

Exploring Gender Discrimination Faced by Women in Indian Sports

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In today's world, we often hear discussions about equality between men and women. However, when it comes to sports, there's a noticeable silence surrounding this issue. Women and girls participate in sports at much lower rates compared to men. In comparison to men's sports, women's sports events receive substantially less media coverage. This gender gap in sports is underpinned by a numerous of barriers, which can be categorized as 'practical,' 'personal,' and 'social and cultural.' Practical barriers encompass logistical challenges such as access to facilities and resources, while personal barriers may include factors like confidence and societal expectations. Social and cultural barriers manifest in stereotypes and biases that limit opportunities for women in sports. Moreover, women face specific challenges within the sports arena, including unequal pay, a lack of female coaches and mentors, biased award systems, and inadequate familial support. These obstacles not only hinder women's participation but also obstruct their progression and success within the sporting domain. This paper aims to shed light on these challenges and offer practical solutions to enhance women's participation in sports. Encouraging girls' and women's participation in sports is crucial not only for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment but also for broader societal development and social change. **Methodology:** Methodology involves comprehensive data collection from secondary sources such as websites, articles, newspapers, and books. Through analysis and synthesis of this data, this paper, endeavor to provide valuable insights and policy suggestions to address the multifaceted barriers faced by women in sports.

Keywords: *Gender Equality, Sports Participation, Barriers, Women's Empowerment, Social Change.*

Introduction: Gender bias in sports is a significant issue, with women often facing discrimination compared to men in various sports. Historical research and media coverage have largely overlooked women's clubs and players, contributing to the gender gap (Scheidler & Wagstaff, 2018). Examples like Sania Mirza facing criticism for her attire and instances of women athletes being abused by male coaches highlight the challenges women in sports encounter. Despite some progress with talented athletes like Mary Kom and Saina Nehwal, gender inequality persists in sports. Recognizing these differences and striving for equal opportunities is crucial for positive change (Olympics.com, 2024). It is unacceptable that women, who make up half the population, are not given fair chances in sports. women and girls are much lower than among men. This gender gap is caused by many barriers, which can be categorised as 'practical', 'personal' and 'social and cultural'. These play a significant role in women and girls' attitudes and behavior (Federico et al., 2023; Sport Scotland The National Agency for Sport, 2008).

List of the main barriers:

1. **Practical barriers:** Practical barriers such as limited access to sports facilities, insufficient funding for training and equipment, and disparities in opportunities for competition are key factors contributing to the gender gap in sports (Duffey et al., 2021). Research studies have shown that women and girls face challenges in accessing quality sports programs and resources, which impact their ability to engage fully in sports activities and develop their athletic skills.

- i) **Funding:** Funding disparities between men's and women's sports are evident across various levels, with women's sports receiving less financial support (Lee et al., 2020). In the 2006/07 period, only 41% of female athletes were funded through different programs. At the community sports level, girls' teams often struggle to secure sponsorships from local businesses due to smaller supporter bases. This imbalance in funding leads to inadequate facilities, equipment, and gear for women's sports.
- ii) **Access to facilities:** Access to sporting facilities is a critical factor that determines women and girls' ability to participate in sports (Reece et al., 2017). Unfortunately, women often face challenges in accessing necessary facilities, as sports halls tend to prioritize male sports for pitch time, leaving women and girls with less convenient time slots. This disparity in access is even more pronounced for women and girls with disabilities, with one-third of disabled young people feeling excluded from local sports opportunities (Pfister & Hartmann-Tews, 2005). Physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, reception areas, changing rooms, and sports facilities, as well as a lack of accessible transport and parking, further limit access for women and girls with disabilities. Additionally, barriers are created when information is presented in formats that are inaccessible to visually impaired and/or hearing-impaired individuals (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2009).
- iii) **Lack of women Coaches:** One significant issue in sports is the lack of women coaches, who play a crucial role in shaping the sports landscape. Coaches are influential figures who determine what and who is valued in the sports world, yet a majority of coaches worldwide are men (Serpell et al., 2023). This imbalance has implications for the representation and opportunities available to women in sports. In some cases, women coaches are burdened with addressing concerns such as sexual assaults within sports federations, rather than being recognized for their coaching abilities (O'Malley & Greenwood, 2018). In the United States, Title IX, a landmark legislation passed in 1972, aimed to address sex discrimination in educational programs, including sports. However, over the years, there has been a steady decline in female coaches. Some critics argue that the combination of male and female athletic departments in response to Title IX led to the gradual selection of male coaches for female teams. While Title IX promoted pay parity for women's team coaches, the lure of higher salaries attracted more male coaches, resulting in the marginalization of female coaches (Melnick, 2018).
- iv) **Biasness in awards:** In India, sports awards are categorized into four main categories: Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Awards, Arjuna Awards, Dhyan Chand Awards, and Dronacharya Awards. Notable athletes like P.V. Sindhu, Sakshi Malik, and Dipa Karmakar received the prestigious Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award following their outstanding performances at the Rio Olympics. However, an analysis of sports awards in India reveals a significant gender disparity, with women receiving fewer government-conferred sports awards compared to men. Each year, the government limits the number of awards given, often relying on recommendations from sports federations (Jain & Mampatta, 2016). It is worth noting that these federations are predominantly male-dominated, which may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in receiving sports awards. Additionally, the lower participation of women in certain sports plays a role in the disparity. For instance, while women's participation in sports like athletics is around 40%, it significantly drops to 10% in sports such as boxing and wrestling ("Issues faced by females in sports," 2023).
- v) **Gender Pay Gap:** The gender pay gap remains a significant challenge for women in sports, as highlighted by studies and reports. For example, tennis players Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams ranked 29th and 33rd, respectively, in the list of highest-paid players in 2020. India's Gender Gap Index in 2020 dropped to the 112th position from 108th in 2018. Disparities in pay are evident in

various sports, such as during the World Twenty 20 competitions where men's teams flew business class while women's teams were only provided with economy class tickets (Abhyuday, 2021). In the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), the average season pay in 2017 was \$74,759, significantly lower than the NBA where male athletes earn an average of \$7,147,217 per season, creating a 96-fold pay difference. Gender prize money gaps further contribute to gender discrimination in sports, with disparities still existing in sports like cricket, football, and golf despite efforts to achieve equal pay in 83% of sports (Katsarova, 2019).

vi) Sexual Harassment: One of the primary reasons for the declining respect for female athletes worldwide is the pervasive objectification they face, often being viewed as commodities for others' desires. This objectification often manifests as sexual harassment, encompassing a range of behaviors such as unwelcome advances and requests for sexual favors, which detrimentally impact athletes' performance (Krane, 2001). Many female athletes choose to leave their sports rather than endure the constant harassment and abuse they face. Unfortunately, instances of sexual harassment are vastly underreported. Additionally, the Sports Law & Welfare Association of India (SLAWIN) has provisions addressing harassment in sports, yet no incidents have been reported. The National Sports Policy, overseen by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, allows for online complaints but lacks transparency regarding the number of filed complaints or the outcomes of adjudication in sexual harassment cases.

2. Personal Barriers: Secondary data sources indicate that personal barriers, including lack of self-confidence, fear of judgment, and internalized gender stereotypes, significantly influence women and girls' participation in sports (Women in Sport, 2023). Studies have highlighted the importance of addressing self-esteem issues, promoting positive body image, and challenging societal norms that discourage women from pursuing athletic goals.

i) Self-Confidence: Girls tend to have lower self-confidence compared to boys, often evaluating their performance and abilities more negatively. This lack of confidence is often tied to body image concerns, as girls who are not comfortable with their bodies may struggle to believe in their physical capabilities and can be overly critical of their performance (Buher, 2023). Moreover, self-confidence in girls is influenced by the competitive nature of sports. While many female athletes enjoy the competitive aspect of sports, some girls and women are deterred from participating due to the competitive environment. This preference for non-competitive or "aesthetic activities" like aerobics, gymnastics, and yoga has been growing among girls and young women, leading to a decline in popularity of traditional team sports in some cases.

ii) Fear of Judgment: Through different studies it was observed that, worry or anxiety that women and girls may feel about how others will perceive them if they participate in sports. They might fear being judged for not being good enough, for not fitting traditional ideas of femininity, or for simply stepping out of expected gender roles (Seal et al., 2021). This fear can be a significant barrier to getting involved in sports because it holds them back from trying something they might enjoy. For example, a girl who loves basketball but feels nervous about joining the school team because she's worried her classmates might make fun of her for being too aggressive or not feminine enough.

iii) Gender stereotypes: These are the beliefs and expectations that women and girls have internalized from society about what is considered appropriate or "normal" behavior for their gender. In the context of sports, these stereotypes often suggest that girls should be more focused on appearance, gentleness,

or domestic activities rather than being strong, competitive, or athletic (Liu et al., 2023). When women and girls internalize these stereotypes, they may feel pressure to conform to them and avoid activities like sports that are seen as more "masculine".

iv) Self-Esteem Issues: Low self-esteem can be both a cause and a consequence of the fear of judgment and internalized gender stereotypes. When women and girls feel insecure about themselves or their abilities, they may be more sensitive to criticism or rejection from others (Ouyang et al., 2020). This can make them less likely to participate in sports, where they fear they might not measure up or be accepted by their peers.

Key Findings:

- There is a prevailing perception that women's sports are less entertaining than men's.
- Men tend to participate in sports more than women, and this gender disparity increases as individuals age.
- In developed states like Haryana and Punjab, the proportion of women participating in sports is as low as 15-20%, in contrast to the more balanced sex ratio in sports observed in northeastern states.
- While many people can easily recall the names of male athletes, few can do the same for female sports personalities.
- Boys are encouraged to participate in a wide range of sports from childhood to adulthood, whereas girls are often directed towards household responsibilities as they grow older, limiting their opportunities for sports involvement.

Suggestions:

Parents play a crucial role in encouraging girls' participation in sports. Their support is vital, and they can advocate for equal opportunities and facilities in schools for both their daughters and sons. Additionally, parents can address obstacles faced by girls in sports and fitness, such as unequal treatment in team selection and access to quality coaches and equipment. Both urban and rural girls show equal interest in sports and fitness, but rural girls often face challenges such as transportation issues and financial constraints, leading to higher dropout rates.

Individuals can take steps to combat discrimination and promote gender equity in sports by:

1. Supporting women's and girls' sports initiatives.
2. Joining women's rights organizations to advocate for change.
3. Challenging stereotypes and myths about women's abilities in sports.
4. Speaking out against gender inequity and encouraging other women and girls to do the same.
5. Advocating for gender equity policies in sports organizations and institutions.
6. Bringing attention to instances of discrimination in schools or universities.
7. Raising general awareness about gender disparities in sports.

Engaging in sports offers numerous benefits for girls, including:

- Reduced risk of chronic diseases.
- Increased self-esteem.
- Lower risk of obesity.
- Better menstrual health.
- Improved academic performance.
- Greater involvement in society.
- Enhanced popularity among peers.
- Development of leadership skills and self-discipline.

By promoting girls' participation in sports and addressing barriers to their involvement, individuals and communities can contribute to their overall well-being and empowerment.

Conclusion:

Gender discrimination in sports is a product of societal constructs. Despite women's consistent participation and achievements in sports, disparities persist in areas such as unequal pay, prize money, and recognition. Additionally, the shortage of female coaches in India and reported incidents of sexual harassment further hinder female participation.

Media coverage often neglects female athletes, reinforcing gender biases in sports representation. These factors, among others, contribute to the lower participation of women in sports. Both men and women have excelled in representing India in sports, but greater encouragement and gender parity are needed to unleash the full potential of female athletes. Rather than blaming parents, the entire society's mindset, which favors males, must be addressed.

While the government has introduced various measures and policies for sports management, loopholes remain apparent. It is the government's duty to enforce sports laws rigorously to ensure the proper functioning of the sports system in India. With concerted efforts and accountability, the day is not far when Indian women will lead in sports across all events.

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