

SPECTATOR ATTENDANCE AT THE 2025 IHF WOMEN'S WORLD HANDBALL CHAMPIONSHIP: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GROWTH PATTERNS AND CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

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Abstract

The International Handball Federation (IHF) Women's World Handball Championship represents the premier international competition for women's handball. Understanding attendance patterns provides insights into the sport's commercial viability and growth trajectory. To quantify and analyze spectator attendance at the 2025 IHF Women's World Handball Championship, we compare the figures with historical data, and identify factors contributing to attendance patterns. This study employs descriptive statistics and comparative analysis of attendance data from the 2025 championship (Germany/Netherlands, November 26–December 14, 2025) and previous editions (2015–2023). Data sources include official IHF reports, venue capacity information, and tournament documentation. Statistical measures include total attendance, per-match averages, venue utilisation rates, and year-over-year growth percentages. The 2025 championship recorded 354,029 spectators across 108 matches at five venues (average: 3,278 spectators/match), representing a 2.8% increase over the 2023 record of 344,399 spectators (average: 3,075 spectators/match). Venue capacities ranged from 5,400 to 12,000. The championship demonstrated sustained growth in women's handball attendance over the 2015-2025 period. The 2025 championship achieved record-breaking attendance, driven by strategic dual-host selection, optimised venue selection, effective marketing, and improved competitive balance. These findings suggest continued growth potential for women's handball as a commercially viable spectator sport.

Key Words: *women's handball, sports attendance, spectator behavior, sports marketing, tournament management.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The IHF Women's World Handball Championship, established in 1957, has evolved from a European-only competition of nine teams to a global event featuring 32 nations since 2021 (IHF, 2025). The championship is the premier international women's handball competition, held biennially in non-Olympic years since 1993.

Spectator attendance at sporting events is a key metric for assessing commercial success, public interest, and the overall health of a sport (Borland & MacDonald, 2003). For women's sports, attendance figures provide empirical evidence of market demand

and inform investment decisions by federations, sponsors, and broadcasters (Antunovic & Whiteside, 2018).

Research into women's sports attendance has shown significant growth in the 21st century across multiple sports (Valenti et al., 2020). Factors influencing attendance include team performance, star players, facility quality, marketing efforts, and cultural attitudes towards women's sports (Inoue & Havard, 2014).

Previous research has documented attendance growth at women's handball championships. The 2007 championship in France attracted 397,550 spectators, the highest attendance in championship history to that point. However, subsequent editions showed variability: China 2009 recorded 103,000 spectators, Brazil 2011 had 68,050, and Serbia 2013 attracted 95,120.

The 2015 championship in Denmark drew 165,000 spectators, while the 2017 championship in Germany recorded 237,263 spectators. The 2023 championship, held across Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, attracted 344,399 spectators, with an average of 3,075 per match, marking the highest attendance in the event's history at that time.

The "host nation effect" in sports attendance is well documented, whereby tournaments held in countries with strong traditions in a particular sport typically achieve higher attendance (Funk et al., 2009). Germany and the Netherlands both possess established handball cultures, suggesting potential for elevated attendance.

1.2 Research Questions

This study addresses three primary research questions:

1. What were the total and per-match attendance figures for the 2025 IHF Women's World Handball Championship?
2. How do these figures compare to previous championship editions (2015-2023)?
3. What factors contributed to the observed attendance patterns?

1.3 Significance

Understanding attendance patterns at the 2025 championship offers insights into the growth trajectory of women's handball and its commercial potential. The dual-host model (Germany/Netherlands) and five-venue structure offer a case study for tournament organization that may inform future championship planning.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive approach using secondary data analysis. The research combines historical attendance data with contextual information about tournament organisation, venue characteristics, and promotional activities.

2.2 Data Sources

Primary data sources include:

- Official IHF reports and press releases (IHF, 2025)
- Tournament documentation from organising committees
- Venue capacity specifications
- Historical attendance records from previous championships (2015-2023)

2.3 Data Collection

Attendance data were collected from official IHF publications and verified against multiple sources. The following variables were recorded:

- Total spectators
- Number of matches
- Venue locations and capacities
- Host nation(s)
- Tournament dates
- Number of participating teams

2.4 Statistical Analysis

The following statistical measures were calculated:

- **Total Attendance (TA)**
- **Average Attendance per Match (AAM)**
- **Year-over-Year Growth Rate (YoY)**
- **Venue Utilisation Rate (VUR)**

2.5 Limitations

This study faces several limitations:

1. Absence of match-by-match attendance breakdowns limits analysis of within-tournament variation

2. Venue utilization rates could not be calculated for all matches due to data availability
3. 2021 attendance data were compromised by COVID-19 restrictions and are excluded from primary comparisons
4. Economic factors (ticket pricing, disposable income) were not systematically controlled

3. RESULTS

3.1 2025 Championship attendance figures

The 2025 IHF Women's World Handball Championship, jointly hosted by Germany and the Netherlands from November 26 to December 14, 2025, achieved significant attendance success.

- **Total Attendance:** 354,029 spectators (before final day)
- **Number of Matches:** 108
- **Average Attendance per Match:** 3,278 spectators
- **Number of Venues:** 5
- **Participating Teams:** 32

3.2 Venue specifications

The championship utilized five venues across both host nations:

Germany:

- Westfalenhalle, Dortmund: Capacity 12,000 (largest venue)
- Porsche-Arena, Stuttgart: Capacity 6,000+
- Trier Arena, Trier: Capacity 5,400

Netherlands:

- Rotterdam Ahoy, Rotterdam: Main venue hosting all tournament rounds including final
- Maaspoort, 's-Hertogenbosch: Smallest venue

3.3 Comparative analysis: 2015-2025

Table 1 presents attendance data for Women's World Handball Championships from 2015-2025:

Year	Host(s)	Total Attendance	Matches	Avg/Match	Teams
2015	Denmark	165,000	84	1,964	24
2017	Germany	237,263	84	2,824	24
2019	Japan	Data limited	96	N/A	24
2021	Spain	Limited*	112	N/A*	32
2023	Denmark/Norway/Sweden	344,399	112	3,075	32
2025	Germany/Netherlands	354,029	108**	3,278	32

*2021 attendance severely impacted by COVID-19 restrictions

**Pre-final day figure; total 108 matches over tournament

3.4 Growth analysis

2023-2025 Comparison:

- Absolute increase: 9,630 spectators (+2.8%)
- Per-match increase: 203 spectators (+6.6%)

2015-2025 Decade Trend:

- Total attendance increased to 114.6% (165,000 to 354,029)
- Per-match attendance increased to 66.9% (1,964 to 3,278)

2017-2025 (Both Germany-hosted):

- Total attendance increased to 49.2%
- Per-match attendance increased to 16.1%

The data demonstrate consistent growth in attendance at the women's handball championship, with a marked acceleration following the expansion to 32 teams in 2021.

3.5 Pre-Tournament demand indicators

Early ticket sales provided predictive indicators of strong attendance. By January 24, 2025, organisers reported 30% of tickets sold in Dortmund. Germany's matches in Stuttgart were completely sold out well in advance of the tournament.

Additional tickets for the main round were released on November 28, 2025, demonstrating sustained demand.

3.6 Notable attendance achievements

The 2023 championship featured 10 matches that drew over 10,000 spectators each — nine in Herning, Denmark, and one in Gothenburg, Sweden. The 2023 final in Herning's Jyske Bank Boxen arena attracted 12,031 fans, demonstrating capacity for large-scale attendance at marquee matches.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Factors contributing to high attendance

4.1.1 Strategic host selection

The dual-host model featuring Germany and the Netherlands leveraged two nations with strong handball traditions and competitive national teams. Germany previously hosted successful championships in 1965, 1997, and 2017, while the Netherlands hosted them in 1971 and 1986. This historical connection to the sport likely drove ticket sales.

Germany's progression to the final, where they faced potential champions Norway, sustained attendance interest throughout the tournament's knockout stages. The host nation effect appears evident in the sustained attendance across multiple venues.

4.1.2 Venue optimisation

The selection of mid-sized venues (5,400-12,000 capacity) created engaging atmospheres without risking empty seating that can diminish spectator experience. Official IHF assessments highlighted the atmosphere in venues such as Rotterdam Ahoy and noted "packed German halls" (IHF, 2025).

The distribution of matches across five venues in different cities maximised geographic accessibility for regional populations, potentially increasing overall attendance by reducing travel barriers for spectators.

4.1.3 Tournament expansion effects

The expansion from 24 to 32 teams in 2021 increased the total number of matches, providing more opportunities for attendance. However, the per-match increase from 2023 to 2025 (+6.6%) indicates that growth was not merely a function of more matches but reflected genuine increases in per-game spectator interest.

The increased competitive balance associated with expansion may have contributed to attendance. The tournament featured historically strong performances by non-European teams, with Brazil finishing sixth, Angola tenth, and Japan thirteenth, adding unpredictability and diverse storylines.

4.1.4 Marketing and promotional efforts

The championship's integrated marketing campaign centered on the motto "Hands Up For More," with a comprehensive promotional strategy:

- Official song "Hands Up For More" by Lucille and Bria X (released September 18, 2025)
- 54-square-meter artwork installation in Stuttgart (unveiled October 22, 2025)
- Social media campaigns and promotional events
- Brand ambassador Tess Lieder (announced November 27, 2024)

The "Catch the Dream" official motto resonated with audiences seeking inspirational sporting narratives, particularly in the context of women's sports empowerment.

4.1.5 Competitive quality and offensive play

The tournament achieved an all-time record average of 64.0 goals per game, surpassing the previous peak of 60.8 from 2003 (IHF, 2025). This offensive excitement likely enhanced spectator appeal, as high-scoring matches are generally associated with increased entertainment value and fan satisfaction (García & Rodríguez, 2002).

4.1.6 Olympic cycle positioning

As the first major championship following the Paris 2024 Olympics (where Norway won gold and France silver), the tournament benefited from heightened public awareness of elite women's handball. The championship served as an early preview of contenders for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, adding narrative significance.

4.2 Comparison with historical benchmarks

The 2025 figures must be contextualized within historical attendance patterns:

Single-Match Records: The 2013 final in Belgrade attracted 19,467 spectators, demonstrating capacity for exceptional single-match attendance. The 1957

inaugural championship final drew approximately 8,000 spectators, played outdoors in Yugoslavia.

Tournament Records: The 2007 championship in France holds the all-time record with 397,550 total spectators, though this occurred under different tournament structures (24 teams, 60 matches). The 2025 championship's 354,029 spectators represents the second-highest total in history.

Recent Trend: The consistent increase from 2015 (165,000) through 2023 (344,399) to 2025 (354,029) demonstrates sustained momentum rather than isolated spikes.

4.3 Within-tournament distribution patterns

While granular match-by-match data were not available, the overall average of 3,278 spectators per match likely masks significant variation. Typical patterns in tournament attendance include:

- higher attendance for host nation matches
- increased attendance in knockout rounds
- peak attendance for semi-finals and final
- lower attendance for matches between lower-ranked teams

The reported sellouts for Germany matches in Stuttgart and high attendance in German venues generally support this pattern. However, the reported "vibrant atmosphere in every host city" (IHF, 2025) suggests relatively consistent attendance across venues rather than extreme concentration in a single location.

4.4 Implications for women's handball development

4.4.1 Commercial viability

The attendance figures provide empirical evidence of women's handball's commercial potential. Sustained attendance across 108 matches demonstrates that sport can consistently attract paying spectators, which has direct implications for:

- sponsorship valuations
- Broadcast rights negotiations
- future investment in women's handball infrastructure

- player compensation and professionalization

4.4.2 Global growth indicators

The successful attendance occurred alongside increased global competitiveness, with non-European teams achieving higher placements than in previous championships. This combination suggests a virtuous cycle: increased visibility (driven by attendance and media coverage) contributes to global development, which in turn makes the championship more compelling for diverse audiences.

4.4.3 Tournament organization best practices

The success of the Germany-Netherlands dual-host model provides a replicable framework:

1. select hosts with established handball cultures;
2. utilize multiple mid-sized venues (5,000-12,000 capacity);
3. distribute matches geographically to maximize regional accessibility;
4. implement comprehensive marketing campaigns with clear messaging;
5. leverage competitive balance to ensure compelling matches throughout the countries.

4.4.4 Sustainability considerations

Questions remain regarding the sustainability of this growth trajectory:

- **host nation dependency:** The strong attendance in Germany and the Netherlands may not replicate in countries with less-established handball cultures;
- **economic factors:** The study period (2015-2025) coincides with generally favorable economic conditions in Europe; future tournaments may face different economic contexts;
- **competition from other events:** The Olympic cycle positioning provided advantages; non-Olympic-adjacent years may face different attendance patterns.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

5.1 Study limitations

This research is constrained by several limitations:

1. **data granularity:** Absence of match-by-match attendance data prevented detailed analysis of within-tournament patterns, identification of peak attendance matches, and calculation of venue-specific utilization rates;
2. **confounding variables:** Multiple factors influence attendance simultaneously (host nation effects, marketing, competitive quality, economic conditions), making causal attribution challenging;
3. **COVID-19 impact:** The 2021 championship's attendance was severely compromised by pandemic restrictions, creating a gap in the longitudinal analysis;
4. **Economic data:** Ticket pricing, local economic conditions, and demographic data were not systematically integrated into the analysis;
5. **media coverage:** Television and streaming viewership data, which influence and correlate with in-person attendance, were not comprehensively analyzed.

5.2 Directions for future research

Several research directions would advance the understanding of women's handball attendance:

1. **econometric modeling:** development of multivariate models incorporating ticket prices, income levels, travel distances, team performance, and other predictive variables;
2. **comparative analysis:** systematic comparison with men's handball championships to assess progress toward gender parity in attendance and commercial success;
3. **spectator demographics:** survey research examining the demographic profile of attendees, motivation factors, and satisfaction levels;
4. **media impact studies:** analysis of the relationship between media coverage (broadcast reach, digital engagement) and in-person attendance;

5. **longitudinal studies:** continued tracking of attendance patterns across multiple championship cycles to identify long-term trends and test sustainability of growth.
6. **geographic analysis:** spatial analysis of attendance distribution, travel patterns, and optimal venue location strategies.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of findings

This study analyzed spectator attendance at the 2025 IHF Women's World Handball Championship, finding:

1. **Record attendance:** The championship achieved 354,029 spectators before the final day, surpassing the previous 2023 record by 2.8% in total attendance and 6.6% in per-match average.
2. **Sustained growth:** The 2015-2025 period demonstrated consistent growth, with total attendance increasing by/to?114.6% and per-match attendance increasing by/to? 66.9%.
3. **Contributing factors:** Strategic host nation selection (Germany/Netherlands), optimized mid-sized venues, comprehensive marketing, improved competitive balance, and Olympic cycle positioning contributed to attendance success.
4. **Commercial viability:** The consistent high attendance across numerous matches demonstrates women's handball's commercial potential and market demand.

6.2 Theoretical implications

These findings contribute to sports management literature by:

- providing empirical evidence of successful tournament organization strategies;
- demonstrating the viability of dual-host models for international sporting events;
- supporting theories of host nation effects in sports attendance;

- contributing to the understanding of women's sports commercialization.

6.3 Practical implications

For stakeholders in women's handball:

National federations: The dual-host model offers a framework for sharing organizational costs and risks while maximizing attendance by leveraging multiple handball markets.

IHF: Continued strategic host selection and support for marketing initiatives can sustain growth momentum. Consideration should be given to developing handball cultures in emerging markets to enable future tournaments beyond traditional European hosts.

Sponsors and broadcasters: The attendance figures provide evidence justifying increased investment in women's handball, with demonstrated audience interest in supporting commercial partnerships.

Host cities: Mid-sized venues (5,000-12,000 capacity) appear optimal for women's handball championships, balancing atmosphere creation with economic viability.

6.4 Future outlook

The 2025 championship establishes a new baseline for women's handball attendance. Sustaining this momentum requires:

- continued investment in global handball development;
- strategic tournament planning that balances established markets with emerging ones;
- enhanced marketing that builds on the 2025 success;
- maintenance of competitive balance to ensure compelling matches.

The challenge for future championships will be replicating these attendance figures in potentially less favorable contexts (non-traditional handball nations, different economic conditions). However, the demonstrated growth trajectory from 2015-2025 suggests underlying structural improvements in women's handball's commercial viability rather than temporary spikes.

Final Conclusion

The 2025 IHF Women's World Handball Championship achieved record-breaking attendance that reflects genuine progress for women's sport. With 354,029 spectators across 108 matches in five venues, the championship demonstrated that women's handball can consistently attract substantial crowds, providing evidence of commercial viability and popular appeal.

For the broader women's sports movement, the 2025 championship offers a case study on successful tournament organization and evidence that investment in women's sports yields tangible returns in terms of fan engagement and public interest. As women's sports globally continue to gain investment and media coverage, handball is well-positioned to capitalize on this momentum, with the 2025 attendance figures serving as both achievement and foundation for continued growth.

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