

GENDER DISPARITIES IN SPORT IN INDIA: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION

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INTRODUCTION

India is facing a gender problem. The World Economic Forum recently ranked India 108 out of 144 on the Global Gender Gap Index, a multidisciplinary benchmarking framework that measures political, social, economic, and health-based disparities; in 2011, the UN ranked India 132 out of 187 in its Human Development Report. The Thomson Reuters Foundation recently dubbed India the most dangerous country for women, ahead of Afghanistan and Syria. India ranks 169 in terms of women's life expectancy, and 38 out of 51 in terms of women's literacy in developing countries. Political discourse is dominated by episodes of gendered and sexual violence, from the Nirbhaya Rape case in 2012 to the Assifa tragedy in 2018. It's much harder to understand - and talk about - the underlying causes of such dramatic disparity.

There is no clearer lens to understand the hidden and pervasive gender inequity in India than in the field of amateur and professional sports. Sports achievement has been linked with increased academic acuity, physical well-being, and earning potential; furthermore, it has been repeatedly and convincingly argued that gendered international sporting success is positively correlated with labor force participation per country (both at the Olympics and Football World Cup). Till date, India has won five Olympic medals in Women's sports, making it - at the Rio Olympics - the worst performing medal winning country on earth.

India is, undeniably, a sporting nation. It has experienced success at the highest levels of professional cricket, and has achieved Asia-region and international success in Badminton, Wrestling, and Shooting. And yet, for a country of 1.2 billion people, India lags far behind every developed nation in virtually every other form of junior, amateur, or professional sporting achievement - particularly for women. The purpose of this paper is to explore the history that surrounds the issue of gender equity in sport in India, what actions have been taken to provide equal opportunity for women in sports, the current issues facing women in sports, the research surrounding the issues pertaining to gender equity in sport, and recommendations for further research in this area.

The idea for this research topic came about when I noticed, through my work with the INSPIRE Foundation, that female participation in sport was de facto discouraged and also that those who played faced many financial, cultural, and political barriers. However, I believe in the power of sport to unify India and provide opportunities for people from disparate socio-economic backgrounds. In order for India to become a stronger and a more wholesome nation, we need to fight gender inequality, especially in the sphere of athletics. It is the first playing ground for true gender equality.

REVIEW OF EXISTING POLICY MEASURES

The Indian government has recently made some efforts to broaden access to women's sport. The National Sports Policy declares "enhanced participation of women, scheduled tribes and rural youth" as an area of focus. More noticeable, however, is the Khelo India scheme. Under this scheme, the central government will undertake twelve key aims: providing support for coaching education; playing field development; annual sports competitions; State-level Khelo centers; national talent development; the development of sports infrastructure; the establishment of regional sports academies; the promotion of sports for the disabled; the promotion of sports for indigenous people; the promotion of physical fitness education; the promotion of Sports for Peace; and, most tellingly, the promotion of Sports for Women.

The Khelo India scheme has been awarded an 82 million USD annual budget, representing slightly under .0002% of Union Budget 2018-2019 (the total expenditure for 2018-19 is \$440 billion); furthermore, its administration has been hampered with charges of corruption, with critics citing lack of allocation of any budgetary resources for people with disabilities or for nurturing sports talent. Additional schemes have been initiated by the Government of India, such as the National Sports Development Fund, which was founded in 1988. The scheme, "supports sportspersons to excel in the field by providing opportunities to train under coaches of international repute with technical, scientific and psychological support and also in getting exposure to international competitions". To continue with their efforts, the Indian government launched the Target Olympic Podium Scheme in 2014. The scheme aims to heighten India's international standing in sports by providing assistance and incentives to a select group of top athletes in the nation. The 2016 Rio Olympics and Paralympic Games results demonstrated that this scheme has experienced limited success, but served as a starting point for the sporting success of the nation as a whole, bringing in a grand total of 6 medals across both games.

The National Sports Festival for Women is another example. Founded in 1975, the aim of this scheme is to increase participation of and competition between upcoming female athletes in the country. Competitions occur on the state and district level. This festival is funded by both, the

state and the central governments. This scheme has been now been merged with the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan (RGKA), and includes twelve sports.

Nonetheless, the Indian government has remained consistently vague regarding specific schemes that have been implemented, if any, to ensure greater participation from women in sports. The most glaring absence of women is in the policies and programs of the Sports Authority of India—the top governmental sports-promoting body in India. They have not included any specific policy measures related to encouraging sportswomanship. Recently, the SAI have made a provision to include eight prominent sportswomen to its governing body, which totals 27 members. However, their roles and function are unclear, therefore being another example of token representation of women in positions of authority.

Vayens, Lenoir, Williams, and Phillepaert (2008) have extensively studied the impact of government sports identification programs in countries around the world. They argue that a lack of theoretical and paradigmatic clarity on the definition of sport “success” hampers the efficacy of these programs globally; however, what cannot be argued are the results. The UK’s Sporting Giants initiative, a massive sports Talent ID scheme that coordinated grassroots outreach with coaching education and athlete funding, led to a second-place finish for the UK (behind China) in all medals at the Rio Olympics. Meanwhile, India administers the National Sports Talent Search Scheme (NSTSS), which seeks to identify and develop future champions between the ages of 10-12. This program has been said to have been ineffective, with it being alleged that “the gain in physical and physiological parameters in trained population was not significantly different... indicating that most of the children were early maturers or chronological age declared was wrong”.

Nowhere is the lack of governmental regulation or oversight better seen than the pay gap between men’s and women’s sporting salaries. The discrepancies are robust and surprising. For example, in 2017, BCCI hiked the salaries of women cricketers to Rs 15 lakh per year for Grade A players and Rs 10 lakh per year for Grade B players. In spite of the increase, however, Grade A male cricketers are paid Rs 2 crore every year, and Grade B players receive Rs 1 crore. The scene is similar in football: male players earn something between Rs 65 lakh to Rs 70 lakh per year, but the female players’ fee ranges between Rs 5 lakh to Rs 10 lakh. It should be noted that these differentials - in the region of 1500-2000% - dwarfs the existing national pay gap of 24.9%.

Many argue that the pay gap is not inherently unfair; television contracts and viewership influence how much players receive (therefore players of different sports earn differently). As the label itself indicates, “women’s cricket” has historically not received much traction because of a systemic bias against women playing sport, which ends up in low viewership ratings and therefore lower salaries for female athletes. The pay gap, therefore, is a symptom of a larger

socio-economic and cultural system that traditionally rewards male athletes more than their female counterparts.

However, there are some bright spots. Women's sports viewership has been increasing dramatically in India and abroad. Last year, the ICC Women's World Cup final was witnessed by 126 million people, which is equivalent to the number of people who watched the Indian Premier League finale of the same year. Thus, there is reason to believe that the landscape for women's sports is slowly reforming; however, it will be imperative for the government to identify, highlight, and implement and articulated program of support, in order to accelerate this change.

SOCIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR GENDER DISPARITIES IN INDIA:

What are the sociological reasons for gender disparity in sports? As the previous section suggests, a major reason for the disparity between men's and women's sports is a systemic privilege given to the former in a variety of respects that leads to a global exclusion of women from sports. In India, playing sports becomes more of a hurdle for women because of the everyday stereotypes surrounding their roles and responsibilities. Women have been conditioned to think that their role in the social economy is limited to domesticity.

In India, for example, the emphasis on getting married and not having a professional life is particularly stark. The problem becomes more complex when the physical and psychological burden of reproduction is placed onto women: burdens that arise from familial and societal pressures. These imperatives in turn codify the way in which women should look and behave; passivity, submission, and dependence become the norm – qualities that are antithetical to ones that are expected from a professional sportsperson. Apart from pursuing her own career, a sportswoman is discouraged from having muscle gain, a tanned complexion, and from travelling extensively for competitions. Such conditioning begins on the level of schooling itself; it has been routinely observed that girls aren't allowed or encouraged to participate in sports from an early age the way boys are.

Women in sport are usually not recognized for their athletic ability, but instead for their physical appearance and femininity. Female athletes are still greatly underrepresented in all types of media, and when they achieve representation, they are often sexually objectified and commoditized. It has been convincingly argued in the field of feminist studies that sport media reinforces patriarchal sovereignty by focusing on female athletes' femininity and heterosexuality, which serves to degrade their athletic accomplishments and athleticism. The media also affects gender equity in sports and promotes the masculinization of sport. For example, gender marking is a common issue in sport media. This term represents the verbal and visual presentation of male

athletes and men's sports as being the norm, while rendering female athletes and women's competitions as secondary.

Thus, if (men's) sports benefits from a patriarchal set-up, women's sports—by default—experiences an immense disadvantage. As a result, there is a significantly lower demand by women to enroll; themselves in athletic programs or training camps.

INTERVIEW WITH RIDHIMA DILAWARI

Ridhima Dilawari is a leading amateur golfer in India, and will be representing India at the World Amateur Team Championship in Ireland in August 2018. She will also be playing at the Asian Games 2018, as a member of Team India. Her interview is transcribed in full.

How did you get started in golf?

My parents always wanted me to play a sport, thus I was introduced to a multitude of sports as a young kid. I played tennis, cricket, football and golf till the age of 8. However, I showed the most aptitude in golf and began to play tournaments when I was 9. Due to the amount of time I had to put in to golf, I naturally stopped playing other sports and focused all my efforts in to golf.

How did you progress to the level you are?

I started playing golf and participating in golf tournaments from a very young age, so for me it was a case of early specialization. As a young kid when I initially started playing competitions, I mostly competed against older boys, as there were simply not enough girls to play against—especially girls who were at a very competitive level. Slowly, over time as I got better, I began representing India in international events. I played my first international event for team India at the age of 12. Thus, I was able to play and compete with the best in the world at a very early stage in my golfing career. I think this exposure to high levels of competition has shaped my career and helped me become the sportsperson I am today. I've also always had the utmost support from my parents, emotionally as well as financially, and they are definitely a huge reason why I have been able to progress to the level I am at.

Who did you receive the most amount of support from?

I've received the most amount of support from my parents. From encouraging me to play a sport, to financially supporting my training expenses, they have been a part of the journey every step of the way. I think it helped that both my parents are doctors and understand how essential physical activity and sport are to a person's life. Luckily, they are also very liberal minded, and did not have any inhibitions about their daughter playing a sport. Playing a sport at a high level requires an immense support system and my parents were able to provide that for me. I am currently

working with a fitness trainer, a nutritionist and a swing coach. These are resources that were put in place by my parents from the very beginning and have been key to my progress as an athlete.

If you wouldn't have received support from your parents, do you think the school system or general environment in India would have helped you?

I was fortunate enough to have received the necessary support from my parents. However, I have several friends who were not quite so lucky. Many parents did not feel it was “worth” the time, money, and effort to practice to a level of excellence. The school system in India does not support high level athletes in any way, and as a result you are forced to skip countless days of school in order to compete. This does often negatively impact academic performance of students if they are not receiving support from external sources. My parents always helped with my school work and got me the necessary tutors in order for me to stay on top of my education, while still performing well in my sport.

What were/are some specific obstacles and barriers you have faced?

Aside from the lack of school support, there is a severe lack of national support, especially regarding funding for women athletes. There are very few resources, if any, that allow for female athletes to succeed without parental and familial support.

Do you feel there has been an increase in support for women athletes at the national level? What has driven this increase (if any)?

There doesn't seem to have been any specific policy changes that have increased support for women; however there has definitely been an increase in media representation for women athletes. With sportspeople like P.V. Sindhu, Sanya Mirza, and Anjali Bhagwat, representing India at the national level, as well as movies like Mary Kom and Dangal, women athletes are finally getting their time in the spotlight. It can only be hoped that with this increase in media representation, changes are made at the national level to further support women athletes.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

After an extensive and broad review of the various issues that are relevant to women athletes in India, this paper concludes that Indian sports needs to reform on a municipal, district, and national level in order to effectively inculcate a healthy attitude sportswomanship in the nation. As the ethnographic interview suggests, an under-allocation and maldistribution of funds is the big elephant in the room, and the Sports Authority of India (SAI) needs to address this issue for both male and female athletes. However, due to a systemic indifference to the latter group, SAI needs to make women's sports is utmost priority. It can do so by planning country-wide

campaigns aimed at broadening women's access to sports, in the manner of other successful international grassroots advocacy schemes such as Sporting Giants (UK) and Talent Search (Australia). Such programs should be implemented not only in metropolitan regions, but in less accessible reasons where a lot of athletic talent has been ignored for decades.

Secondly, the Ministry of Education should also design programs to encourage sports education and participation in schools all over India. This will ensure that girls, from primary school onward, receive curricular support from educational institutions. Endorsing sports participation for girls will be the first step in bringing about a systemic change in which sports is practiced and consumed in India.

To successfully evaluate the state of women's sports in any country, extensive research and data collection is necessary. We strongly recommend boosting the field of sports studies universities in India. SAI, too, should found a research centre that focuses on finding sociological data for women's sports. After accomplishing the initial stage of comprehensive data collection, committees can be instituted to evaluate this data and make prudent policy decisions to ameliorate issues such as the wage gap, low enrolment and retention rates, and infrastructural deficiencies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the various social, economic, cultural, and political conventions that govern the state of sports for women in India. The main conclusion of this paper is that the problems that women athletes face in the country are far from being incidental or situational; all of them are very much systemic. They arise from a deep patriarchal belief system that influences sports on the level of infrastructure, policy, and funding, which further results in issues such as the wage gap, low viewership, gendered stereotypes, and an overall low standard of sportspersonship. There is a consistent lack of governmental support, vital lacunae in the amateur sports ecosystem (such as Title IX regulation in the US, which stipulates equal spending for men's and women's university sports),

To eradicate these problems, and to hone sportspersons who can match international standards, these systemic problems need to be identified. Then, astute policy changes need to be implemented that address and reform these gender-based disparities. Whilst conducting research for this paper, the author has come to the conclusion that primary data and resources for evaluating the condition of sports for women in India is abysmally scarce. Since the stakes of this issue for women athletes is currently very high, this field requires urgent attention.

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