

Research Article

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Gender equality policy of the Olympic Movement in Chinese sport governing bodies: the case of elite volleyball

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Keywords: Olympic Movement; gender equality; sport policy; China; volleyball**Abstract**

Objectives: This research based on the theoretical framework of globalisation focuses on the development of gender equality policy in the Olympic Movement and the implementation of IOC's gender equality policy in the context of Chinese elite volleyball.

Methods: In addition to documentary analysis, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key insiders within Chinese elite volleyball system to provide a comprehensive understanding of the IOC's gender equality policy implementation. The analysis involved perspectives of athletes' participation, coaching positions, and leadership roles according to three main elements of the IOC's gender equality policy.

Results: The findings demonstrated that the responses of Chinese elite volleyball to IOC's gender equality policy are participative, conflictual, and passive in terms of the gender balance of athletes' participation, coaches' positions, and the representation of leadership roles respectively.

Conclusions: IOC recommended subordinated stakeholders including NOCs to implement gender equality policy. The attitude of Chinese elite volleyball governing body towards gender equality is generally positive. However, IOC's gender equality policy is not consistently transferred at national level. Policy might be implemented with symbolic measure in China without monitoring system. Referees should be included in policy contents in addition to athletes, coaches and leaders. In addition, since IOC's gender equality policy and statistics have been keeping updated, further results with respect to the case of volleyball should be demonstrated in future research.

Introduction**Research background**

IOC's policy on gender equality involves three perspectives, which are athletes' participation, coaching positions, and leadership roles. To be specific, gender equality in athletes' participation means that female athletes' participation should be the same with male athletes. Except for participation, the increase of the percentage of women's events can also prompt gender equality to some extent. Nonetheless, different from the positive tendency of women's participation, IOC has admitted that women are underrepresented as coaching staff at the Olympic Games. Regarding leadership roles including management and decision-making positions, IOC has set statistical targets over the past 20 years [1, 2]. For example, they required the proportion of women executive decision-making positions in National Olympic Committees (NOCs) should be more than 10 %, 20 % and 30 % by the end of 2001, 2005 and 2020 respectively. Furthermore, IOC has set concrete Gender Equality and Inclusion Objectives for 2021–2024 with five areas including participation, leadership, safe sport, portrayal, and resource allocation [3].

Literature review and multiple research gaps

According to Houlihan [4], the emergence of a worldwide organisational infrastructure for sport has positive influence on development of a global sporting culture. Scholars from almost all over the world have studied the relationship between globalisation and sport from different angles involving but not limited to politics, economics, culture and sociology [4–7]. Since globalisation is originated from and rooted in Western capitalist countries, non-Western insights into globalisation are under-represented. However, several

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recent studies have profoundly discussed the relationship between globalisation and Chinese elite sport in economic and ideological fields, which provide substantial background for this research [8–10]. Since gender equality which has been recognised as a perennial social issue and global value, this research focuses more on cultural aspects. A combination of globalisation and gender issues tends to be under-researched in the sporting context. Therefore, this research could fill the gap of gender issues in sport globalisation studies.

In addition to the gap of gender elements in sport globalisation studies, there is another research gap regarding gender-related policy in Chinese sport development. Due to

traditional gender relations, Asian countries are relatively late adopter of gender-based movement. Since socio-cultural system is different from the West, non-Western countries including China may pay more attention to the communication and negotiation with the IOC in terms of sport policies. Among sport studies on gender and women in the context of China, a multitude of studies have provided a sound research background from either feminist theory or socio-historical aspect [11–20]. Nevertheless, there is a dearth that gender equality is regarded as a particular perspective of policy in sport research. Hence, this research could also fill the gap of gender equality issue in Chinese sport policy studies (Figure 1).

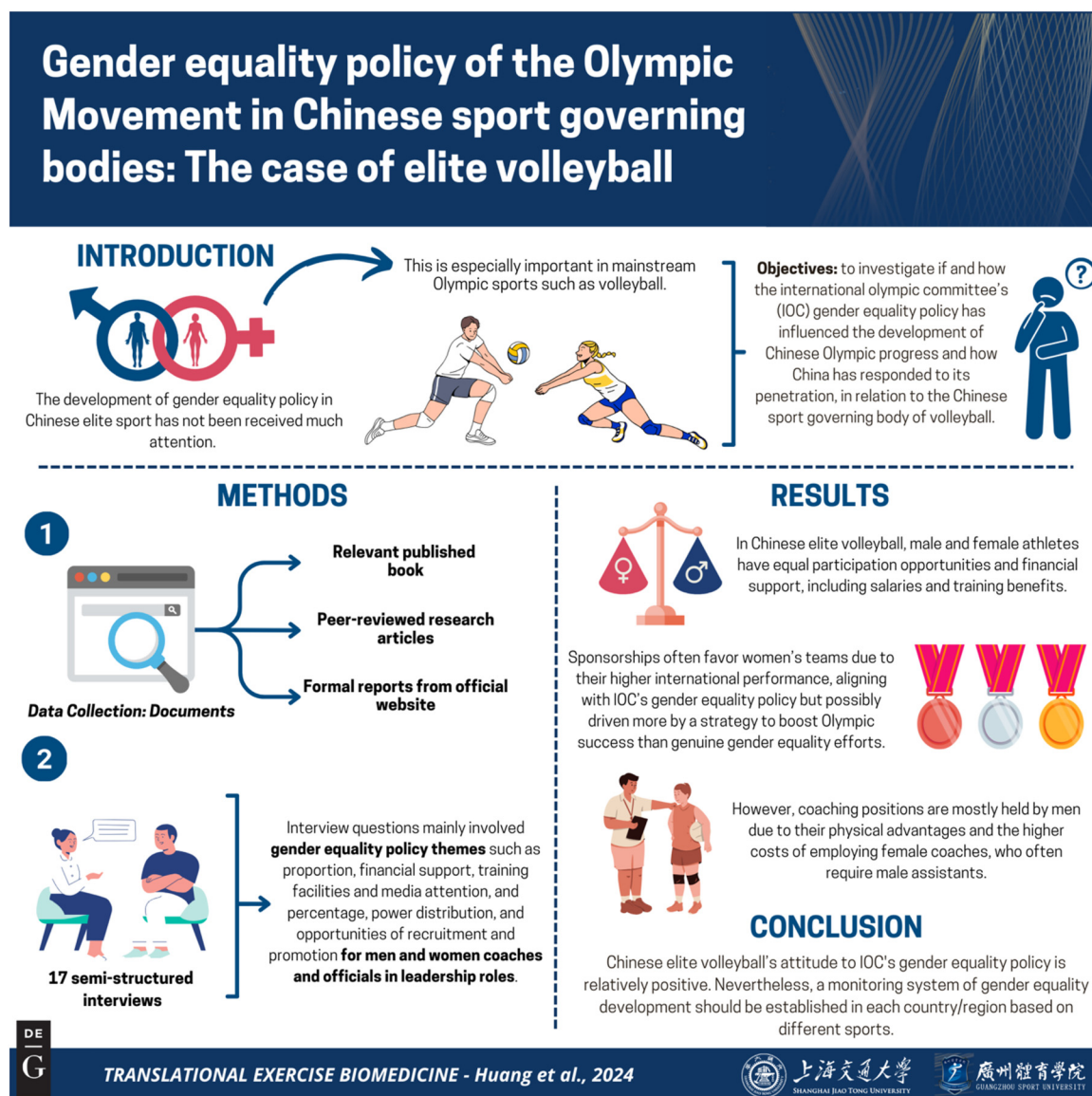


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the study. Figure created by with BioRender.

Research aims and objectives

The aim of this research is to investigate if and how the IOC's gender equality policy has influenced the development of Chinese Olympic progress (1990s–2020s), meanwhile, if and how China has responded to its penetration, in relation to the Chinese sport governing body of volleyball. Premised on research background and research aim, specific research objectives are:

- (1) To explore the influence of the global IOC's gender equality policy and advocacy of women empowerment on Chinese elite sport through the case study of Chinese volleyball governing body;
- (2) To investigate how Chinese sport governing body of volleyball responded to global gender equality policy implemented by IOC and the factors behind.

Theoretical framework: 'reach' and 'response' dichotomy of globalisation

Houlihan's [4] globalisation framework which has been updated by Tan [21] mainly reflects in 'reach' and 'response' dichotomy, which regards globalisation as a bidirectional process between international level and local level rather than a kind of oppressive penetration (Figure 2). Three primary concerns are economic, political, and cultural emphasis. This research is based on cultural globalisation because the focus of this study is on IOC's gender equality policy which serves as a recognised global value. Moreover, the process of response which relates to the attitude of national authorities is generally typed as passive, participative and conflictual. In specific, the passive response which means the complete import of global culture has two possibilities. First, the recipient culture accepts the external culture with an attitude of enthusiasm but in a passive way. Second, the recipient culture has no ability to challenge the pressure of the penetration of the global

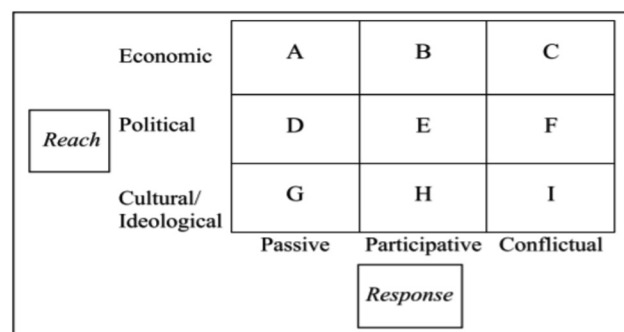


Figure 2: Patterns of globalisation (adapted from [21]).

culture. Participative response reflects that the relationship between global culture and local culture reaches a balance in the context that global culture has a sufficient control over resources to provide local culture with leverage. Last, conflictual response indicates that local culture with the possession of sufficient resources has an ability to boycott global culture, or the recipient culture has its own set of value in order to reject the penetration of the external culture.

Materials and methods

Ontological and epistemological assumptions

The main method of this research is semi-structured interviews, the perspectives of researchers cannot be excluded from the collection and analyses of data during the research process. Hence, this research is based on the position of constructionism. Besides, this research is considered as an interpretivism research. Data collected from semi-structured interviews are mostly based on interviewees' own feelings, experiences, and opinions [22, 23]. Therefore, subjective, and critical perspectives of research participants and the researchers' understanding of the answers are inevitably involved into the process of data analysis. In addition, due to complicated characteristics of the development of gender equality policy in Chinese sport governing bodies which cannot be simply measured in a numerical way and are unrealistic to quantify, qualitative data is more appropriate, solid, and effective.

Case selection

The criteria for case selection of elite volleyball are mainly based on three considerations. First, since this research focuses on the interaction between IOC and Chinese sport governing body, particular sport selected in this study should be an Olympic sport with a relatively long history of development in both the Olympic Movement and China. Volleyball had been included in the Olympic Games when China returned to IOC and the Olympic Games in 1979 and 1984 respectively. Second, given the fact that volleyball has been included in one of the prominent Olympic sports that China attached great importance to and given more support compared to other sports, the findings of the case of volleyball could reflect China's mainstream feedback on IOC's gender equality policy. Third, Olympic performance can be recognised as the most direct and intuitive factor that reflects the situation of gender equality at the Olympic Games.

Data collection: semi-structured interviews

Interview questions which were formulated according to globalisation theory mainly involved gender equality policy themes such as proportion, financial support, training facilities and media attention between men and women athletes, and percentage, power distribution, and opportunities of recruitment and promotion for men and women coaches and officials in leadership roles (Appendix 1).

Regarding interview sampling strategy, based on purposive sampling strategy [24], interviewees were identified and selected according to the relevance, seniority, and feasibility with research topic. To be specific, since IOC's gender equality

policy involves three dimensions of athletes, coaches and leaders, the sample is divided up according to these three categories [24]. In addition, in order to make sure the authority of the information provided by the interviewees, snowball sampling is also utilised to qualify the identity of research participants. The details of interviewees are illustrated in the table below (Table 1).

Data analysis

This research is subjected to thematic analysis. NVivo 12 Plus which is a qualitative data analysis computer software package was employed during the process of thematic analysis. In specific, interview transcripts were imported into NVivo. Meaningful units were extracted from transcripts and coded as various tags. Same or similar tags were systematically merged. Then tags with different aspects of the same research targets (athletes/coaches/administrative leaders) were grouped into the same category. Last, all of the categories were organised into sub-themes and themes based on theoretical framework.

Results

Chinese elite volleyball athletes: a participative response

Quotas of athletes

The proportion of athletes can be seen as one of the most straightforward manifestations to reflect gender equality in sport [25]. In terms of volleyball, which is a team sport, due to the same competition format, the number of athletes as well as substitutes taking part in the competition is strictly regulated. According to FIVB's [26] official regulations, the maximum number of athletes of per NOC is 12 men and 12 women. In the context of China, as the national-level authoritative volleyball governing body subordinate to the IOC and FIVB, CVA is obliged to abide by all the official international volleyball rules in terms of athlete quotas to be eligible to participate in international competitions.

Such equivalent quota represents male and female athletes have equal opportunities to participate in competitions. However, gender equality in terms of the percentage of male and female athletes has not been involved into the requirement of talent identification and enrolment. First, the situation of talent identification and athlete recruitment of each province varies from year to year, and the situation of each province may directly affect athlete identification of

Table 1: Profiles of the interviewees.

Interviewee number	Organisation(s)	Position(s)	Interview date
1	National men's volleyball team	Retired male athlete	11 May 2021
2	National men's volleyball team	Retired male athlete	18 May 2021
3	National men's volleyball team	Current male athlete	27 May 2021
4	Provincial men's volleyball team	Retired male athlete	27 May 2021
5	Provincial men's volleyball team	Retired male athlete	11 August 2021
6	Provincial women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	11 August 2021
7	Provincial women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	11 August 2021
8	Provincial women's volleyball team	Retired female athlete	13 August 2021
9	Provincial women's volleyball team	Retired female athlete	13 August 2021
10	Provincial women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	13 August 2021
11	Provincial women's volleyball team	Retired female athlete	14 August 2021
12	National women's volleyball team	Retired female athlete	15 August 2021
13	Provincial-level volleyball management centre	Male department director	17 August 2021
14	Provincial women's volleyball team, national women's volleyball team	Male current head coach, former assistant coach	18 August 2021
15	National women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	18 August 2021
16	National women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	18 August 2021
17	National women's volleyball team	Current female athlete	18 August 2021

the national team. Hence, the overall gender balance is difficult to be controlled. Second, the number and proportion of male and female athletes who actively participate in the selection process is not fixed. Third, the recruitment of athletes has become increasingly difficult in recent years, especially among young athletes. Gender equality may not be taken into consideration in the process of talent identification under this situation. More importantly, forth, elite sport is performance-based instead of gender-based. In other words, sport performance and achievements rather than gender balance are considered as the key bases in the process of athlete selection and recruitment (Interviewee 3).

Financial support

Chinese elite volleyball's financial support mainly comes from government budget and commercial sponsorship. In terms of the government budget based on 'whole nation system of competitive sport' (*juguo tizhi*) with centralised organisational structure [27], it is divided into central/national and local/provincial levels. Whether at national or provincial level, instead of directly allocating financial support to either men's or women's volleyball team, they receive grant as a group. The basic salary of athletes is guaranteed and not affected by sporting performance and achievements (Interviewee 2).

Based on outstanding international sporting success and media attention achieved by national women's volleyball team, they may gain more opportunities of commercial sponsorships and endorsements than national men's volleyball team. Women's volleyball matches are often broadcasted and exposed by mainstream media. It means that Chinese national women's volleyball team gains much more additional commercial money than Chinese national men's volleyball Team (Interviewee 13).

There are some suspicious views pertaining to Chinese elite volleyball's relatively participative response to IOC's gender equality regarding financial support for athletes. In specific, the reason why the attitude of Chinese elite volleyball towards gender equality is completely in line with IOC's policy is the superior performance of Chinese national women's team. More financial support is the outcome of better sporting performance. Therefore, the response of Chinese elite volleyball to IOC's gender equality policy seems to be a coincidence rather than a pursuit to promote the status of women in sport.

Treatment of training

Similar to financial support from government budget, training treatment involving sport equipment, apparatus,

facilities, venues and fields for both male and female athletes are tantamount. In addition, the basic necessities of life including uniforms, diet, residence, and travelling charge of competitions are the same for male and female athletes (Interviewee 15).

Nevertheless, some interviewees reported that in some provinces, training supplies may be distributed in a sequential order according to competition results. Furthermore, as financial support for athletes varies depending on commercial income, better training guarantees can range based on additional commercial resources derived from sporting success. The difference is especially evident in the National Volleyball Teams with more sponsorships and endorsements compared to Provincial Volleyball Team.

There is a specific example to reflect Chinese elite volleyball's attitude towards gender equality policy related to athletes' uniforms. FIVB [28] launched the world's first 'Equal Jersey' campaign in June of 2021, which encouraged top players champion gender equality by wearing a special edition jersey featuring their own name and that of a player of the opposite gender. Such an activation is in line with the IOC's policy that women and men compete on a level playing field with equal attention on an international level. This initiative has been transferred to Chinese volleyball governing bodies in different levels, but not actively implemented. According to interviewee 13, a senior director of a Provincial Volleyball management Centre:

"I have heard FIVB promoted a gender equality movement called 'Equal Jersey' in June earlier. This campaign was not taken seriously in China though. The focus of this year is on performance of the Olympic Games and the National Games. Hence, it is unnecessary for volleyball teams to put efforts on preparing for an activity that may do little to improve the sport performance." (Interviewee 13, a director of a Provincial Volleyball Management Centre)

Chinese elite volleyball coaches: a conflictual response

Gender ratio of coaches

The gender ratio of coaches in both National and Provincial Volleyball Teams are extremely unbalanced. Men make up the majority of the coaching staff (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 3; Interviewee 4; Interviewee 11; Interviewee 12). The disparity in the number and ratio of male and female coaches is mainly due to the fact that men's volleyball teams only have male coaches. Besides, coaches of women's volleyball teams may be either male or female. Therefore, the number of male coaches is more than double that of female coaches. First, there is no women coaches within the

men's volleyball teams because women coaches do not contribute to the practical training and competitive performance of men's volleyball. Female coaches are not usually recruited by men's volleyball teams. In other words, only male coaches can help male athletes improve their athletic performance and competitive achievements. Second, since the technical level of skills and tactics of men's volleyball tends to be higher than the development of women's volleyball, the majority of coaches in women's volleyball teams are still men, which could widen the gap of proportion between male and female coaches.

Recruitment process

Professional volleyball teams tend to assume male coaches instead of female coaches as the ones who are more qualified for the position of head coach. In particular, speed and endurance are regarded as fundamentals of outstanding performance in elite sport. In addition to sporting skills, excellent physical strength is especially a must for a volleyball coach to be able to cope with the intense daily pressure of training. A stereotype that men, rather than women are mainly thought to be more capable of high-intensity training in elite sport because of the differences embodied in body structure [29]. The workload and work schedule are cumbersome and heavy for women as elite volleyball coaches in national-level and provincial-level volleyball teams (Interviewee 10). Moreover, on the basis of the fact that women coaches may not be physically fit enough to withstand the high intensity of physical competition in elite volleyball training, recruiting a male coach is much more cost-effective than hiring a women coach. An official of a Provincial Volleyball Management Centre explained the reason that:

"If we hire a qualified female coach, one or two male assistant coaches need to be recruited in order to assist her work. However, financial resources for volleyball team are limited. If it costs so much to hire a female coach, why do not we hire a male coach?" (Interviewee 13, a department director of a Provincial Volleyball Centre)

In addition, childbirth is the biggest barrier to women not being hired by professional volleyball teams. Pregnancy and maternity leave might limit the employment of women as coaching staff in professional volleyball teams. During the period that women coaches are on maternity leave, daily training may be interrupted so that sporting performance may decline. Hence, female coaches are more or less discriminated against and excluded in the recruitment process.

In terms of the subjective factors of the low proportion of women coaches, female interviewees revealed that they are less likely to continue working as professional coaches

within elite volleyball teams after retirement. For women volleyball athletes with outstanding achievements in the Olympics, being a professional coach in an elite volleyball team might not be the best choice after retirement. For other women volleyball athletes who have not accomplished enough to become leaders after retirement, they prefer to be coaches in sport clubs at amateur level or PE teacher at schools rather than professional coaches of elite volleyball teams. This is because that professional coaching positions are scarce, which means not every year there is a quota for coaching position within National or Provincial Volleyball Teams.

Chinese elite volleyball leaders: a passive response

Percentage and promotion of executive leaders in the decision-making level

Regarding executive decision-making positions in Chinese elite volleyball system, they mainly refer to the director or associate director of volleyball management centre at national, provincial, and municipal level. Athletes of the National Volleyball Team are selected from different Provincial Volleyball Teams while they remain their provincial identities during the period that they are in the National Volleyball Team. Thus, volleyball athletes of National Team who have won medals at the international level, especially the gold medal at the Olympic Games, are accessible to be directly employed as the head of the Volleyball Management Centres of their home provinces based on employment guarantee system for the retired elite athletes.

The promotion of executive leaders in the decision-making level within Chinese elite volleyball is based on achievements rather than gender. Neither men nor women have the privilege of being promoted to leadership. Women have not gained more leadership opportunities as a result of gender equality policy. Leadership opportunities are passively assigned to women retired athletes rather than actively advancing women empowerment.

Percentage and recruitment of administrative officials in the middle level

Leadership positions of administrative officials in the middle level are equivalent to civil servants, which means that volleyball-related background is unnecessary to be included into the recruitment criteria. In this way, men's physical strength is no longer an unbeatable advantage for women. They are recruited after passing the same standard of technical tests and interviews without any restrictions on

gender. The fact that women pass technical test with higher scores leads to an increase in the number of women administrative officials in recent years.

Whereas, when they are assigned to different departments within volleyball organisations, specific posts would vary by gender. Women administrative officials are recognised to be more careful at mundane tasks such as logistics, while men administrative officials tend to be assigned to external positions that require strong social skills and organisational capabilities (Interviewee 13).

Discussion

Continuously updated international policy, but inconsistent compliance at national level

According to IOC [30], gender equality Policy has been constantly updated with data collected from each Olympic Games. However, in the context of Chinese elite volleyball governing bodies, there is no sector accountable for gender equality. The absence of a specific department responsible for gender equality reflects China's lack of attention to gender equality policy in elite sport. Moreover, without the supervision and management of an independent department for gender equality issues, international policy might be difficult to be efficiently implemented at national level with orderly guidance.

Based on excellent international sporting performance of Chinese female elite athletes, some interviewees believed that under the current situation that Chinese women athletes outperformed male athletes, it is not urgent and crucial to take gender equality centred on women among athletes as consideration. Some other interviewees expressed that gender equality is not given enough attention in Chinese elite sport system because there is no gender inequality, or rather, China is already doing better than other countries, especially among East Asian countries that share the same cultural background [31, 32]. However, it is ironic that other East Asian countries such as Japan or South Korea have implemented particular projects or legislation for promoting the participation of women athletes and the status of women's sports [33–35]. In terms of tangible policies and regulations, China does not seem to be able to show that it has a well-developed system to guarantee gender equality and eliminate gender inequality in elite sport. Therefore, it is now most urgent and important for China to establish a special gender equality section to act as a mediator, to deliver the international message and to facilitate its implementation at national level.

Policy may be implemented with symbolic measure in China without monitoring system

There is no specific monitoring system in terms of the implementation of IOC's gender equality policy at national level. IOC does not compulsorily require sub-ordinated NOCs to apply any of the classified items of gender equality policy in their countries. Thus, to ostensibly accommodate international policy of gender equality which has not been regarded as an essential issue, China may demonstrate their support to international policy by taking symbolic and seemingly plausible but insufficient actions. The existence of women leaders is for the sake of appearances/packaging/propaganda rather than actual mechanism to achieve equality. The suggestion is to build up an efficient monitoring system between IOC and Chinese sport governing bodies regarding gender equality policy meanwhile raising the education and awareness of gender equality within Chinese elite sport system.

In addition, the lack of monitoring system can also lead to ignorance and misinterpretation, or blindly copying of policy [32]. IOC's policy on gender equality is based on existing fact that women have been suffering from inequality in elite sport and the Olympics. However, based on the historical outstanding performance of Chinese elite women's volleyball, male elite volleyball athletes need to be given more attention. A situation peculiar to the country should be taken into consideration in the process of policy implementation at national level regarding a particular sport. Blindly implementing international policy without domestic consideration when the policy is not in line with the national situation could only lead to a vicious circle in terms of the development of Chinese elite men's volleyball.

Referees should be included in policy contents in addition to athletes, coaches and leaders

In the process of data collection of semi-structured interviews, a certain number of interviewees expressed the similar view that the increasing number of Chinese women have been involved in the group of professional referees at both international and national level. The increase in the number of female referees is even greater than that of female athletes, coaches and leaders, which may be due to the small base of the original number of female referees in Chinese elite sport system. Hence, gender balance of referees who can be regarded as an

important group of elite sport events is a crucial platform to present gender equality achievements and is strongly suggested to be classified as one of the aspects involved in IOC's gender equality policy.

Limitations and inspirations for future research

Based on the quest for depth rather than generalisability, the findings of this research regarding elite volleyball will not be applicable to the rest of sport governing bodies in the context of China. Each case study can only reflect the situation of policy implementation in terms of the specific sport and its governing body. Second, in terms of data collection, semi-structured interviews conducted in this research mainly focused on the perspectives of athletes and coaches within Chinese elite volleyball system. Due to the sensitivity of gender equality issues in China and the difficulty of establishing contact with senior leaders, not many potential interviewees in leadership positions, especially ones with international background, such as the officials from IOC, were included in the list of interviewees.

Therefore, a wider range of case studies should be selected to enrich generalisability regarding the development of IOC's gender equality policy in China. Besides, for more comprehensive research findings and the depth of discussion, the connection with a greater number of officials/experts in relation to gender equality in sport from both international and national levels should be established in order to collect multi-faceted information. Finally, since IOC's gender equality policy and statistics have been keeping updated, further results with respect to the case of volleyball should be demonstrated in future research.

Conclusions

This research aims to analyse the implementation of IOC's gender equality policy involving athletes' participation, percentage of coaching positions, and representation of officials in leadership, decision-making, governing and administrative roles in Chinese elite volleyball governing bodies. With respect to athletes' participation, the basic salary, training benefits, and living conditions for men's and women's volleyball teams are equivalent. Chinese women's volleyball teams with higher international sporting performance certainly obtains more additional benefits than men's teams. Men occupy most of the coaching positions within Chinese elite volleyball system. Male coaches with a higher physical level than female coaches are in greater demand.

Additionally, financial support is another factor that female coaches are underrepresented. As regards leadership positions, Chinese women volleyball athletes with distinguish international achievements would be directly assigned to the decision-making positions according to each province's insurance system for retired elite athletes. For administrative officials at a lower level who might have no background in volleyball, depending on the written test results, women are hired at a higher rate than men. However, the high proportion of women's representation in leadership positions indirectly brought about by the excellent performance of National women's volleyball team and the high admission rate of female officials may not indicate gender equality policy in terms of leadership roles has been actively enforced, but passively accepted by Chinese elite volleyball governing bodies. To sum up, the responses of Chinese elite volleyball to IOC's gender equality policy are participative, conflictual, and passive in terms of gender balance of athletes' participation, coaches' positions, and the representation of leadership roles. The attitude of Chinese elite volleyball governing bodies towards IOC's gender equality policy is relatively positive.

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Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individuals included in this study.

Author contributions: The authors have accepted the responsibility of the entire content of manuscript and approved its submission.

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