

Review

# Addressing gender inequalities in European football: Key dimensions and strategies

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**Abstract:** Women's football in Europe has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, evolving from a historically marginalized status to a vibrant and increasingly celebrated part of the football world. Despite these advancements, gender inequality continues to present a formidable and multifaceted challenge, reflecting broader societal inequities and deep-rooted historical biases that persist in many aspects of life. This study employs a robust theoretical approach to systematically identify the key dimensions of gender inequality in European football and assess existing strategies deployed by the UEFA and its national associations, aimed at mitigating these disparities. This in-depth examination uncovers gaps and opportunities, providing a nuanced understanding of where progress has been made and where continued effort is required. Additionally, the study presents a comprehensive set of actionable insights and evidence-based recommendations designed to enhance current strategies and introduce pioneering solutions that effectively address specific challenges. Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality in sports, offering actionable insights for stakeholders committed to transforming the landscape of European football. The goal is to pave the way toward a more equitable and inclusive future for women's football, setting an example for sports globally through evidence-based reforms and fostering collaboration among key stakeholders and policymakers.

**Keywords:** gender inequality; European football; women's football; UEFA strategy; structural barriers; cultural stereotypes

## 1. Introduction

Women's football in Europe has witnessed an unprecedented transformation, surging to the forefront of global sports with its growing popularity, increased investments, and significant strides toward equality and professionalism [1]. The momentum behind women's football is palpable across Europe. This journey from obscurity to the limelight is anchored by a network of players, coaches, officials, clubs, and associations working in unison. In 2023/24, an impressive 1.6 million registered players have descended onto pitches across Europe, of which 3049 are fully professional. The number of licensed female coaches stands at 25,921, and female referees at 16,548. This infrastructure of players, referees, and coaches lays the foundation for the highest levels of professional competition, including the UEFA Women's EURO and the Women's Champions League, which have experienced record attendance and viewership [2].

Despite significant advancements, the sport continues to struggle with gender inequalities. These disparities manifest across multiple dimensions [3]. At the heart of these inequalities are structural and cultural factors that collectively create an environment where women face unequal opportunities and recognition [4]. Structurally, there are significant disparities in the allocation of resources, with

women's teams often receiving fewer financial investments and less access to quality facilities and training compared to their male counterparts. This disparity in resources is compounded by gender-biased policies within football organizations that often prioritize men's programs, further hindering the growth and development of women's football [5].

Culturally, the persistent stereotypes that view football as a predominantly male activity continue to influence societal attitudes and behaviors. These stereotypes are often reinforced through media representation, which tends to marginalize women's sports, focusing instead on men's competitions [6]. This limited visibility affects public perception and engagement, making it challenging to attract sponsorships and investments necessary for the growth of women's football. Consequently, female athletes often face a lack of opportunities to showcase their talents on prominent platforms, impacting their professional development and societal recognition [7]. Efforts to address these gender disparities have seen the implementation of a range of strategies by organizations like UEFA and national football associations. These include initiatives aimed at increasing female participation from grassroots to professional levels, enhancing media coverage of women's football, and promoting women's involvement in football governance [8]. While these strategies have led to some progress, the pace of change remains slow, necessitating ongoing commitment and innovation to fully bridge the gender gap in European football [4].

Moreover, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within football organizations perpetuates decision-making processes that may overlook the needs and perspectives of female athletes [5]. Increasing the presence of women in these positions is essential for driving the cultural and structural changes needed to support gender equality. Gender inequalities in European football not only impact the sport itself but also reflect and contribute to broader issues of gender dynamics in society [9]. By fostering an environment of inclusion and equality, the football community can not only enhance the sport's integrity and appeal but also serve as a catalyst for wider social change [10]. In understanding and addressing the complexities of gender inequalities within European football, stakeholders can pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive future that benefits the industry.

### **1.1. Aim of the study**

This study aims to theoretically identify the key dimensions of gender inequalities in European football, with a focus on understanding the underlying structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that perpetuate these disparities. The study seeks to critically examine existing initiatives and strategies employed by major football organizations, such as UEFA and national football associations, aimed at promoting gender equality within the sport. The study further aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in European football by generating actionable insights and evidence-based recommendations. These recommendations are designed to assist policymakers, sports organizations, and stakeholders in developing more effective strategies to foster an inclusive environment in football.

## **1.2. Significance of the study**

The significance of this study is rooted in its comprehensive examination of gender inequalities in European football, offering critical insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by women within the sport. Focusing on structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, the research illuminates persistent disparities that hinder the growth and recognition of women's football. Understanding these dynamics is vital for addressing the entrenched biases that impact female athletes' participation, advancement, and leadership opportunities in football. Evaluating existing strategies and initiatives from organizations like UEFA and national football associations allows the study to identify effective practices as well as areas needing enhancement. These insights are essential for informing and refining policy development, ensuring that efforts towards gender equality are impactful and sustainable. The study contributes to the broader discourse on sports-related gender equity by providing evidence-based recommendations to guide stakeholders in fostering a more inclusive football culture. Addressing these inequalities not only aims to enhance the sport's integrity and appeal but also sets a precedent for broader social change, encouraging other sectors to champion diversity and inclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

Gender inequality in sports remains a pressing issue despite significant progress in recent decades. This disparity is particularly conspicuous in football, a sport that holds global cultural and economic significance [4]. The call for equity in football echoes broader societal movements advocating for equal opportunities, treatment, and recognition of women. The roots of gender inequality in sports are deeply embedded in historical contexts and societal norms that have long shaped perceptions and opportunities for women [11]. To fully understand the current landscape of gender disparity in football, it is crucial to explore how historical changes and cultural norms have contributed to the marginalization of women in sports.

### **2.1. Historical exclusion from sports**

In many societies, sports have historically been perceived as an inherently male domain, a notion that significantly contributed to the exclusion of women from these activities [11]. This exclusion was enforced not only through societal norms but also through formal institutionally sanctioned barriers, with cultural attitudes and regulations often explicitly barring women from engaging in sports [12]. These biases can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where notions of athleticism and competition were deeply intertwined with masculine ideals and warrior cultures. In ancient Greece, for instance, which is heralded as the birthplace of the Olympic Games, women were categorically excluded from participating in athletic competitions [13]. More than just participants, women were also prohibited from attending these events as spectators, reinforcing their exclusion from the athletic sphere. Athletic endeavors were closely associated with military training and civic responsibilities, roles that were exclusively reserved for men, who were considered the defenders and leaders of their city-states [14]. Being an athlete was aligned with being a citizen, a status that women could not claim. This tradition of gender-based exclusion established a precedent that

endured through the centuries, embedding the belief that sports and femininity were fundamentally incompatible [15]. Such pervasive historical biases established a long-standing narrative that positioned women as outsiders to the athletic world, shaping the development and organization of sports worldwide and setting a formidable backdrop against which modern efforts for gender inclusion in sports have had to struggle [16].

## **2.2. Gender norms and domestic ideals**

Throughout history, prevailing gender norms have consistently reinforced the idea of sports as a male-oriented domain. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, societal expectations for women were predominantly centered on domestic roles, such as homemaking and child-rearing, rather than on participating in athletic pursuits [11]. The advent of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent rise of organized sports did little to challenge these entrenched perceptions. Instead, as sports became more structured and competitive, women's involvement was frequently discouraged or outright prohibited [17]. Victorian ideals of femininity heavily influenced this era, placing great emphasis on modesty, gentility, and the supposed physical fragility of women. Such ideals portrayed physical exertion and competitive sports as unsuitable and even hazardous for women, perpetuating the fear that these activities could jeopardize their reproductive health and compromise their primary roles as mothers and caregivers. This belief system was not just cultural but also shaped institutional policies, leading to explicit restrictions on women's participation in physical activities [14]. These assumptions about women's physiological limitations and societal roles were deeply ingrained, manifesting in rules and customs that systematically excluded them from the sporting world [11]. Even as the world transformed and modernized, these outdated notions continued to cast a long shadow over female athleticism, creating barriers that women athletes have had to overcome for generations.

## **2.3. Institutional barriers to football**

In the realm of football, societal norms have historically manifested as institutionalized barriers that effectively prevented women from participating fully in the sport. A prominent example of this is the ban imposed by the English Football Association [FA] in 1921, which prohibited women from playing on FA-affiliated pitches. This decision reflected patriarchal attitudes and the perception that women's football was garnering unwanted attention, siphoning interest away from men's matches. Such perceptions were not unfounded, as evidenced by the remarkable public interest in women's games, particularly highlighted by the 1920 match at Goodison Park, which drew an unprecedented crowd of more than 50,000 spectators [18]. The longevity of this prohibition, which remained in place for fifty years until 1971, had a profound impact on the trajectory of women's football [19]. By stunting its growth, the ban relegated the sport to a largely amateur status, unable to secure the necessary support and recognition. The end of the official ban did not instantaneously resolve the systemic inequities women faced in football; instead, it marked the beginning of a gradual and challenging journey toward equity [20]. Infrastructure lagged, with limited access to quality training facilities, insufficient funding, and a lack of dedicated

professional leagues for women, further marginalizing female players and hindering their development. Consequently, women's football faced slow progress, as these foundational gaps continued to present significant obstacles, and the sport struggled to gain the same legitimacy and support afforded to men's football [21]. The impact of the FA's ban illustrates the enduring influence of historical barriers and underscores the ongoing challenges that must be addressed to achieve true equality in the sport.

#### **2.4. Shifting norms and the feminist movement**

The mid-20th century marked a period of profound social and cultural transformation, challenging traditional gender roles, particularly in the realm of sports. The emergence of women's rights movements during the 1960s and 1970s was instrumental in advocating for gender equality across all societal domains, including athletics [22]. This era of activism was characterized by robust efforts to address and rectify inequalities in various sectors. Notably, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the United States played a crucial role by prohibiting sex-based discrimination in federally funded education programs, including athletics [23]. This landmark legislation provided a legal framework that underscored the importance of equal access to sports and education for both genders, significantly enhancing opportunities for female athletes [24]. In Europe, although there was no equivalent to Title IX, the feminist movement nonetheless galvanized efforts to dismantle sexist practices across the sporting world. Women athletes and their advocates began to demand equitable access to resources vocally, better-playing facilities, and equal opportunities in competition [25]. These demands led to a gradual erosion of longstanding institutional barriers. As societies started to accept the legitimacy of women's participation in sports, the groundwork was laid for developing more inclusive attitudes and policies [9]. These shifts were further bolstered by growing public awareness and support, which highlighted the importance of gender equality, laying a foundation for future progress in the pursuit of equal opportunities in sports for women.

#### **2.5. Contemporary reflections and persistent challenges**

Despite these advances, the historical legacy of gender norms continues to manifest in contemporary challenges faced by women's football. The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within sports organizations, the disparity in media coverage, and inequities in pay and sponsorship persist, echoing the biases of past decades [5]. These challenges are often exacerbated by lingering cultural perceptions that women's sports are less exciting or less important than men's, a notion rooted in historical traditions of exclusion and marginalization [3]. Efforts to address these ongoing inequalities must acknowledge the historical context that has shaped the current landscape. Recognizing the impact of past exclusions and societal norms is critical for understanding the structural and cultural changes necessary today [7]. Confronting these historical narratives and their influence on contemporary practices, stakeholders can work toward creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for women in football and sports more broadly. The historical context and societal norms surrounding gender inequality in sports, particularly football,

highlight the deep-seated challenges that women have faced for generations. While significant progress has been made, acknowledging and addressing the enduring legacy of these historical inequalities remains vital in the ongoing pursuit of gender equity in sports [4]. Learning from the past and actively challenging the remnants of outdated norms allows the sports community to progress toward a more inclusive future. This future is envisioned as one that truly embraces and celebrates the contributions of women to the sporting world [14]. Acknowledging historical limitations and biases provides a necessary foundation for understanding the depth of changes required to foster equity in sports. This journey involves not only addressing policy and structural inequalities but also promoting cultural shifts that recognize and value women's achievements and potential in all areas of athletics [1]. By doing so, the sports community can create an environment that supports diversity and offers equal opportunities, recognizing the vital role that women play in enriching and expanding the athletic landscape.

## **2.6. Toward gender equality in football**

Achieving gender equality in football presents a multifaceted and enduring challenge that necessitates the active collaboration of a diverse range of stakeholders. This includes governing bodies, clubs, sponsors, the media, and society at large. Each plays a crucial role in dismantling the structural, economic, and cultural barriers that have historically hindered progress [3]. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that recognizes their interconnected nature and seeks to implement policies that tackle these issues holistically. Policies designed to promote gender equality must be wide-ranging, focusing on critical areas such as increasing female participation at all levels of the sport, ensuring equitable financial investment, enhancing media representation, promoting leadership inclusion, and fostering cultural change [26].

A critical aspect of these policies is the need for accountability and transparency in their implementation, which is essential for driving sustainable progress and ensuring that measures are genuinely impactful. Moreover, fostering strategic partnerships between men's and women's football can create substantial opportunities for mutual growth and collaboration. Employing the immense popularity of men's football allows resources and attention to be directed towards bolstering women's football, enhancing its visibility and support [2]. This strategic approach can help bridge the gap between the two, creating a platform where women's football can flourish alongside its male counterpart [4]. Increased exposure and engagement can attract new fans, sponsors, and media interest, ultimately fostering a culture of inclusivity and equality within football. Such efforts not only promote gender equity but also enrich the entire football community, offering a more diverse and comprehensive representation of talent and passion on the field [3].

Gender inequality in football remains a deeply rooted issue, reflecting broader societal norms and structures that have historically marginalized women. While progress has been made, significant work remains to dismantle the barriers that prevent full gender equality in the sport. This journey toward equality requires commitment, innovation, and an unwavering belief in the value of diversity and inclusivity [2].

Embracing these principles allows the sports community to ensure that football, along with all sports, remains an open and equitable arena where every individual has the opportunity to succeed and inspire. This commitment to inclusivity and fairness helps create an environment that celebrates diversity, fosters equal opportunities for all participants, and ultimately enriches the sporting landscape. An inclusive approach encourages both players and fans from all backgrounds to engage with and contribute to the sport, cultivating a culture of mutual respect and shared success.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a comprehensive theoretical approach to systematically investigate the multifaceted aspects of gender inequality in football. The methodology identifies and critically evaluates existing disparities, focusing on key areas such as participation, economic support, media portrayal, leadership roles, and cultural perceptions. This thorough analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how these interrelated factors contribute to the challenges faced by women in football. Through this lens, the study reveals the intricate issues at play, offering clearer insights into the structural and cultural changes necessary to create a more equitable football environment. In its meticulous evaluation, the study assesses UEFA's strategy for promoting gender equality, highlighting both notable successes and critical areas needing further intervention. The research illuminates effective efforts and persistent challenges, aiming to equip stakeholders with actionable insights and recommendations to further advance gender equality in football. This comprehensive approach ensures decision-makers gain a thorough understanding of the current landscape, enabling them to develop strategies that address existing gaps and reinforce effective practices. Through its detailed analysis, the study aims to drive significant progress toward a more equitable and inclusive environment within football.

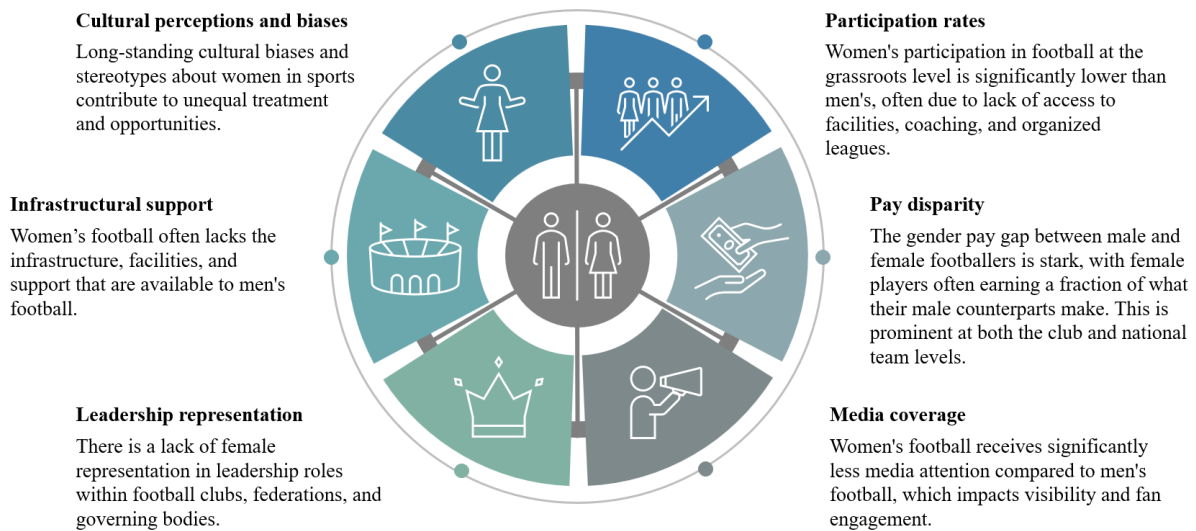
### **4. Results**

Gender inequalities in football manifest through a complex array of dimensions that collectively impact the participation, progression, and recognition of women within football. Despite significant advancements in recent years, football continues to grapple with entrenched disparities that limit women's opportunities and uphold inequitable practices [5]. Central to understanding these inequalities are the various structural and cultural factors that contribute to an uneven playing field. Structural factors include the systemic barriers embedded within football's organizational frameworks, such as unequal access to resources, inadequate infrastructural support for women's teams, and gender-biased policies that favor male athletes [1]. These structural challenges often translate into fewer opportunities for women to participate at competitive levels, hindering their athletic development and professional advancement. Cultural factors, on the other hand, stem from societal norms and perceptions that perpetuate the notion of football as a predominantly male endeavor. Such cultural stereotypes are reinforced through media representation, educational practices, and community attitudes, all of which can diminish the perceived legitimacy and value of women's contributions to the sport [17]. These cultural biases further exacerbate gender inequalities by discouraging female participation from a young age

and perpetuating the marginalization of women in football-related roles. Together, these structural and cultural dimensions create a multifaceted landscape of gender inequality. Examining these interconnected factors is crucial to addressing the disparities and fostering a more inclusive environment within the sport. Understanding these key dimensions sets the stage for identifying specific barriers and exploring potential strategies to create a more equitable future for all athletes, regardless of gender [27].

#### 4.1. Key dimensions of gender inequalities in European football

Analyzing these inequities through six key dimensions: *Participation rates*, *pay disparity*, *media coverage*, *leadership representation*, *infrastructural support*, and *cultural biases* (**Figure 1**), offers critical insights into the underlying issues and catalyzes discussions around possible solutions.



**Figure 1.** Key dimensions of gender inequalities in European football [Developed by author].

##### 4.1.1. Participation rates

Exploring the barriers to female participation in football at different levels reveals a complex interplay of cultural, structural, economic, and social factors that continue to inhibit equal access and opportunities for women and girls [28]. At the grassroots level, a significant barrier is the pervasive cultural stereotype that football is inherently a male sport, which discourages girls from taking up the sport at a young age. This stereotype is often perpetuated by family and peers, leading to a lack of encouragement and support for girls to engage in football [17]. Moreover, many communities prioritize funding and resources for boys' sports programs, resulting in a dearth of opportunities for girls, such as fewer teams, leagues, and training facilities designed specifically for female players [29].

At the competitive amateur level, barriers become more structurally entrenched. Many clubs do not have women's teams or have fewer women's teams compared to men's. This situation not only limits the opportunities for women to play but also affects the perception of women's football as secondary to men's. Additionally, the pathway to professional football for women is less defined and less supported, with fewer scouts, sponsorship opportunities, and professional advice available to guide



female athletes. The scarcity of role models also plays a significant role; there are fewer visible female players who young women and girls can look up to, reducing the aspiration to pursue football seriously [30].

Further complicating female participation at the professional level is the issue of work-life balance, which is often more pronounced for women due to societal expectations around family roles. Many female athletes face the challenge of balancing career development with personal and family responsibilities, often with less support than their male counterparts. In cases where maternity policies and support systems are inadequate, female players may find themselves forced to choose between motherhood and continuing their sports careers [31].

#### **4.1.2. Economic disparities**

The economic structure of football, encompassing pay gaps and revenue distribution, presents a significant arena where gender inequality is starkly evident. At the professional level, the disparity in earnings between male and female footballers is profound, with female athletes frequently earning substantially less than their male counterparts. This pay gap is a persistent issue reflecting broader systemic inequalities not only in football but across many other professional sports [32]. The roots of these disparities can be traced to historical biases and practices that have long valued men's sports over women's, both in terms of audience perception and financial investment [8]. Revenue distribution in football is heavily skewed to the benefit of men's teams, driven by larger audiences, more lucrative broadcast deals, and more substantial sponsorship agreements. Men's football has historically attracted more media coverage and fan engagement, leading to increased advertising revenues and commercial deals. These revenue streams significantly enhance the financial capabilities of men's clubs, allowing them to offer higher wages and invest more in training, facilities, and development. Consequently, the financial muscle of men's football continues to grow, further entrenching the economic divide [33].

In contrast, women's football remains underfunded and underpromoted, trapped in a cycle where the lack of investment leads to lower visibility and, subsequently, less revenue [32]. This disparity is not solely the product of the market forces but is also a reflection of a historical lack of investment and interest from organizational and commercial stakeholders. The undervaluation of women's football from its nascent stages has hindered its commercial development and ability to compete on an equal footing with men's football. As a result, women's leagues generally operate on smaller budgets, translating them into lower salaries, fewer sponsorship deals, and limited resources for growth and development [34].

The pay gap itself is also maintained and justified through revenue models that prioritize short-term profits over long-term equality. Men's football teams not only generate more revenue but also often control a majority of available resources within sports organizations. Advertising campaigns and sponsorship agreements disproportionately benefit men's teams, resulting in greater visibility and off-the-field earning potential for male players. This disparity then feeds into the cycle of investment, where more money is led to men's football, perpetuating existing inequalities. Additionally, prize money for tournaments is significantly higher for men's teams, further exacerbating the gap [35].

### **4.1.3. Media representation**

Media involvement plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and expanding the reach of any sport, and its impact on promoting women's football has been significant yet inconsistent [36]. The traditional underrepresentation of women's sports in media coverage has historically contributed to its marginalization, creating a visibility gap compared to men's football. However, when media engagement increases, it has the potential to transform women's football, driving broader recognition, greater investment, and increased participation [1]. Media coverage of women's football has been limited, often relegated to secondary status behind men's events. This disparity in coverage contributes to the perception that women's football is less important or exciting, perpetuating stereotypes that have long undermined women's sports [17]. This lack of visibility impacts not just public perception but also financial elements, such as sponsorship and advertising revenues, which are drawn to entities with higher exposure. Without adequate coverage, women's football struggles to attract the funding needed to improve infrastructure, player development, and competitive opportunities [37].

However, in instances where media involvement has increased, there is a noticeable positive impact on football's growth. Major tournaments like the UEFA Women's Euro have seen unprecedented levels of media coverage in recent editions [8]. This increased coverage has helped to showcase the talent and excitement inherent in women's football, drawing in new fans, sponsors, and broader audiences. As noted by several studies, such spikes in visibility have directly correlated with increased attendance at games and a surge in merchandise sales, reflecting growing public interest and engagement [2]. Moreover, media coverage serves as a vital platform for changing narratives around women's football. Focusing on athleticism, strategy, and competition, rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes, enables media narratives to enhance the legitimacy and appeal of women's football [4]. This shift in focus highlights the skill and dedication of female athletes, presenting them as equals to their male counterparts and emphasizing their contributions to the sport [7].

Additionally, empowering storytelling around female footballers helps change public perceptions, encouraging more young girls to participate by seeing football as a viable path for both personal and professional success [38]. Documentaries, sports analysis programs, and features that highlight the journeys and achievements of female footballers contribute to a more positive and empowering representation of women's sports. Such narratives can influence young girls' perceptions, encouraging them to participate and see football as a viable path for personal and professional development [39].

Beyond traditional forms of media, digital platforms and social media have emerged as transformative forces in promoting women's football. These platforms allow for direct engagement with fans and offer an unfiltered space for telling stories and sharing highlights that might not make mainstream news [40]. Social media campaigns can spearhead movements supporting women's sports by amplifying key events, athlete achievements, and calls for equality and investment in women's football. This digital shift is crucial for engaging younger audiences and fostering communities passionate about women's sports [41]. The economic impact of enhanced

media involvement cannot be overstated. Greater visibility attracts sponsors who are keen to associate their brands with values of equality, diversity, and empowerment that are often linked with women's sports [42]. The financial influx from sponsorships and advertising opportunities can be reinvested into the sport to improve facilities, training, and athlete support systems, creating a virtuous cycle of growth and development [43]. However, challenges remain in achieving consistently high levels of media coverage for women's football across all regions and leagues. Often, coverage spikes around major international tournaments and then diminishes during regular league play, highlighting the need for sustained media engagement.

#### **4.1.4. Leadership and governance**

The disparity in female representation within European football governance is a critical issue that highlights broader gender inequalities in the sport. Despite football's status, the structures governing football in Europe remain predominantly male. This gender imbalance in leadership roles underscores a significant challenge for gender equality and has far-reaching implications for how the sport is organized, developed, and perceived [5]. The underrepresentation of women in football governance has deep historical roots. Traditionally, football, like many sports, evolved as a male-centric activity. In Europe, this was mirrored by the establishment and evolution of football clubs and governing bodies that were predominantly run by men. This male predominance wasn't merely incidental; it was reinforced by cultural norms that viewed sports management and leadership as male pursuits, effectively relegating women to ancillary or supportive roles [1].

Over the decades, as football became more commercialized and structured, these norms were institutionalized, making it particularly challenging for women to enter and ascend within the ranks of football governance [7]. The legacy of exclusionary practices has persisted, resulting in governance structures that lack the diverse perspectives needed to holistically address issues within the sport, particularly those impacting women. Despite increasing awareness and advocacy for gender equality, current statistics reveal that women remain significantly underrepresented in European football governance [44]. Women account for only a small fraction of executives and committee members. This pronounced underrepresentation is not confined to top-tier organizations; it also permeates local clubs, where governance roles predominantly favor men [16].

This disparity suggests systemic barriers that continue to limit female access and progression within football's governing echelons, reflecting broader societal challenges related to gender inequality [5]. Several systemic barriers contribute to the low levels of female representation in football governance. One significant barrier is the ingrained cultural perception that aligns leadership, particularly in sports, with masculinity. This perception can deter women from pursuing leadership opportunities and can bias organizations against considering female candidates for such roles [45]. Additionally, the pathways to leadership in football governance often involve networks and mentorships, which have traditionally been less accessible to women. Such networks are essential for career advancement but can operate to exclude those who are not part of the traditional "old boys' club." Without access to these informal

networks, women may find it challenging to gain the visibility and support needed to rise to leadership positions [4].

Biases in recruitment and promotion processes also play a role. These processes can unconsciously favor male candidates, perpetuating a cycle where men continue to dominate leadership roles. Furthermore, women in football governance often face heightened scrutiny and pressure compared to their male counterparts, which can further impede progress [46]. The lack of female representation in football governance has several implications. Decision-making bodies that are predominantly male may neglect or inadequately prioritize issues affecting women in football. This oversight can impact funding allocations, the development of facilities and programs for female players, and the overall visibility of women's football [5]. Moreover, the absence of women in leadership roles limits the extent to which governance structures can serve as role models for aspiring female athletes and professionals. Without visible examples of women in positions of power within football, young women may struggle to envision their potential for leadership within the sport, thus perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation [10].

The disparity in female representation in governance also reflects and reinforces broader cultural norms that marginalize women in sports. Media narratives, public perceptions, and fan engagement are all influenced by who holds the power in football organizations. As long as leadership remains male-dominated, these narratives are likely to continue promoting an image of football as primarily a men's sport [47].

Economically, this imbalance can have implications for the marketability of women's football. If decision-makers are not attuned to the potential growth markets within women's sports, opportunities for commercial sponsorships, partnerships, and fan base expansion may be overlooked, thus limiting the financial development of women's football. The disparity in female representation within European football governance is both a reflection and a perpetuation of broader gender inequalities. Addressing this imbalance is critical not only for the development of women's football but also for the integrity and evolution of football. As European football continues to grow and adapt to changing societal values, ensuring diverse leadership is paramount for promoting a more equitable and dynamic sporting culture [5].

#### **4.1.5. Infrastructural support**

Infrastructural support is a fundamental component that dictates the development, accessibility, and success of sports at all levels. The disparity in infrastructural support between men's and women's football is emblematic of broader gender inequalities within the sport, reflecting systemic biases that prioritize men's teams and perpetuate a cycle of underinvestment in women's football [8]. This analysis explores the various dimensions of infrastructural disparity in football, examining financial investment, facility access and quality, organizational support, and the socio-cultural factors that contribute to these ongoing inequalities [48].

One of the most significant aspects of infrastructural disparity in football is financial investment. Patterns of funding allocation have overwhelmingly favored men's football, resulting in a well-developed network of facilities, resources, and support systems for male athletes. Major financial sources such as sponsorships, advertising, and media rights predominantly flow into men's football, creating

significant budgetary differences [46]. This financial imbalance affects nearly all aspects of infrastructural support, from the construction and maintenance of stadiums and training facilities to the hiring of skilled personnel and support staff. In many organizations, women's football struggles to secure equivalent funding, which in turn limits its access to high-quality infrastructure [4]. This systemic underfunding means that women's teams often lack the same level of training facilities and equipment as their male counterparts [3]. The disparities in funding not only impact the immediate needs of women's teams but also hinder long-term planning and investment, perpetuating a cycle of inequality [8].

The disparity in access to and quality of facilities between men's and women's football is another critical dimension of infrastructural inequality. Men's teams typically have dedicated access to top-tier stadiums, training grounds, and support facilities [49]. These environments are often equipped with state-of-the-art amenities, designed to optimize player performance and well-being. In contrast, women's teams frequently have to make do with shared or secondary facilities, leading to conflicts over usage schedules and inadequate conditions for professional training and competition [28]. Furthermore, the quality of facilities available to women's teams is often inferior, with less investment in maintenance and modernization. Poorly maintained pitches, lack of essential training equipment, and insufficient access to physiotherapy and medical facilities can all detract from the professionalism and competitiveness of women's football. These conditions not only impact performance but also pose risks to players' health and safety, contributing to higher injury rates and shorter playing careers [49].

In addition to physical infrastructure, the organizational support and infrastructure available to women's teams are often lacking compared to men's teams. This disparity affects a range of critical support functions, including coaching, medical services, and administrative support [35]. Women's teams frequently operate with fewer coaches, limited access to sports scientists, and reduced medical support staff, all of which can impact the quality of training and athlete development [50]. The organizational disparity extends to strategic planning and operational support as well. Men's teams typically benefit from comprehensive support structures that include marketing, public relations, and media outreach, which help to elevate the team's profile and attract further investment [1]. Conversely, women's teams often receive limited marketing and media coverage, restricting their visibility and ability to draw in fans and sponsors, further exacerbating the resource gap [4].

The long-term implications of infrastructural disparity in football are profound, affecting the sustainability and growth of women's football at every level. When women's teams are consistently under-resourced, it limits their ability to attract talent, improve performance, and compete on equal footing with men's teams [50]. This inequity not only hampers the development of female athletes but also impacts the broader perception and acceptance of women's football. Without adequate infrastructure, the opportunities for young girls to pursue football as a viable career path are limited, reducing the talent pool and stunting the sport's growth [49]. Moreover, the lack of investment in women's football infrastructure may deter potential sponsors and investors, who may view the sport as less commercially viable given the disparities in visibility and professionalism.

#### **4.1.6. Cultural perceptions and biases**

Cultural biases significantly impact women's participation in football from a young age. Girls often encounter societal expectations that prioritize traditional feminine activities over athletic pursuits [17]. This societal pressure can discourage early engagement with the sport, leading to lower participation rates among girls compared to boys. The lack of visible role models and the perception that football is a 'boys' game can further dissuade girls from participating or continuing in the sport [51]. At the community and school levels, these biases can translate into fewer opportunities for girls to play football, as resources and attention are often skewed toward boys' programs [29]. This early disparity in access and encouragement can have lasting effects, reducing the number of women who pursue football at competitive and professional levels. These biases also affect the broader acceptance and legitimacy of women's football. Despite significant advancements and increased visibility, women's football is still often perceived as a novelty or secondary to men's competitions [28]. This perception is reinforced by structural inequalities, such as unequal pay and resource allocation, which perpetuate the idea that women's football is less valuable or commercially viable [32].

The cultural narrative that women's sports are somehow inferior to men's sports is a barrier to achieving true equality and recognition. These biases can influence the attitudes of fans, sponsors, and decision-makers within the sport, impacting everything from attendance at women's matches to the level of investment in women's leagues [51]. As long as these cultural barriers remain, women are likely to continue facing challenges in gaining equal footing in terms of participation, recognition, and support. Cultural biases are a significant factor in the ongoing disparity between men's and women's football. These biases affect everything from participation rates and media representation to the broader acceptance of women's football as an equal and valued part of the sports landscape [4]. The impact of these biases highlights the complex interplay between cultural perceptions and institutional practices, illustrating why achieving gender equality in football requires an understanding and addressing of both.

#### **4.2. UEFA's strategy aiming at mitigating gender inequalities in football**

UEFA, as the governing body for European football, plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality across the sport. Existing frameworks aimed at mitigating gender inequalities in European football encompass a range of initiatives designed to address the systemic barriers women face in the sport. UEFA has recognized the need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality [52]. These interventions include implementing policies that mandate equal access to resources and facilities for female athletes, as well as developing programs to increase female participation at all levels, from grassroots to professional play. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and shifting global dynamics, UEFA's Women's Football Strategy 2024–2030 is a powerful commitment to propel women's football to unprecedented heights. This strategic framework is designed not just to respond to the challenges of our time but to revolutionize the landscape of women's football in Europe, making it a key player in the global sports arena. This comprehensive six-year plan highlights a

mission to foster a sustainable ecosystem in women’s football, emphasizing diversity, financial viability, inclusivity, and competitive excellence [2].

Women’s football in Europe has demonstrated remarkable resilience, overcoming societal barriers and underinvestment to become a prominent fixture in the sport. This transformation is evidenced by outstanding performances, record-breaking attendance, and heightened visibility at events such as the UEFA Women’s EURO and the Women’s Champions League. These achievements underscore the momentum propelling women’s football forward and the collective efforts to lay a foundation for future success [8]. It is upon these accomplishments that UEFA looks to build an interdependent and sustainable ecosystem over the next six years.

Central to the UEFA strategy are its strategic priorities (**Figure 2**), designed to tackle the diverse challenges and opportunities within women’s football. These priorities are multifaceted, addressing areas such as participation, professionalism, fan engagement, competitive structures, and governance. Addressing these core issues, UEFA aims to ensure that women’s football not only grows but also thrives within a competitive landscape.



**Figure 2.** UEFA’s strategic priorities for women’s football [Developed by author].

#### 4.2.1. Football pathways for players, coaches and referees

UEFA, through its specific priority, is committed to strengthening development pathways for players, coaches, and referees throughout Europe, ensuring a nurturing environment where talent can flourish through inclusive and comprehensive strategies [53]. A crucial element of this strategic pillar focuses on mapping the pathways and competition structures within national associations to establish clear routes for progression across the football pyramid. Launching a Europe-wide talent identification program will systematically uncover new talent in collaboration with national associations, offering aspiring players opportunities to rise to higher levels [54].

In tandem with player development, reinforcing coaching pathways is essential. Efforts include expanding coaching initiatives and adhering to the UEFA Coaching Convention framework to increase the number of skilled coaches and technical staff. Recruitment platforms and events will be created to incentivize clubs and academies

to offer coaching positions and internships, thereby increasing professional opportunities. Referee development receives equal attention, with initiatives aimed at broadening opportunities and implementing comprehensive programs to prepare the next generation across all UEFA member associations. Emphasizing content specific to women's football ensures that the unique characteristics and needs of female athletes are addressed, embedding diversity and inclusion more deeply within the sport [7]. Ultimately, this strategic initiative seeks to foster growth in national associations with dedicated pathways and bolster player transitions from youth to professional levels, furthering the mission of sustainable and inclusive growth in European football.

#### **4.2.2. Universal access to grassroots football**

UEFA is actively supporting national associations to foster growth and retention in football participation through the use of expertise, research, and insights. Collaborating with national associations and governments, UEFA aims to ensure access to football for girls in schools, highlighting the societal and health benefits of participation while investigating reasons for girls dropping out [55]. This initiative includes mapping pitch locations and usage for girls and women and advocating for equal playing opportunities. A joint program with UEFA partners addresses access and infrastructure challenges in grassroots clubs, striving for inclusivity and diversity [54]. The UEFA Playmakers program is set to expand its reach, inspiring a wider audience by teaching basic football skills and life skills [56]. Encouraging flexible formats through a Europe-wide competition linked to the UEFA Women's Champions League final and involving commercial and media partners enhances engagement. Digital communities will connect participants, providing information on playing opportunities [8]. Growth and retention of registered club players and participants are key metrics, alongside an increase in countries offering football in schools for girls. Monitoring dropout rates, the evolution of playing locations, and participation in UEFA programs are essential for evaluating success. This comprehensive approach ensures that football becomes a favored sport for women and girls across Europe, fostering community engagement and personal development.

#### **4.2.3. Players at the center of the game**

UEFA places player welfare at the core of its strategic priorities, guiding decision-making to ensure a holistic approach to athlete well-being. Leading health and performance research is a crucial aspect of this dedication, alongside raising awareness and providing education on women's sports and the unique needs of female athletes [57]. UEFA fosters informed discussions and deeper involvement with players and their representatives through dedicated platforms, effectively encouraging advocacy and engagement within the sport. Championing multi-stakeholder initiatives and activities is essential for establishing robust support systems that prioritize the voices and welfare of all athletes [43]. Higher sporting and governance standards are established through the UEFA Minimum Standards Framework for National Teams. This commitment is reflected in enhanced access to UEFA Academy programs, coaching, refereeing initiatives, and mentorship opportunities [58]. The effectiveness of UEFA's efforts is evaluated by assessing the impact of medical research campaigns, the increase in national associations meeting established standards, and participation



in educational and leadership programs. Prioritizing the needs and welfare of players contributes to a safer, more inclusive, and thriving football ecosystem [26].

#### **4.2.4. Guardians of the game working hand in hand**

UEFA is dedicated to enhancing collaboration and forging strong partnerships to ensure the sustainable growth of women's football. This involves working closely with national associations and other football stakeholders to establish a long-term international match calendar that accommodates the unique requirements of the professional women's game [43]. Training rewards and similar mechanisms are encouraged both globally and at the domestic level, fostering a culture of development and recognition across the sport. Providing platforms for social and stakeholder dialogue is crucial, offering leagues, clubs, unions, players, coaches, referees, and supporters opportunities to share insights and drive the game forward [59]. The implementation of a national association and club collaboration charter aims to formalize partnerships and streamline efforts across the continent. Tailored support to emerging national associations is provided, bolstering the community of women's football leaders and promoting growth. UEFA actively engages with decision-makers to secure growth opportunities and investments, while global development of the game is promoted through joint programs [60]. Collaboration to strengthen female leadership and presence in decision-making positions remains a priority. Success will be measured through outcomes of stakeholder dialogues, financial investment growth, participation in UEFA programs, and an increase in female leaders within the sport [5].

#### **4.2.5. The best domestic league**

UEFA is committed to prioritizing and investing in European domestic leagues and their clubs to foster a more professional, competitive, and sustainable club football ecosystem. This strategic focus is essential for creating an environment that attracts the world's top players and expands the fan base through engaging and entertaining matches [61]. To achieve these objectives, UEFA will implement a national association league and club development incentive scheme through the UEFA HatTrick program [62]. High-potential leagues and clubs will receive support in their journey towards full professionalism, with UEFA providing strategic expertise, bespoke support, and centralized solutions across sporting, governance, financial, and commercial aspects. Establishing a trusted data ecosystem and insights hub will further enhance the professional game, while setting minimum league standards will help drive improvements. Club licensing and additional tools will be utilized to ensure sustainable development and professionalization. Success will be evaluated based on growth in the number of fully professional players, clubs, and leagues; the number of leagues meeting minimum standards; and improvements in commercial, engagement, sporting, operational, and financial metrics [63]. Additionally, the number of leagues with strategic plans and domestic club licensing, along with participation in UEFA workshops, will be monitored. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate the business case for European women's football and increase the overall value of the industry through these concentrated efforts.

#### **4.2.6. The summit of club football**

UEFA's strategic priority is to elevate European club competitions, with the UEFA Women's Champions League serving as the pinnacle of excellence and competition. This strategy aims to make these competitions the most competitive and well-supported in the world, inspiring the next generation of football stars [64]. To achieve these ambitions, UEFA will implement the 2025–2030 cycle of women's club competitions and introduce a second club competition, expanding playing opportunities in Europe. An innovative commercial concept will be launched for the UEFA Women's Champions League, targeting maximum visibility and revenue while maintaining global accessibility. Scheduling will be optimized with player welfare and exclusivity in mind [2]. To raise club standards and capacities, enhanced UEFA club licensing will be employed alongside cutting-edge sporting and financial regulatory mechanisms and technology. The financial sustainability of women's club competitions will be improved by driving investments from men's club competitions and increasing financial incentives [62]. Success will be assessed through a comprehensive evaluation of commercial, engagement, sporting, operational, and financial metrics, including competitive balance analyses and benchmarking [60]. The strategy focuses on increasing the number of clubs participating in UEFA competitions, ensuring clubs meet licensing requirements, and fostering knowledge-sharing through club gatherings. This approach promises to provide more opportunities for clubs to participate in European competitions, ensuring continuous growth and development across the continent.

#### **4.2.7. The spotlight on national teams**

National team football, highlighted by the prestigious UEFA Women's EURO, remains a pivotal force in elevating the standards, ambitions, and visibility of the sport on a global scale [64]. This spotlight on national teams not only showcases Europe's finest athletes but also provides a platform for all age categories and levels of competition, shining a light on emerging stars and offering them the biggest stage to demonstrate their skills and passion. As national team football becomes increasingly competitive and popular, there is a critical need to harness this momentum to further grow and develop the women's game [65]. This involves inspiring girls and women at every level, appealing to wide audiences, and making focused improvements on facilities and working conditions, with player welfare consistently prioritized. To enhance the impact of the UEFA Women's EURO, it's essential to improve and equalize standards and services for both teams and fans while maximizing returns sustainably through improved operational and commercial concepts [2]. This enhancement includes developing a state-of-the-art TV product, ensuring increased visibility and availability across all UEFA territories, and advancing the tournament's digital footprint. Additional efforts include promoting the UEFA Women's Nations League, the Women's European Qualifiers, and the Finalissima, alongside exploring rights centralization to boost national team football visibility. Through these initiatives, UEFA aims to deliver legacies of competition and events that spur growth, backed by evaluations of commercial, sporting, operational, and financial metrics [66]. This comprehensive strategy ensures that national teams continue to be a driving force in the evolution of women's football, forging a path for future generations.

#### **4.2.8. Authentic fan culture, limitless exposure and maximized returns**

UEFA is committed to cultivating an authentic fan culture and maximizing exposure for its women's competitions by engaging deeply with both current and emerging fans [61]. Understanding their preferences, behaviors, and needs is pivotal for enhancing reach and relevance. This dedication involves creating exceptional in-stadium experiences to maximize attendance and identifying optimal kick-off times that align with spectator preferences [67]. A comprehensive fan culture and attendance support program will be delivered to national associations, leagues, and clubs to further bolster engagement. Promoting players and teams across Europe through unique digital content and innovative storytelling is essential for nurturing player-to-fan connections [68]. UEFA seeks to amplify visibility and engagement globally via cutting-edge broadcasts and 'always-on' digital offerings, establishing a long-term vision with ambitious targets for commercial growth. This includes diversifying revenue streams and delivering a tailored commercial strategy for women's football competitions, collaborating with partners to align with UEFA's strategic priorities under the UEFA Women's Football Commercial Program [69].

Promoting gender equality and the role of women in football is central to this strategic framework, advancing the sport's development and fostering a more inclusive environment. UEFA's mission for 2030 reflects a commitment to inspiring passion, purpose, and play across Europe [2]. The organization envisions women's football being celebrated for its unique values and community, becoming the most-played team sport among women and girls everywhere. UEFA aims to ensure that Europe is home to the world's top players and professional opportunities and that women's football is recognized as the most sustainable and investable women's sport [59]. These ambitions are supported by continuous financial investment and ongoing evaluation. UEFA stresses the importance of monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing to keep the strategy agile and responsive to changing conditions and acknowledges that achieving these goals requires the collective support of national associations, leagues, clubs, players, fans, and partners, each playing a vital role in shaping women's football's future.

#### **4.2.9. UEFA's strategy reflection**

Reflecting on UEFA's six-year plan, it is evident that their strategy is not just about responding to present challenges. It is about embracing the future and setting a course for transformative change, ensuring that women's football becomes an integral part of Europe's sporting landscape. Through strategic priorities focused on participation, professionalism, engagement, and sustainability, UEFA is laying the groundwork for a vibrant and interconnected ecosystem. The plan's comprehensive approach reinforces the message that no challenge is insurmountable. With a shared sense of purpose and dedication, the football community can achieve remarkable progress over the coming years. As UEFA embarks on this journey, the integrity of its vision and the strength of its commitment to women's football promise to drive the sport forward, ensuring it remains truly unstoppable.

As we look towards 2030, the realization of these goals signifies not only the successful implementation of a strategic framework but the establishment of a legacy. This legacy goes beyond the confines of sport, contributing to societal goals of

equality, community, and progress. UEFA's strategy is an invitation to everyone invested in the sport to join this movement, fueling a trajectory that promises continued growth and success on and off the pitch. With unified efforts, UEFA is poised to create a future where women's football is synonymous with excellence and opportunity for all.

### **4.3. Recommendations**

While UEFA, as the governing body for European football, has indeed set specific priorities to address gender inequalities, there is still significant progress to be made to achieve full gender equity in the sport. UEFA's strategic initiatives have laid important groundwork by focusing on increasing female participation, enhancing media visibility for women's football, and promoting more diverse leadership within football organizations. Despite these efforts, persistent challenges remain, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of gender inequality in football.

#### **4.3.1. Actionable suggestions to strengthen existing policies**

To effectively strengthen existing policies and further reduce gender inequalities in European football, a series of actionable suggestions can be implemented. These recommendations aim to enhance UEFA's foundational work by addressing both structural limitations and cultural perceptions within the sport:

- **Enhanced investment in women's programs:** Increase funding dedicated to women's football at all levels, ensuring equitable access to quality facilities, training programs, and coaching staff. This can create more opportunities for women to develop their skills and compete at higher levels.
- **Comprehensive grassroots initiatives:** Expand grassroots programs with a strong focus on reaching young girls in schools and communities. Partner with educational institutions to integrate football into regular physical education curricula for girls, providing them with early exposure and engagement with the sport.
- **Professional pathway development:** Establish clear and structured career pathways for female athletes, including mentorship programs, professional advice, and support networks. Ensuring there is a defined route for progression from amateur to professional status can motivate more women to pursue football seriously.
- **Media engagement and visibility:** Work with media partners to increase the coverage of women's football matches and events, ensuring they receive equal promotion and broadcasting time for men's competitions. Highlight compelling stories of female athletes to shift public perception and generate greater interest.
- **Leadership development programs:** Implement targeted leadership development initiatives aimed at preparing more women for governance roles within football organizations. Encourage national associations to prioritize gender diversity at their executive levels by enacting policies that promote female leadership.
- **Cultural education and awareness campaigns:** Launch campaigns to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes that limit women's participation in football. Engage with community leaders, parents, and educators to foster a supportive environment that values gender equality in sports.

- **Monitoring and evaluation frameworks:** Establish rigorous frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of gender equality policies. Set clear objectives and metrics to track progress and adjust strategies as necessary. Transparency in reporting can foster accountability and drive continuous improvement.
- **Collaborative efforts and partnerships:** Encourage collaboration between UEFA, national associations, clubs, and gender equality advocacy groups to pool resources and share best practices. Joint initiatives can leverage broader networks for more impactful outcomes.

With these actionable suggestions, UEFA and its associated bodies can reinforce their commitment to gender equality, driving substantial and sustained progress in European football. Through concerted efforts, the football community can work towards a future where the sport is fully inclusive and equitable for all participants.

#### **4.3.2. Pioneering approaches to tackle dimensions of inequality**

To address untouched dimensions of gender inequality in football, pioneering approaches are necessary to drive significant and lasting changes:

- **Localized, grassroots empowerment projects:** Support localized grassroots projects tailored to specific communities, ensuring that initiatives resonate with the unique challenges and opportunities within different regions.
- **Holistic athlete development programs:** Create comprehensive programs that support the personal, educational, and professional development of female athletes. These programs should include life skills training, academic support, mental health resources, and career planning to empower athletes beyond the field.
- **Intersectional initiatives:** Implement strategies that consider the intersectionality of gender with race, socioeconomic background, and other identities. Tailor programs to support women who may face compounded barriers, ensuring inclusivity for all marginalized groups within women's football.
- **Community-based recruitment and retention efforts:** Develop community-based initiatives focused on recruiting and retaining female talent from diverse backgrounds. Partner with local leaders to create culturally relevant programs that encourage participation and celebrate diverse identities.
- **Innovative sponsorship models:** Develop sponsorship models that specifically target underrepresented areas within women's football, such as youth development programs or women's coaching academies. Encourage brands to commit to long-term investment in women's initiatives.
- **Gender-inclusive policy advocacy:** Advocate for gender-inclusive policies not only within sports organizations but also at the governmental level. Pursue legislation that mandates gender equity in sports funding, facility usage, and educational programming.
- **Leadership exchange networks:** Establish international exchange programs and mentorship networks that connect female leaders across different sports and industries. Facilitate knowledge sharing and relationship building to foster a global community advocating for gender equality.

These pioneering approaches aim to address less visible dimensions of inequality, making the landscape of football genuinely inclusive and equitable for all participants. Adopting such forward-thinking strategies can create a ripple effect, enhancing the sport for future generations.

## **5. Conclusion**

The journey toward gender equality in football is complex and ongoing, reflecting broader societal dynamics and long-standing inequities. Despite significant strides in recent years, considerable challenges remain, particularly in leadership, participation, media representation, and resource allocation. These disparities not only undermine the growth and visibility of women's football but also restrict the sport's potential to embody diversity and inclusivity on a global scale.

UEFA's six-year plan to ensure equality signifies a crucial step towards removing gender disparities in football by focusing on female participation, visibility, and leadership, thereby addressing structural and cultural barriers. This strategy not only emphasizes equitable resource allocation but also seeks to redefine women's football as a key aspect of the sport's future, setting an influential precedent for other organizations to embrace inclusivity and diversity. However, while UEFA and other football governing bodies have initiated efforts to address issues, such as promoting female participation and enhancing visibility through strategic investments, deeper challenges persist that require innovative solutions. Leadership within the sport continues to be predominantly male, affecting decision-making processes and the implementation of policies that can support equitable development for all genders. Additionally, cultural stereotypes that position football as a male-dominated sport deter female participation from grassroots levels to professional stages.

The allocation of resources presents another significant barrier. Structural inequities in funding and facilities access place female athletes at a disadvantage, limiting their opportunities for development and success. Addressing these disparities necessitates a thorough reassessment of how resources are distributed, ensuring that women's programs receive comparable support to their male counterparts.

Encouragingly, there is growing momentum for pioneering approaches that target unaddressed dimensions of inequality. Strategies focusing on athlete development, intersectionality, and innovative sponsorship models offer promising avenues to tackle structural and cultural barriers. These approaches aim to dismantle entrenched stereotypes and provide the necessary support for women to advance within the sport.

Achieving true gender equality in football requires sustained effort, collaboration, and commitment from all stakeholders, governing bodies, clubs, sponsors, media, and fans. It involves not only institutional reforms but also cultural shifts that celebrate and support female participation and leadership at all levels. Football has the unique capacity to drive meaningful change through its global influence, setting an example for other sports and industries.

Emphasizing equality and inclusivity will not only enrich football but also inspire future generations. Supporting women in football is about realizing the full potential of the sport and fostering a culture that champions equality as a core value. As football

continues to evolve, embracing these principles will shape a future where everyone can thrive and contribute to the beautiful game.

### **5.1. Practical implications**

The findings of this study offer numerous practical implications for advancing gender equality in football. Firstly, they underscore the need for football organizations to reallocate resources more equitably, ensuring that women's programs receive the funding and facilities necessary to foster talent development and competitive performance. This can lead to a more balanced playing field, encouraging more women and girls to participate and pursue football careers. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of implementing comprehensive grassroots initiatives, which can introduce football to young girls in schools and communities. Actively promoting inclusion from an early age enables organizations to nurture a new generation of female athletes who view football as an accessible and rewarding pursuit. In leadership, the findings suggest actionable steps towards increasing female representation in governance roles. Organizations are encouraged to adopt transparent recruitment and promotion policies that promote gender diversity and to establish mentorship programs that support women's advancement into leadership positions. On the media front, the study illustrates the impact of increased visibility on women's football. Media outlets and sponsors are prompted to invest in campaigns that highlight female athletes' achievements, thereby enhancing public interest and changing perceptions. These practical implications pave the way for football to harness its global platform to drive meaningful gender equity initiatives, enriching the sport and setting a standard for inclusivity in other domains.

### **5.2. Limitations of the study**

The study on gender inequalities in European football, while comprehensive, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the scope of the research is predominantly focused on major organizations such as UEFA and national football associations, which may overlook smaller, yet influential, local clubs and grassroots initiatives that also play a significant role in shaping gender dynamics within the sport. This focus could lead to an incomplete understanding of the diverse challenges and successes experienced across different levels of football. Additionally, the study primarily relies on existing literature, policy documents, and qualitative interviews, which may not fully capture the nuances and evolving nature of gender inequalities within the sport. The reliance on secondary data could limit the ability to identify emerging trends or innovative practices that are yet to be widely recognized or documented. Another limitation is the geographical focus on Europe, which, while intentional, may not account for the cultural and structural differences influencing gender equality in football in other regions. This regional concentration could hinder the generalizability of the findings in a global context. Moreover, the study's analysis is constrained by the availability and quality of gender-disaggregated data, particularly in leadership and governance roles. Inconsistent or incomplete data reporting can make it challenging to form a fully accurate picture of the current state of gender representation across various football organizations. Lastly, while the study offers

recommendations to address gender disparities, its scope does not extend to evaluating the implementation and long-term impact of these suggestions, which could provide deeper insights into their effectiveness and adaptability. Recognizing these limitations is critical for directing future research and refining strategies to promote gender equality in football.

### **5.3. Recommendations for future research**

Future research on gender inequalities in football should expand its scope to encompass a broader range of organizations, including local clubs and grassroots initiatives, which play a critical role in the development and perception of women's football. Exploring these smaller entities could uncover unique challenges and innovative practices that are not visible at the higher levels. Additionally, longitudinal studies are recommended to assess the long-term impact of current gender equality initiatives and track evolving trends. Such research could offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of various strategies over time and help refine them for better outcomes. Expanding the geographical focus to include other regions outside of Europe is another important avenue for future research. This would provide a more global perspective and help identify how different cultural and structural contexts influence gender disparities in football. Finally, prioritizing the collection and analysis of comprehensive, gender-disaggregated data will improve the accuracy of future studies and support evidence-based policy-making aimed at advancing gender equity in the sport.

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