

Shattering Stereotypes: The Power of Women in Indian Sports for Societal Transformation

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Abstract

The research paper talks about the exploration of women empowerment through sports as a tool in India. It addresses the various problems that sportswomen in India face- lack of media representation, visibility, recognition, funding, opportunities, and gender inequality. It uses the method of literature review to analyse the empowerment of women through sports through four themes in the form of a thematic analysis: breaking gender stereotypes, economic empowerment, media representation and visibility, and health and well-being. The paper discusses the advantages of women in sport, and benefits of sport in general. Previous findings by UN Women and IOC show that there was a large percentage increase in women considering themselves leaders post a sports programme held to empower women. The results of this research paper show that there is clear evidence that there has been a step forward in terms of women's participation in sports. Due to positive social and cultural change to reduce gender inequality, more women can now become athletes. Also, recent scholarship programmes and financial aid are great ways of boosting the development of women through sports. Additionally, sport provides athletes with the determination to keep going, resilience to never back down, and mental strength to show that they are strong and capable. Sportspeople like P.V. Sindhu, Deepika Kumari, and Mithali Raj have worked extremely hard to become visible and gain recognition, make their country proud, and do economically well for themselves. Through this research paper, sport as a tool for women empowerment was explored.

Keywords: women empowerment, women in sports, leadership, gender inequality, media, sport, gender stereotypes, career, athletes

Introduction

Sport is a word that instantly brings back lots of memories, but most importantly, it brings that sense of joy, spirit of togetherness, and competition. Apart from physical fitness, all sports give individuals and teams so much to learn from and boost their soft skills.

In practical terms 'sport' is defined by its social interpretation as well as its strong association with physical exertion and performance measures. What we perceive as 'sport' in one instance may not be in another; sport takes on many forms and is constantly changing based upon societal norms, trends, and new directions. (*What Is Sport?*, 2021)

Within sport in India, there are many problems that are pertinent. A major one is that of gender inequality. Gender inequality prevails in many fields but this paper will talk about its impact in sports. In many areas of the country, sport is used to break the gender barrier, especially football because it's considered a men's sport. (Singh, 2020). Sportswomen face many issues. They face sexism on a daily basis, based on how they dress and speak. Despite progress, discrimination based on the real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity of female athletes persists. The fear of being bullied socially and being tagged "gay" pushes

many girls out of the game. (*Issues Faced by Females in Sports*, 2023) Women do not receive the same level of respect or recognition as men in sports do. There is a lack of equal funding compared to men's athletics. Women have limited opportunities to play sports in high school and college, which means they have to look elsewhere for sports which is rarely feasible.

Data shows that 15% of women play cricket compared to 25% of the men in India, indicating the huge gender inequality in cricket. Surprisingly, the story is not the same in kabaddi, where 15% of men and 11% of women participate in the sport. (Singh, 2023) The point was well taken by the BCCI who announced the pay-parity in cricket across gender. Going forward, the match fee for both men and women cricketers will be the same as we move into a new era of gender equality in cricket in India. This shows the commitment of the country towards women in sports. There have also been improvements at the grassroots level, where, now, more women are allowed to take up sports as a profession. An organised domestic structure is also in place for many sports for women to rise from the grassroots to representing the country. For example, in cricket, one begins by getting into their district's team through trials. Then, by playing for their district one can get selected to represent their state, at the national level. After representing their state in multiple tournaments such as the Women's Senior One Day Trophy, Women's Senior T20 Trophy, Senior Women's Challenger Trophy and a few more, players get scouted by officials to play for their nation, India, at the international stage. (Kinza, 2022)

Women empowerment is defined to promote women's sense of self-worth, their ability to determine their own choices, and their right to influence social change for themselves and others. (*Womens Empowerment - Facts, Stories and How To Help*, n.d.) The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their status is also important for the achievement of sustainable development. (*Women Empowerment*, n.d.) It provides them with a chance to redefine gender roles and gives them more freedom to pursue what they want. Women in sport defy the common misperception that they are weak or incapable. (*Lakshmi Puri*, 2016)

Gold is a perfect metaphor to describe how Indian women have surpassed their male counterparts in previous Olympic Games. Since Karnam Malleswari's gold in 2000, India has experienced an increase in the number of female athletes in many sports. (*Revolution and Evolution of Indian Women Athletes*, 2021) Since then, Indian sports women such as Mary Kom, P.V. Sindhu, Saina Nehwal, Mirabai Chanu and a few more have gone on to win Olympic medals in many sports such as badminton, boxing, and weightlifting.

Methodology

Method of Literature Review

A literature review involves researching, reading, analyzing, and summarizing scholarly literature, typically journals and articles, about a specific topic. The result of this may be a report, article, thesis, dissertation, or grant proposal. (*Literature Reviews - Research Methods*, 2023) It helps in identifying what has been written on a particular topic, determining the extent to which a specific research area reveals any plausible trends or patterns, aggregating findings related to a research question to support evidence-based practice, generating new theories, and identifying topics that require more investigation. (*Chapter 9 Methods for Literature Reviews - Handbook of eHealth Evaluation: An Evidence-Based Approach*, n.d.)

This research paper analyses the empowerment of women through sports analysing four different themes.

Thematic Analysis

Breaking Gender Stereotypes:

Gender stereotypes have existed for such a long time in India and so has sexual discrimination in sports. This paper talks about the importance of breaking these gender stereotypes, changing the societal perception of women's role in society, and making social and cultural changes to move towards equity.

Economic Empowerment:

Sport has had an impact on the financial status of so many sportswomen and it continues to do so. It's scientifically proven that sport brings about leadership and better the decision-making ability of athletes. Athletes recognise the importance of teamwork and trust, they know how to deal with adversity and conflict, and they know how to think strategically and shift course when necessary. (Torres, 2018) This economic and leadership empowerment is a great advantage for all women in sports.

Media Representation and Visibility:

The only way that people in the country get to know about India's aspiring sports women is through media representation. Visibility is a key factor to empower women through sports. The media has undeniable power to increase support and change how India views their women in sports.

Health and Well-being:

Isabella Vidaña, a leadership coach with IMG Academy, says, "Coaches are looking for student-athletes who show pride in their team, are supportive, and put others before themselves. Those athletes who are seen as leaders are the ones that know how to control their emotions, learn from their mistakes, and give it their all even when things are not going their way. These types of athletes understand the importance of their character and how it will go beyond their sport and into everyday life." (*The Top 12 Things All Successful Athletes Demonstrate*, 2019) Having strong mental health, resilience, and leading a healthy lifestyle are all important characteristics of a successful sportsperson.

Discussion

Breaking Gender Stereotypes

Language reveals so much about the stereotypes of women in sport. Hearing the classic line "stop running like a girl" and calling knee push-ups "girl push-ups" makes you view women with poor athletic ability ever since your childhood. There is a clear bias associating women with their appearance and domesticity, and insinuating a lesser ability to win. Negative gender stereotypes are harmful to women participating, or looking to participate, in sports. (How Language Shapes Gender Stereotypes in Sport, 2017)

Gender roles are prevalent in many cultures. At present, girls and young women (aged between 5 and 30 years old) continue to experience educational inequality, exposure to violence, and unequal access to sports and physical activity, among other forms of discrimination. (*Fit for Life Workshop: Empowering Girls and Young Women Through Sport*,

2022) Research shows that 75% of girls have heard derogatory statements about women in sport. These statements ruin sports for girls from a young age. (*Gender Stereotypes*, n.d.) They also receive less encouragement from family members and teachers to be physically active. (Reynolds, 2018) Significant gender gaps are seen when looking at the number of women participating in sport – 1.5 million fewer women than men participate in sport at least once a month. There is also a clear gap when looking at the number of women working in sport at every level. Women make up only 18% of qualified coaches and 9% of senior coaches. (*Sexism In Sport*, n.d.) Clearly, there's a big gender gap between men and women in sport.

The question arises about what's being done to actually bridge the gap and move towards equity. Social and cultural changes can be seen in many places and it's great to see how so many people are encouraging it. The 'Fit for Life Workshop: Empowering Girls and Young Women through Sport' was held by UNESCO to share good practices and discuss needs concerning the empowerment of girls and women in and through sport. (*Fit for Life Workshop: Empowering Girls and Young Women Through Sport*, 2022) Such workshops being held by experts are beneficial for the development of women in sports.

Racket sports like tennis, badminton, and squash are great examples of mixed gender matches. Many sports advocates believe that even at the grassroots level, mixed training and competition can foster mutual respect; improve both boys' and girls' social skills; enhance resilience; and provide experiences that will help them in their broader lives. (*Girls Playing in Boys Teams*, n.d.)

Nowadays, we're seeing so many heroes in sports coming up from small villages in the country. Karnam Malleswari, the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal, set a great example for so many other women athletes to dream big and strive for success. P.V. Sindhu, the youngest Indian female athlete to win an Olympic medal and the first Indian world champion, used to travel 60 km to train in the early stages of her career. (Sah, n.d.) Hardworking sports women like them inspire thousands of young girls to take up sports as a career.

Economic Empowerment

Sport is recognised as a powerful tool to amplify women's voices and tear down gender barriers and discrimination. (*Lakshmi Puri*, 2016) It contributes to the development of leadership skills in women. Sport involves many leadership roles such as captancy and coaching that can enhance women's self-confidence and decision-making skills. Improved perception of girls' abilities amongst themselves and their families also enhances respect for their respective bodies. It gives them a sense of belongingness and ownership as well as an identity beyond the domestic realm. (*Using the Power of Sport for Empowering India's Girls*, n.d.)

Young girls look up to sports women as their role models. Achievements of Indian women in sport provide them with employment opportunities in the government and public sector organizations through sports quota appointments. These women are well respected and recognised by society.

In the 2012 London Olympic Games, Mary Kom was India's flag bearer in the closing ceremony, strongly advocating equality for women. She is one of India's most successful

women athletes who has also created a foundation to train and develop talent. She has proven to be a great leader and her boxing academy has provided a platform for more young souls to live their dreams.

Becoming sportspersons boosts the economic status of women, which is a need for many. The story of Deepika Kumari truly shows the power of sports in terms of economic empowerment. At a young age, Deepika took up archery at a training centre near her village to reduce the burden on her family. Practicing with makeshift bamboo bows, using mangoes as targets, she somehow managed to qualify for the training centre's academy project, in the process, obtaining free food and lodging. From there onwards, she started participating in tournaments, winning prize money and eventually, getting scouted by the Tata Academy junior team coach. Slowly, she acclimatised herself to new equipment and followed it up with success in national junior tournaments. (Basu, 2020) All her hardwork and dedication led to her soon being successful on the international stage. At just 18 years of age, Deepika was the world's highest ranked archer. She's now won 31 World Cup Stages medals, 5 World Cup Final medals, and 5 World Championships medals over a decade. (*Deepika Kumari*, n.d.) Her journey from absolute poverty in her childhood to global stardom is worth more than words can describe.

Sponsorship programs such as Infosys Foundation and GoSports Foundation's 'Girls for Gold' campaign can prove to be very useful for women in villages who need financial support. It is evident that there is loads of talent out there in the country, but due to the lack of facilities or finances to train, hardly any athletes reach their true potential. These sponsorship programs provide a strong support system for high performing athletes, coaches, and academies. (Infosys Foundation Collaborates With GoSports Foundation to Launch 'Girls for Gold' Program for Aspiring Women Athletes Across India, 2023) They also help young athletes receive well-deserved recognition. Welspun Super Sport Women program (WSSW) is a program that supports female athletes across 14 different sporting disciplines in India, providing them with scholarships. (Welspun India Ltd, n.d.)

Media Representation and Visibility

A study about the attitude of sports media towards women's sports shows that only 8% of employees always watch these events. A study conducted on the twitter accounts of local television sports broadcasters shows that men's sport coverage is 73% higher than women's sport coverage. The study also reveals biases in providing opinions. It shows men's sports get about 10.7% of tweets whereas women's sports get a measly 1.7% tweets. (Bagchi, 2020) Clearly, there is an imbalance in the quality and quantity of sports coverage of women and men. Two weeks of Olympic coverage is a rare period of time when consistent coverage of women sports stars makes the headlines. Apart from major sporting festivals, statistics claim that 40% of all sports participants are women, yet women's sports receive only around 4% of all sports media coverage. (Bagchi, 2020)

In 2019, the Indian women's football team's success story was hardly noticed by any sports broadcasters. The team narrowly missed out on the opportunity to qualify for the next round of the AFC Olympic qualifiers and shockingly, none of their matches were shown live on any Indian Television. (Bagchi, 2020)

All these stories and numbers show that clearly, there is a lack of visibility of women in sports through the media. Coverage of women's sports has historically never attracted the

same level of advertiser's interest or media coverage as men's sports. But, although slowly, progress is being made. (Guaglione, 2021)

Women in sport being represented by the media is extremely crucial for the current and future generations. So many young girls get inspired by watching their role models play passionately and represent the country with so much pride. It instills that motivation in them to also make a career out of sports and gives young, aspiring athletes that self-reliance that they too can bring a lot of pride to their country. Fortunately, the representation of women athletes in the media is increasing and so is the coverage of their sporting events. The recently conducted Women's IPL in India had lakhs of viewers online and stadiums were fully filled with fans. The power of the media in the current world is unimaginable and women are far more visible in sports today than ever before. So many famous women athletes are now visible on the television in many ways- advertisements, motivational speeches, TED talks, panel discussions, and webinars. Visibility of women athletes like Saina Nehwal, Mary Kom, Mithali Raj, and many more is a substantial reason that women participation in sports has increased drastically.

Health and Well-being

Research on sport, gender, and development indicates that sport can benefit girls and women by enhancing health and well-being, fostering self-esteem and empowerment, facilitating social inclusion and integration, challenging gender norms and providing opportunities for leadership and achievement. Women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and lower levels of depression compared to those who don't. They also have a more positive body image and experience higher states of psychological well-being. Sports also keep them healthy through fewer chronic illnesses, reduced risk of obesity, stronger bones and reduced risk of osteoporosis and regular menstruation. Engaging in regular physical activity also helps in the prevention of several chronic diseases. (Gopinathan, 2020)

India's badminton superstar P.V. Sindhu says that being physically active helps us stay fit and healthy. Regular exercise can help reduce serious health issues and also helps with weight management. A healthy lifestyle should be the dream of each individual as it could be a great source of peace and happiness. For her, health is the complete state of physical, mental and social well-being. (Venkat, 2021)

A great example of having top level fitness is Karnam Malleswari in the 2000 Olympic Games. It was an outstanding effort- Karnam had overcome a dip in form and dealt with a new weight category like a true winner- to win a bronze medal. She may not have stood highest on the podium but Karnam Malleswari had given India something far more important- the self-belief for women athletes to know that they too could do their nation proud. (*Meet Karnam Malleswari, the First Indian Woman to Win an Olympic Medal*, 2023) She showed everyone that fitness and health is crucial for adapting to difficult situations such as hers. Mithali Raj, India's former cricket captain, was successfully able to lead her country for 18 years over a 26 year long career due to her top-level fitness. Saina Nehwal, one of India's best badminton players ever, encountered many injuries through her time but she never gave up. She had multiple opportunities to just end her career and retire before she would ideally want, but she didn't. She kept going and took it up as a challenge to see how many injuries her body could cope with. She focused on rehabilitation and coming back strong every time she faced an issue. (*Want to See What All Injuries My Body Can Cope*

With: Saina Nehwal | Badminton News, 2022) Being an athlete is what gave her the power to do this.

Sport teaches athletes so much about being mentally strong while battling through all tough times during their career. The determination to keep going, resilience to never back down, and mental strength to show that they are strong and capable are a few qualities that make athletes special.

Conclusion

This paper is a thematic analysis of the empowerment of women through sports as a tool in India. It talks about various factors such as societal perception, economic status, media representation, and fitness and well-being. There is clear evidence that there has been a step forward in terms of women's participation in sports. It's great to see more and more girls pick up sports from a young age. This social and cultural change is what will encourage even more young girls in the future to become athletes. In the current day, lots of young girls have the talent but not the financial capability of becoming professional athletes. Recent scholarship programmes and financial aid are great ways of boosting the development of women in India through sports. Athletes like P.V. Sindhu, Deepika Kumari, Mithali Raj, Dipa Karmakar, and Saina Nehwal have worked extremely hard to gain recognition, make their country proud, and do economically well for themselves. Through this research paper, we explored that all of this is possible only through sport. Nothing can act as a better tool for women's empowerment other than sport.

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