of gender in sport is a complex, ever-changing area that is closely linked to participation levels, opportunities and the treatment of individuals based on gender differences. This theme not only crosses gender lines between sports, but also delves into enduring social ideas surrounding gender roles and abilities. Over time, men’s sports have received increased attention, financial support, and media coverage, increasing the visibility and prospects of male athletes. This stark contrast perpetuates a long-standing gender gap in sport, affecting important areas such as pay, sponsorship, access to facilities and resources available for training and competition (Ariyo, E. S., 2022).

The surge of women’s soccer onto the global stage in the 1990s marked an era of immense growth and promise within the sports landscape. Despite this, the realm of professional soccer remains predominantly male-centric, creating a stark imbalance in the treatment and compensation of female players. A glaring discrepancy exists between the salaries, resources, and investment afforded to male and female soccer players, perpetuating a systemic inequality that hampers the progress and livelihoods of women in the sport (Murray, C., 2019). The call for equal pay for equal work has reverberated strongly within the domain of women’s soccer, spurred by the principles of feminism advocating for equitable treatment across all spheres. This demand has gained substantial traction, especially as the U.S. professional women’s soccer team has made remarkable strides in international tournaments, drawing attention to the glaring disparities in remuneration and resources between male and female athletes.

Motivated by the pressing need to address these disparities and advocate for fair treatment, this research endeavors to delve into the multifaceted aspects of the demand for equal pay in professional women's soccer. Drawing upon sociological and feminist perspectives, this study aims to dissect the controversy surrounding this issue, dissecting the implications and significance of equal pay not just for women in soccer but also for the broader pursuit of gender equality within the global sporting arena. This examination will illuminate the path towards establishing parity between male and female athletes, forging a vision of inclusivity and equality within the realm of sports worldwide.

## **2. Efforts for Equal Pay in U.S. Professional Women's Soccer**

### *2.1 Current Status of Equal Pay for Equal Work in U.S. Professional Women's Soccer*

The impact of the Civil Rights Movement on sports cannot be underestimated, sparking important conversations and actions to address inherent inequalities. The disparity between women's and men's soccer in the United States is a stark example of this ongoing inequality. Despite the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team's remarkable global success, players still face significant disparities in pay, working conditions and resources compared to the men's team. Their pursuit of fair treatment and fair compensation is a powerful example of the obstacles female athletes continue to face. The deeply entrenched gender bias in sports, portraying football as a predominantly masculine domain, perpetuated this discrimination against female players. The patriarchal grip marginalized women in a sport they excelled in, robbing them of deserved rights and recognition.

In the 1970s, FIFA began recognizing and supporting women's football, but it was not until the early 1990s that a dedicated women's committee was established (Scelles, N., 2021). The inaugural Women's World Cup victory by the U.S. women's team in 1991 set the stage for eight subsequent tournaments, with the U.S. team clinching four titles. Despite this success, pay inequality plagued the U.S. women's soccer team, consistently earning lower wages compared to their male counterparts. From 2008 to 2015, data from U.S. Soccer revealed a staggering \$200,000 disparity between the highest-paid men and women during the same period. This discrepancy extended beyond salaries, affecting bonuses, training, medical care, and venue resources for female players. The substantial investment required with minimal returns made it arduous for many female athletes to sustain their careers and aspirations. Inadequate training environments and equipment, coupled with limited medical resources, increased their vulnerability to various health issues.

In a significant stride towards rectifying this inequality, in March 2019, 28 women's soccer players filed a gender discrimination lawsuit against U.S. Soccer. They highlighted that between 2013 and 2016, the women's national team earned less than one-third of what the men's team received. While arguments had been made justifying financial disparities based on audience size and revenue generation, these arguments were debunked when the 2015 World Cup-winning U.S. women's team generated over \$23 million in revenue compared to the U.S. men's team's \$4.6 million profit (Andrew Das, 2016).

After relentless advocacy and struggle, a historic collective labor agreement was finally signed by the U.S. Women's National Team, the U.S. Men's National Team, and the United States Soccer Federation (USSF). This groundbreaking agreement ensures equal pay for equal work, marking a significant milestone in the battle for gender pay parity. Notably, the deal mandates that 90 percent of World Cup prize money be evenly split between players from the 2022 Men's World Cup roster and the 2023 Women's World Cup roster, a groundbreaking move unique to the United States among top soccer nations (Andrew Das, 2022). This agreement not only values labor equally but also champions fairness, prevents discrimination, and fosters the advancement of women's soccer in the United States.

### *2.2 The Contributions of Various Feminist Perspectives to Advancing Women's Rights in the Realm of Football*

Feminism plays a crucial role in championing parity in remuneration for comparable work within women's football. Liberal feminism underscores the values of parity, autonomy, and human rights (Wade & Ferree, 2019). Specifically, within the realm of women's football, this ideology advocates for equitability in opportunities, resources, and treatment for female athletes. Notably, the enactment of Title IX in 1972 stands as a significant milestone, ensuring parity in educational programs and sports for both genders (Famuditimi-Bello, K., 2020). This pivotal legislation mandated educational institutions to furnish equivalent resources and scholarships to female athletes, sparking a transformation in women's involvement in sports, particularly football. Consequently, it paved the way for amplified investments in women's sports, fostering broader participation and the benefits stemming from endeavors like women's football.

On the other hand, radical feminism identifies patriarchy as the root cause of women's subjugation (Wade & Ferree, 2019). Within sports like football, this patriarchal influence manifests through gender-based segregation, historically relegating women's football to a marginalized position with far less support compared to men's football. The perception of women's football as inferior mirrors entrenched patriarchal beliefs predominated by men. Financial disparities and inadequate sponsorship further underscore this disparity. Additionally, societal

expectations concerning childbirth and familial duties can disrupt the careers of female athletes, contributing to their economic vulnerability. The goal of radical feminism is to deconstruct these patriarchal frameworks that impede the progression of women in sports.

Meanwhile, feminist postmodernism challenges fixed classifications and underscores the diverse experiences of women predicated on factors such as race, class, nationality, ability, and age. This perspective underscores that women engaged in football, or any other domain, hail from varied cultural backgrounds and possess distinct aspirations (Wade & Ferree, 2019). It scrutinizes the concept of a universal experience, proposing that localized and individualized theories offer a more accurate comprehension of the intricacies surrounding women's involvement in football. It prompts the consideration of the distinctive hurdles encountered by women from diverse backgrounds in the realm of sports. Collectively, these feminist viewpoints call for persistent advocacy for equitable resources, the disruption of patriarchal norms and structures, recognition of the diverse experiences of female athletes, and the advocacy of inclusive policies and support mechanisms tailored to address the unique challenges faced by women in football.

### **3. Comparative Analysis of Chinese and American Women's Football Players**

#### *3.1 Comparison of the Situation Between the US Women's Football Team and the Chinese Women's Football Team*

In the field of intersectional studies involving sports, gender, and ethnicity, the U.S. women's soccer team and the Chinese women's soccer team encounter distinct circumstances. Within the realm of sports, examining the intersection of gender and ethnicity reveals contrasting scenarios for the U.S. women's soccer team and the Chinese women's soccer team. China's women's soccer team boasts nine Asian Cup victories and holds the 19th spot in FIFA World Rankings, a stark contrast to the 74th position held by China's men's soccer team. Despite these achievements, there exists a considerable disparity in their respective salaries (Jenny Feng, 2022). A 2018 report from the Chinese Football Association indicates that fewer than 20% of players in the top two women's leagues in China, the Chinese Women's Super League and League One, earn over 10,000 yuan (\$1,572) monthly. Notably, the highest-earning female players in these leagues receive merely about 20% of the wages earned by their male counterparts (Jenny Feng, 2022).

In comparison, the women's soccer league within U.S. college campuses and the robust soccer structure established through socialized semi-professional and professional leagues reflect a different scenario (Nessler, C., Gomez-Gonzalez, C., & Gasparetto, T., 2021). While the Chinese women's soccer team has showcased commendable performances, the league struggles with poor marketing and negligible attention, hampering its commercial development and corporate support. Consequently, this situation results in low incomes for Chinese women's soccer players and inadequate post-retirement security. Moreover, attracting top-tier talents and ensuring equitable treatment proves challenging when juxtaposed with the income of Chinese men's soccer players. This disparity in systems and circumstances complicates the pursuit of equal pay within the Chinese soccer landscape. Nevertheless, with the escalating success of women's soccer garnering increased attention, there have been notable advancements. Earlier this year, the Chinese payment platform Alipay, which pledged a ten-year, 1 billion yuan (\$157.2 million) commitment in 2019 to bolster the growth of women's soccer in China, announced a reward of 13 million yuan (\$2.04 million) for the players following their triumphs. This development potentially opens avenues for augmenting salaries in Chinese women's soccer (Jenny Feng, 2022).

#### *3.2 Employing Feminist Theory to Assess Disparities in the Treatment of Female Athletes in China and the United States*

The disparities between China and the United States in the treatment of female soccer players can be better comprehended through the lens of postmodern feminism. This approach highlights the intricate nature of gender treatment and acknowledges the multifaceted influences of social, cultural, and economic factors. Postmodern feminists scrutinize power dynamics within the football industry, emphasizing the impact of media portrayal, commercialization, and global trends. They question the constructed narratives around women's soccer in both countries, examining how these narratives mold public opinions and affect the treatment of female players. In China, conventional gender roles and societal expectations significantly shape perceptions of women's roles in sports. Despite the achievements of China's women's soccer team, the wider cultural narrative might not accord the same recognition and status to female athletes as seen in the United States. These societal attitudes might result in reduced attention and investment in female players, ultimately leading to lower wages. Radical feminists in each country focus on distinct aspects due to their unique social environments. In China, they may stress how ingrained gender roles and societal expectations hamper recognition and support for female athletes. Conversely, in the United States, their emphasis lies in critiquing the historical marginalization of women in sports and its ongoing impact on female football players.

Furthermore, substantial disparities exist in the infrastructure and developmental trajectories of women's soccer

between the two nations. The U.S. college system serves as a robust platform for nurturing talent and enhancing visibility for female athletes (Nessler, C., Gomez-Gonzalez, C., & Gasparetto, T., 2021). In contrast, the Chinese Women's Football League encounters hurdles in marketing, visibility, and corporate backing, directly affecting players' earnings and career prospects. Investment levels and institutional support for women's soccer vary significantly. The United States boasts a more established structure with well-funded professional leagues and a track record of investing in women's sports. Although China has shown considerable progress recently, it may still lag behind in terms of financial backing and sustained support for women's soccer. Liberal feminists in both countries advocate for more equitable policies within football associations and sports bodies to address inequality. However, changes in policies and societal perceptions evolve slowly and might not immediately translate into fair treatment and wages for female players.

#### 4. Suggestion

Female athletes wield significant power in catalyzing substantial changes within the sports industry, extending beyond just football and toward achieving parity in compensation. Firstly, establishing transparency within salary structures and bonuses is pivotal. Athletes must champion systems that are clear and equitable, linking pay directly to performance and acknowledging achievements comparable to their male counterparts. Simultaneously, ensuring a balance in sponsorship and endorsement opportunities is crucial. Encouraging brands to invest equally in female athletes, aligning with their skill sets and market appeal, can help bridge the existing financial support gap.

Addressing disparities in media coverage stands as another essential aspect. By advocating for increased visibility of women's sports and equal representation across media platforms, female athletes can enhance their prominence and acknowledgment. This endeavor is instrumental in reshaping public perceptions and garnering backing for equitable compensation. Furthermore, active involvement in collective bargaining agreements holds significance. By pushing for clauses in contracts that guarantee parity in pay for equal work, female athletes can secure tangible commitments from sports organizations.

Beyond individual endeavors, advocating for legislative and governance reforms proves crucial. Pursuing reforms mandating fair pay practices for female athletes within the sports industry is pivotal for fostering enduring gender equality. These collective strategies empower female athletes to challenge existing norms and disparities, fostering an environment where equal compensation becomes an intrinsic facet of their careers.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper delves into the wide gaps in treatment, wages, and resources between male and female soccer players, notably in the U.S., emphasizing the ongoing battle against gender bias. Feminist viewpoints have significantly shaped discussions on gender parity in sports, advocating for equity, challenging entrenched norms, and acknowledging diverse experiences in soccer. These perspectives stress the importance of continuous advocacy, inclusive policies, and targeted support systems to address the specific hurdles faced by women in sports. Examining the status of female soccer players in China and the U.S. underscores the complexity of disparities shaped by intersecting factors. While both countries encounter obstacles in achieving fair pay, the nuances differ due to distinct societal, cultural, and structural elements. Suggestions to remedy these gaps spotlight the pivotal role of female athletes in instigating change. Ultimately, the quest for equal pay in professional women's soccer mirrors the broader struggle for gender equality in sports. It demands collective action, policy shifts, and a change in societal perspectives to establish an environment where female athletes receive fair treatment, acknowledgment, and rightful compensation for their contributions to the sporting realm. However, this study focus primarily revolves around the disparities between male and female soccer players in the U.S. While this provides valuable insight, it might overlook nuanced challenges faced by female athletes in other regions or sports, limiting the breadth of the analysis. A potential avenue for future study could involve a more comprehensive global examination of gender disparities across various sports, taking into account regional, cultural, and economic influences.

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