Perception and Participation of Women in Competitive Sports in India

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Abstract

Women's participation in competitive sports has been a subject of increasing interest and discussion across the globe, especially in countries like India where traditional gender roles have long influenced social and professional life. Despite a gradual shift in societal attitudes and the emergence of successful female athletes on international platforms, the rate of female participation in competitive sports in India remains disproportionately low compared to their male counterparts. This research paper explores the perception of women's involvement in competitive sports and examines the underlying socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and infrastructural barriers that affect their participation.

The study aims to understand how societal norms, family expectations, and gender stereotypes influence the opportunities and motivation for women to engage in sports. It also investigates the roles played by educational institutions, government policies, the media, and sports authorities in either promoting or hindering women's involvement in athletics and games. The research incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, using surveys, interviews, and case studies to collect insights from athletes, coaches, educators, and policymakers.

By critically analyzing the perception and actual participation trends of women in Indian sports, this paper seeks to identify gaps between potential and realization. The findings aim to contribute to the discourse on gender equity in sports and recommend inclusive strategies for improving female representation at all levels of competition. The ultimate goal of this research is to support the creation of a more empowering and equal sporting environment for women in India, where talent and dedication are valued beyond gender.

Keywords: gender role, societal attitude, perception, counterparts, barriers.

Introduction

Sport is a powerful medium that transcends physical activity and becomes a tool for empowerment, identity, and societal change. In India, the arena of competitive sports has long been skewed toward male dominance, reflecting deeper gender inequalities ingrained within the socio-cultural fabric of the country. While there has been notable progress in recent decades—with female athletes like Mary Kom, P.V. Sindhu, Saina Nehwal, Hima Das, and Mithali Raj gaining international acclaim—these individual successes contrast sharply with the overall low levels of women's participation in organized and competitive sports.

The historical marginalization of women in Indian sports can be attributed to several factors: restrictive gender roles, cultural taboos, lack of access to facilities, financial constraints, societal discouragement, and inadequate institutional support. In many regions, especially rural and semi-urban areas, girls are still discouraged from engaging in physical activity beyond school-level or recreational contexts. Concerns about safety, clothing norms, and societal judgment often act as invisible yet powerful barriers to participation.

Moreover, the portrayal of female athletes in the media continues to be inconsistent—often focusing more on their appearance, personal lives, or controversies than on their achievements and struggles. Despite policy-level interventions such as the "Khelo India" initiative and increased funding for women in sports, the

grassroots implementation and awareness of such schemes remain limited. As a result, many aspiring sportswomen fall through the cracks due to systemic neglect or lack of encouragement.

Educational institutions and sports academies, which should be the foundational support structures for nurturing talent, often fail to provide gender-sensitive and inclusive training environments. The scarcity of female coaches, gender-neutral facilities (like locker rooms), and flexible career pathways further demotivate many young women from pursuing sports professionally.

However, amidst these challenges, there is a visible shift in perception among the youth, particularly in urban India. Parents are beginning to support their daughters' ambitions in sports, and schools are more open to offering structured physical education for girls. Yet, this change is neither uniform nor widespread, and disparities persist.

This research aims to delve deeper into these dynamics by exploring not just statistical data, but also lived experiences and perceptions of stakeholders. By doing so, it will attempt to uncover the complex realities that shape women's participation in Indian sports and highlight what needs to change in policy, mindset, and practice.

The study is not just about understanding obstacles—it is also about identifying enabling factors: What kind of support systems work? What motivates successful female athletes to persevere? What role can local communities, media, and education systems play in normalizing female sports participation?

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to a more equitable, inclusive sports culture where gender does not determine opportunity or success.

Introduction to Literature Review

The participation of women in competitive sports has been a widely researched topic, both globally and in the Indian context. Previous studies have investigated the historical, social, psychological, and policy-related dimensions of women's involvement in sports. This section presents a review of relevant academic literature, reports, and case studies that shed light on the key themes relevant to this research.

3.1 Historical Background and Gender Roles in Indian Sports

Historically, Indian society has prioritized male participation in physical and public activities, relegating women to domestic roles. Early participation of women in sports was limited to a few privileged classes, and societal approval for female athletes was rare. According to Bandyopadhyay (2007), cultural conservatism and rigid gender norms prevented most women from entering the athletic domain, particularly in rural regions.

3.2 Social Perceptions and Stereotyping

A common theme in the literature is how societal expectations and traditional gender norms continue to restrict women's involvement in sports. Studies by Kamlesh & Singh (2013) reveal that female athletes often face judgment for deviating from the "feminine ideal," especially in sports requiring physical strength or unconventional attire.

Research also shows that women are frequently under pressure to prioritize family obligations over training and competition (Sengupta & Dasgupta, 2015). These perceptions reduce both the motivation and support female athletes receive from families and communities.

3.3 Institutional Support and Policy Gaps

The Indian government has launched several initiatives like **Khelo India**, **Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao**, and **TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme)** to support female athletes. However, multiple studies, including those by Sharma (2020) and Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports reports, highlight implementation gaps, unequal fund distribution, lack of monitoring, and limited access in backward regions.

3.4 Media Representation and Influence

The media plays a dual role in shaping public opinion. On one hand, successful women athletes like P.V. Sindhu and Mary Kom are celebrated; on the other, the media often overemphasizes their appearance, marital status, or background rather than consistent athletic performance (Bose & Chakraborty, 2018). This selective portrayal reinforces stereotypes and fails to normalize women's regular involvement in competitive sports.

3.5 Barriers to Participation

Key barriers identified across studies include:

● Lack of proper facilities for women (changing rooms, female coaches)
● Poor awareness of career options in sports
● Gender discrimination in selection and training
● Body image concerns and societal pressure
● Safety concerns during travel or training

(Gupta et al., 2019; Singh & Verma, 2017)

3.6 Enablers and Positive Trends

On a more positive note, recent literature points to:

● Increased parental support in urban areas

● Role models inspiring young girls

● Introduction of physical education in school curricula

● Female participation in school-level tournaments gaining acceptance

(Sarkar, 2021; Indian Council for Sports Research, 2022)

Research Objectives

The primary goal of this study is to examine how societal perceptions affect the participation of women in competitive sports in India and to identify both the barriers and enablers influencing their athletic journeys.

The specific objectives of this research are:

● **To analyze societal attitudes and cultural norms** surrounding women's involvement in competitive sports in India.

● **To identify the key challenges** (social, economic, institutional) that restrict women's participation in sports at various levels.

● **To assess the role of family, educational institutions, and media** in shaping perceptions of female athletes.

● **To explore the impact of government schemes and sports policies** on the inclusion and support of women in competitive sports.

● **To suggest actionable strategies** for increasing women's participation and improving their representation in sports governance and leadership.

4.2 Research Questions

Based on the objectives, this study is guided by the following research questions:

I. How is women's participation in competitive sports perceived in different regions of India?

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II. What are the major socio-cultural and economic barriers that female athletes face in India?

III. How do family support, community attitudes, and peer influence affect a woman's decision to pursue sports competitively?

IV. What is the role of the media in either promoting or limiting the visibility of female athletes?

V. Are current government policies and initiatives effectively addressing the gender gap in Indian sports?

VI. What measures can be taken to foster a more inclusive and empowering environment for aspiring sportswomen?

4.3 Scope of the Study

This study primarily focuses on:

- Young women (ages 15–30) who are current or aspiring athletes

- Coaches, physical education instructors, and sports administrators

- Schools, colleges, and sports institutions

- Both urban and rural settings in India

The insights gathered will reflect diverse perspectives and attempt to offer region-sensitive, practical suggestions for advancing female participation in sports.

Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating both **quantitative** and **qualitative** approaches to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of the issue. This design enables the researcher to collect numerical data to measure trends and also interpret personal experiences to uncover the underlying social and cultural dynamics.

The study is **descriptive and exploratory** in nature. The descriptive element focuses on examining the extent of participation of women in competitive sports, while the exploratory aspect delves into the underlying perceptions, challenges, motivations, and support systems influencing that participation.

By employing both structured surveys and open-ended interviews, the research allows for triangulation, enhancing the validity and reliability of the results. The research findings aim to inform educators, policymakers, sports authorities, and social reformers.

5.2 Population and Sample

The **target population** for this study includes:

- Young women (aged 15–30) currently involved in competitive sports (district/state/national level)

- Physical Education (PE) teachers and coaches

- Parents of female athletes

- Administrators or coordinators of sports academies and institutions

To represent this diverse population, a **sample size of approximately 100–150 participants** has been selected. This includes:

- **80 Female Athletes**: From different sports disciplines and educational institutions

- **20 Coaches/PE Teachers**: With at least 3 years of experience in mentoring female athletes

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● **30 Parents/Guardians**: Having daughters actively pursuing sports in school or college

Sampling Techniques:

● **Purposive sampling** is used to target individuals directly involved in women's competitive sports.

● **Snowball sampling** is used particularly in rural areas where access is limited; initial contacts help refer additional respondents.

5.3 Data Collection Methods

A. Primary Data Collection

1) **Structured Questionnaire**:

a) Designed to collect data on demographics, participation patterns, perceived societal attitudes, family support, challenges, and future aspirations.

b) Contains both **closed-ended questions** (e.g., Likert scale, multiple-choice) and **open-ended questions** to allow personal insights.

c) Distributed in physical form during field visits and digitally via Google Forms to expand reach.

2) **Semi-Structured Interviews**:

a) Conducted with selected athletes, coaches, and parents to gain in-depth understanding of attitudes, barriers, and experiences.
Questions cover topics such as gender bias in training, pressure to conform to social roles, safety concerns, financial struggles, and access to opportunities.

B. Secondary Data Collection
1) Data is sourced from:

a) **Government reports and statistics** (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, National Sample Survey)
b) **Published academic research and dissertations**
c) **Media coverage** of female athletes and sporting events
d) **NGO and sports federation reports**
e) Relevant case studies of successful women in sports

This helps establish context, support primary data, and identify gaps in previous research.

5.4 Tools for Data Analysis
1. **Quantitative Data Analysis**:

a. Responses from the questionnaires are compiled in Microsoft Excel or SPSS.
b. Techniques used include:

i. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentages)
ii. Cross-tabulations (e.g., comparing rural vs. urban participation)
iii. Bar graphs and pie charts to visualize data trends
iv. Chi-square test (if needed) to find associations between variables

2. **Qualitative Data Analysis**:

a.   Interview transcripts are analyzed using **thematic coding**.
b.   Repeating themes are grouped under categories such as *gender bias*, *inspirational figures*, *media influence*, *institutional support*, etc.
c.   Verbatim quotes are selected to illustrate key insights and personal experiences of participants.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

● **Sample Limitations**: The study does not represent all regions of India equally, especially the northeast and tribal belts due to accessibility constraints.

● **Response Bias**: Some participants may provide socially desirable responses, particularly in interviews or sensitive questions related to gender.

● **Language Barrier**: While efforts are made to provide translated versions of the survey, some rural participants may face difficulties expressing themselves fully.

● **Time Constraint**: Since field data collection is time-intensive, certain institutional stakeholders may not be   reached.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

● **Informed Consent**: All participants are informed about the purpose of the research and their rights, and written/verbal consent is taken.

● **Confidentiality**: Names and identities of participants are kept anonymous. Data is used solely for academic purposes.

● **Voluntary Participation**: Participants have the freedom to withdraw at any point without penalty.

● **Cultural Sensitivity**: Care is taken not to impose judgments or offend cultural norms, especially during interviews in conservative regions. This section sets the foundation for credible data gathering and lays out how the study ensures validity, relevance, and ethical compliance.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

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6.1 Overview of Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected through questionnaires and interviews. The aim is to assess:

● The current level of women's participation in competitive sports

● How societal perceptions influence participation

● The roles played by family, educational institutions, and media

● Challenges and enablers faced by female athletes

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The findings are presented in the form of **statistical summaries**, **tables**, **graphs**, and **qualitative themes** to offer a comprehensive view of the results.

6.2 Quantitative Data Analysis (Survey Responses)

Total Respondents: 130

- 80 female athletes
- 20 coaches/PE instructors
- 30 parents of athletes

A. Demographic Profile of Athletes

Category	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Respondents	48%	52%
Age 15–20	61%	39%
Age 21–25	35%	51%
Age 26–30	4%	10%

Interpretation: Participation is relatively higher among younger females (15–25 age group), and urban athletes are slightly more represented due to better accessibility to training infrastructure.

B. Perceptions of Family and Society Toward Sports

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My family supports my sports career	45%	33%	12%	7%	3%
Community thinks sports is inappropriate for girls	18%	25%	30%	22%	5%
Sports is seen as a viable career for girls	12%	28%	30%	23%	7%

Interpretation: While family support is fairly strong, community-level perceptions remain mixed. Many still do not see sports as a viable long-term career for women.

C. Access to Sports Facilities and Training

- 36% reported **lack of female coaches**
- 51% mentioned **inadequate changing rooms**
- 43% had to **travel >10 km** for practice
- 27% had **no access to proper nutrition advice or physiotherapy**

Interpretation: Infrastructure challenges are significant, especially in semi-urban and rural areas. The absence of gender-sensitive facilities is a major deterrent.

D. Media Influence

● 65% of respondents believed that **media highlights only elite female athletes**

● 72% said **positive representation motivates them**

● 48% noted that **media still portrays women based on looks and personal life**

Interpretation: Media plays a double-edged role—while it offers visibility, it also perpetuates stereotypes and ignores grassroots talent.

6.3 Qualitative Data Analysis (Interview Insights)

Themes Identified from Interviews:

1. Motivation from Role Models

"I want to be like Mirabai Chanu one day. She showed girls from small towns can do anything." – State-level weightlifter, Uttar Pradesh

Interpretation: Successful athletes inspire a new generation, especially in Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns.

2. Gender Bias in Training Environments

"Our male coach often focused more on the boys' team. We were given less time and fewer facilities." – Female footballer, Uttar Pradesh

Interpretation: Implicit biases continue to affect training quality and confidence levels in female athletes.

3. Parental Support as a Game Changer

"If my father didn't push me to pursue sports, I wouldn't even have thought of competing." – Sprinter, Prayagraj

Interpretation: Family support is a critical enabling factor. Educated or progressive parents significantly impact participation.

4. Cultural Restrictions

"I can't wear shorts in public. So I skip events even if selected." – Rural athlete, Varanasi

Interpretation: Cultural norms still limit participation, especially in conservative communities.

6.4 Summary of Key Findings

● Women face a **complex mix of external and internal challenges** in competitive sports.

● **Infrastructure and societal expectations** are two major obstacles.

● Despite this, a **rising wave of motivation, awareness, and role models** is gradually improving participation.

● There is a **clear urban-rural divide**, with rural girls facing more cultural resistance.

● **Institutional support exists on paper but is poorly implemented** in many regions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

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7.1 Conclusion

The research has explored a crucial aspect of gender equity in Indian sports: the **perception and participation of women in competitive sporting activities**. Based on a combination of quantitative data and qualitative

insights, it is evident that while **progress has been made**, significant **barriers still exist** for women who aspire to pursue sports seriously.

One of the most encouraging findings is the **growing support from families**, especially in urban regions, as well as the influence of **female role models** who have redefined traditional norms. Women athletes are no longer invisible in the Indian sporting landscape—but their **representation remains limited** to a handful of disciplines and national icons.

A major challenge remains in the **structural and cultural constraints** that women face. The lack of proper facilities for women (such as changing rooms, female coaches, and safe training environments), combined with **social stigma, financial limitations, and restrictive gender roles**, continues to undermine women's ability to train and compete at higher levels.

The **media**, while playing a key role in highlighting successful female athletes, often reinforces stereotypes through superficial coverage and inadequate representation of grassroots talent. Meanwhile, **government initiatives**, although well-intentioned, suffer from implementation gaps, particularly in rural areas where awareness and accessibility remain low.

Overall, this research reaffirms the need for **multi-dimensional interventions**—social, educational, infrastructural, and policy-driven—to create a sustainable and inclusive sports environment for Indian women.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following **recommendations** are proposed to improve perception and participation of women in competitive sports in India:

A. Institutional and Infrastructural Support

1. **Establish gender-sensitive sports infrastructure** at schools, colleges, and community centers (changing rooms, female coaches, safety mechanisms).

2. **Ensure female representation in sports governing bodies**, coaching staff, and selection committees.

3. **Create safe and accessible sports facilities** in rural areas to bridge the urban-rural gap.
B. Policy and Government-Level Reforms

4. **Strengthen the implementation** of schemes like *Khelo India*, *TOPS*, and *Fit India Movement* with special provisions for women.

5. **Incentivize sports participation among girls** through scholarships, free sports kits, nutrition programs, and travel subsidies.

6. **Introduce mandatory gender equity audits** in sports institutions receiving government grants.
C. Education and Awareness

7. **Integrate gender-sensitive physical education** into the school curriculum from an early age.

8. Conduct **awareness workshops for parents**, especially in rural areas, to change perceptions about girls in sports.

9. Promote **career guidance sessions** for female athletes to showcase diverse opportunities in coaching, administration, and sports sciences.

D. Media and Representation

10.   Encourage **equitable and respectful media coverage** of women's sports across platforms.

11.   Support **regional-level sports storytelling** that highlights real journeys of rural and semi-urban female athletes.

12. Combat stereotypes by **emphasizing performance, skill, and leadership** in coverage rather than personal life or appearance.

E. Community Engagement

13. Promote **community sports events for women** to normalize female participation in public sports spaces.

14. **Involve local influencers, panchayats, and youth groups** in supporting and organizing women-centric sports initiatives.

15. Recognize and award **local female athletes** to build visibility and aspiration in their communities.

Final Thought

Empowering women through sports is not just about physical activity—it's about **breaking barriers**, **building leadership**, and **redefining societal norms**. With the right blend of support, visibility, and policy commitment, India has the potential to become a global leader not just in medal tallies, but also in **gender-inclusive sports culture**.

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