

Motherhood or Medals: Reproductive Labour, Institutional Absence, and Gendered Inequality in Indian Sport

Lachem Mendarawa Dorjey

Independent Researcher

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the structural exclusion of maternity rights within Indian sport through the experiences of elite women athletes navigating pregnancy, infertility, childbirth, and post-partum return to competition. Drawing upon contemporary media narratives surrounding Indian sportswomen, including Thangjam Tababi Devi and Dipika Pallikal Karthik, the paper argues that Indian sporting institutions continue to operate through masculinised assumptions of uninterrupted athletic labour. While international sporting systems increasingly recognise maternity protections as essential to athlete welfare, Indian sports governance remains largely devoid of formalised maternity frameworks, comeback pathways, ranking protection systems, or childcare support mechanisms. Consequently, motherhood becomes institutionally constructed as career disruption rather than a legitimate dimension of women athletes' lives. Situating these narratives within broader feminist theories of reproductive labour and gendered citizenship, this paper argues that the absence of maternity protections in Indian sport reflects deeper patriarchal structures embedded within labour, policy, and national sporting culture.

Keywords: gender and sport, reproductive labour, motherhood, Indian sport, feminist sociology, maternity policy, women athletes

Introduction

Sport is frequently framed as a domain of meritocracy, discipline, and national representation. Yet the structures governing elite sport are rarely gender-neutral. Women athletes across the world continue to encounter institutional systems historically designed around male bodies, male career trajectories, and male assumptions of uninterrupted labour participation. In India, these inequalities become particularly visible in relation to motherhood.

For many Indian sportswomen, pregnancy and childcare remain professionally precarious experiences marked by uncertainty surrounding sponsorship continuity, training access, financial

stability, and future selection opportunities. Unlike male athletes, whose parenthood seldom disrupts professional legitimacy, women athletes frequently encounter implicit assumptions that motherhood diminishes competitiveness, commitment, or physical capability.

Recent journalistic investigations, particularly The Quint's "Motherhood or Medals" series, have foregrounded the lived realities of Indian sportswomen confronting these institutional absences. These accounts are significant not merely as individual stories, but as sociologically valuable narratives exposing broader structural inequalities within Indian sport governance.

This paper analyses these narratives through the lens of feminist sociology and theories of reproductive labour. It argues that Indian sport continues to externalise the social and biological realities of motherhood onto women athletes individually, while failing to institutionalise collective systems of support. As a result, motherhood functions as a structurally produced point of professional vulnerability.

Reproductive Labour and the Gendered Structure of Sport

Feminist scholarship has long argued that modern labour systems are organised around a gendered separation between productive labour and reproductive labour. While productive labour is institutionally recognised, economically valued, and structurally supported, reproductive labour — including pregnancy, childbirth, caregiving, and domestic work — is frequently privatised and feminised.

Sporting institutions reproduce these same divisions. Elite athletic systems are often built upon assumptions of uninterrupted physical availability, mobility, and continuous performance optimisation. Such assumptions align closely with traditionally masculine career models that do not account for reproductive interruptions.

Women athletes therefore occupy a contradictory position. They are expected to perform at elite levels while simultaneously navigating reproductive responsibilities that institutions neither structurally recognise nor adequately accommodate. Pregnancy, rather than being integrated into athletic career frameworks, becomes treated as deviation from normative sporting participation.

This exclusion reflects what feminist sociologists describe as the "male norm" within professional institutions, wherein systems appear neutral while being fundamentally structured around male life patterns.

Institutional Absence and the Indian Sporting Context

The Indian sporting landscape remains fragmented in its approach to maternity rights. Unlike several international federations and professional sporting systems that now provide maternity

leave protections, ranking safeguards, childcare assistance, and phased return policies, Indian sport lacks a comprehensive and standardised maternity framework.

Consequently, athletes who become pregnant frequently encounter:

- uncertainty regarding team selection,
- withdrawal of sponsorships,
- suspension of training support,
- ranking disadvantages,
- and pressure toward early retirement.

The absence of policy effectively individualises risk. Women athletes must negotiate motherhood through personal financial resources, family networks, or exceptional institutional goodwill rather than through guaranteed structural rights.

This institutional gap is particularly striking given India's broader constitutional and legal commitments toward gender equality. Although maternity protections exist under labour legislation such as the Maternity Benefit Act, elite athletes frequently occupy ambiguous contractual positions outside standard employment frameworks. Their labour remains celebrated symbolically through nationalism and sporting representation, yet inadequately protected materially.

Thangjam Tababi Devi and the Fragility of Athletic Continuity

The case of Thangjam Tababi Devi illustrates the precariousness of athletic continuity after motherhood. Tababi Devi emerged as one of India's most promising young judokas after winning silver at the 2018 Youth Olympics, becoming the country's first judo medallist at that level.

Her trajectory symbolised both national aspiration and the increasing visibility of women in Indian combat sports. However, following pregnancy and childbirth, her sporting pathway became uncertain due to the absence of structured reintegration systems.

Importantly, Tababi Devi's experience reveals how motherhood is institutionally distinguished from other forms of athletic interruption. Injuries, for instance, are generally recognised within sporting systems as temporary setbacks requiring rehabilitation, recovery, and reintegration support. Motherhood, by contrast, is often implicitly treated as permanent disengagement from elite competition.

This distinction reflects deeply gendered assumptions regarding women's bodies and professional legitimacy. Athletic institutions appear willing to rehabilitate injured athletes but remain structurally unprepared to support reproductive transitions.

Dipika Pallikal Karthik: Motherhood, Infertility, and Class Privilege

Dipika Pallikal Karthik's experience introduces additional dimensions concerning infertility, emotional labour, and socioeconomic privilege. Pallikal publicly discussed her prolonged fertility treatment journey before becoming a mother to twins in 2021. She also acknowledged that sponsorship support weakened during this phase of her life.

Despite these challenges, Pallikal successfully returned to elite competition and secured major international victories after childbirth. Her comeback narrative has been celebrated as evidence of resilience and determination. However, sociologically, her experience also demonstrates the extent to which successful post-partum return in Indian sport often depends upon access to exceptional personal resources.

Pallikal herself recognised the importance of financial stability, family support, and public visibility in enabling her return. These conditions are not universally available to Indian women athletes, particularly those competing outside commercially visible sports.

Her case therefore highlights a critical structural issue: in the absence of institutional support systems, motherhood in sport becomes navigable primarily through privilege. The ability to "return" is unevenly distributed across class, economic, and social lines.

Motherhood and Gendered Citizenship in Sport

The unequal treatment of motherhood within sport reflects broader societal constructions of gendered citizenship. Male athletes who become fathers rarely encounter scrutiny regarding professional continuity or physical capability. Fatherhood is often publicly framed as emotionally enriching and professionally stabilising.

Women athletes, however, are frequently positioned as potentially unreliable or physically diminished after childbirth. This asymmetry demonstrates how caregiving remains culturally coded as feminine responsibility even within supposedly meritocratic professional domains.

Sport therefore mirrors broader patriarchal social structures wherein women's reproductive labour is treated as individually managed rather than collectively supported. The ideal athlete continues to be imagined through masculinised assumptions of bodily availability and career continuity.

In this sense, the exclusion of maternity protections is not merely an administrative oversight but a reflection of institutional ideology.

Toward a Feminist Framework for Athlete Welfare

Addressing these inequalities requires moving beyond symbolic celebration of women athletes toward substantive structural reform. A feminist approach to athlete welfare would recognise reproductive labour as integral rather than external to women's sporting careers.

Such reforms should include:

- guaranteed maternity leave protections,
- ranking preservation systems,
- post-partum rehabilitation pathways,
- fertility treatment sensitivity,
- mental health services,
- financial continuity guarantees,
- and childcare support during training and competition.

These measures are increasingly visible within international sporting systems and should not be treated as exceptional accommodations but as basic institutional responsibilities.

The recognition of motherhood within sport also carries broader symbolic significance. It challenges the longstanding assumption that elite athleticism and reproductive life are fundamentally incompatible.

Conclusion

The narratives emerging from Indian sportswomen reveal that the conflict between motherhood and elite sport is socially and institutionally produced rather than biologically inevitable. Women athletes are not excluded because motherhood inherently prevents competitive excellence; they are excluded because sporting systems remain structured around masculinised assumptions that fail to accommodate reproductive realities.

The experiences of athletes such as Thangjam Tababi Devi and Dipika Pallikal Karthik expose both the vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded within Indian sport governance. Their stories reveal how institutional absence transforms motherhood into professional risk.

For Indian sport to meaningfully pursue gender equity, maternity rights must move from the margins of policy discourse to the centre of athlete welfare frameworks. Without structural transformation, the celebrated rhetoric surrounding women's sporting achievement will remain fundamentally incomplete.

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