

Breaking Barriers: The Journey of Women in Indian Sports and the Fight for Equality

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55968/ijems.v14i02.540>

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Women in sports have faced historic discrimination and societal pressures, especially in male-dominated fields. While once excluded from the Olympics, their participation has steadily grown, challenging stereotypes and demonstrating their skills. In India, female athletes confront cultural expectations that prioritize marriage and domestic roles over athletic careers. Despite this, icons like Karnam Malleswari and P.T. Usha have shown immense potential. Yet, barriers such as limited resources, sexism, and media bias persist. While progress is being made and govt has made different policies for upliftment but still there is a need to pay attention to this and need many changes.

Keywords: Women, Equality and Empowerment

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Diksha Sharma, Research Scholar, Department of Physical Education, Himachal Pradesh University Summerhill, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India. Email: dikshasharma@gmail.com	Sharma D, Lal M. Breaking Barriers: The Journey of Women in Indian Sports and the Fight for Equality. <i>ijems</i> . 2025;14(2):74-79. Available From https://ijems.net/index.php/ijem/article/view/540/	

Manuscript Received 2025-03-28	Review Round 1 2025-03-30	Review Round 2 2025-04-17	Review Round 3 2025-04-29	Accepted 2025-05-05
Conflict of Interest Authors state no conflict of interest.	Funding Non Funded.	Ethical Approval The conducted research is not related to either human or animals use.	Plagiarism X-checker 5	Note All authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.



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Introduction

Women have struggled from decades to get equal opportunities in the male dominant society in each field. Women were confined to the house work and thought that they belong to that space in the later Vedic or Medieval period in the Indian society (Saravanakumar, 2016). Women have faces numerous challenges and discrimination in every field whether its education, rights, facilities as well as sports. The field of sports was considered as a male dominating in world. In the early Olympics women were not allowed to even witness the sports event and later the were not allowed to participate in them. After the revival of modern Olympics (1896), still women were kept out of the participation as Perrier de Coubertin was follower of the same ideology that the games should be exclusively for men (Dar et al., 2023). But with time women have evolved significantly in the sports and participated in the Olympics after four year (1900) of its revival in certain sports but again in 1928 Olympics women was kept out of the event. After that women were only allowed to participate in certain event till 1952 Olympics after that women are challenging the masculine energy (Banerjee and Manna, 2020). This historical background proves that women have faced numerous of challenges in sports as well despite this they have proven their prowess, determination, breaking records, breaking down stereotypes and have an inspiring story for future generations.

The picture of women in India was not too different from the world. Indian sports field has been long dominated by male athletes. In India women athletes have to face the stereotypical behaviour of the society that women are delicate, they don't possess strength, there is no future of women athletes and they do not belong to this field. They do not only face the stereotypical mentality but also face the lack of infrastructure, media coverage, coaching etc (Sharma et al., 2018). By overcoming these barriers women have make there way to this field also, by giving example or proving their abilities of face challenges, talent and determination to overcome the stereotypes (Main et al., 2018). Despite these hurdles, female athletes like P.V. Sindhu, Mary Kom, and Mithali Raj and many more have emerged as trailblazers demonstrating that women can excel in competitive sports while challenging stereotypes and redefining gender norms.

This paper seeks to examine the key themes surrounding women in sports in India, with a particular focus on the challenges they face when entering the field, societal attitudes towards female athletes, the role of media representation, and the ongoing fight for equality in sports. By exploring these issues, the paper aims to highlight the progress that has been made over time, while also identifying areas that still need attention and improvement.

01. The Evolution of Indian Female Athletes and the Barriers They Face

1.1 Historical Presentation of Indian Female Athletes:

Women have faced lots of discrimination worldwide in every field whether we talk about rights, facilities, opportunities or pursuing their life dreams. Indian society cultural was one of them, here women got less opportunities in the past time to pursue their dreams or work out side the house professionally. As known earlier, women participate in the Olympic in 1900 in which out of 997 athletes only 22 women competed in 5 events. India also sends its first Indian male athlete in 1900 Paris Olympics, but women participated in the year of 1952 Helsinki Olympics for the first time from India that was Nilima Ghose and Mary D'Souza Sequeira (Majumdar, 2013). Before this there was a participation in the Asian games by Roshan Mistri who secured silver medal in the year 195. Where as first women to won an Olympic medal was Karnam Malleswari in the year of 2000 Sydney Olympics. After her Indian won its bronze medal in 2012 London Olympics by Marry Com in boxing and Saniya Nehwal in Badminton and journey of struggles continues till now (Ghosh et al., 2018). One of the most known athletes the "Golden Girl" and "Queen of Indian track and field" of that era was PT Usha who won 4 gold and 7 silvers in Asian games (Vachhani, 2014). This shows the disparity among the men athletes and the female athletes.

1.2 Barriers for Female Athletes:

In India women face stereotypical mentality of the society from the decades. Women were confined to the marriage and doing household work and sports thought to be the field of masculine energy not the feminine. In the past time women were discouraged for pursuing sports and other profession due to societal expectation and expected to prioritized

For marriage and motherhood (Arora et al., 2024). In addition to this 65% population lives in rural area in India (Ministry of Finance, 2021) rest the population is still not aware about the importance of sports. Still sports are considered as a recreational or fun activity which make it more verse for women to pursue the field. The sports have a significant role in women character building and making them fit physically, emotional, intellectually and socially (Aldegheiry,2021).

Due to lack of infrastructure, coaching facilities and safeguard women athletes has to back step from the field. There has been a severe gender imbalance in the allocation of resources for female athletes, with fewer opportunities for women in terms of sports scholarships, coaching, and sponsorships (SAI,2020). As Indian 65% population lives in rural area many girls have limited access to sports training facilities, which often lack basic amenities and qualified coaches. Even the dresses and sports equipment became barrier for Indian women to participate in the sports. As per Indian culture women should cover their head and eyes should be on the ground (Oza, 2018).

1.3 Security and Pay Disparity in Women's Sports

Sexism and stereotypes further compound the challenges faced by female athletes. Around the world, women in sports are often judged for their appearance rather than their athletic achievements and their commitment to sports is frequently questioned in the context of family responsibilities (Kakoti, 2024). Women athletes sometime face the security issues like sexual harassment, abuse and bullying by their counterparts. The Sports Authority of India has only documented two incidents where trainers faced arrest on the accusation of harassment and sexual assault, resulting in minimal convictions, often as short as 3-day period (Sapariya,2024). While the visibility of women in sports has increased, there remains a significant gap in terms of pay and opportunities between men and women. Women get lesser sponsorship compared to their counter. As compared to male athlete still in 21 century women get lesser pays and salary for the same sports that took the same efforts and time. Even this is seen that there is a large difference in the winning prize also (Choudhary, 2024). This can be seen in the Indian cricket team where male athletes

Have more sponsorship and winning money, salary hikes as compared to their counterpart.

1.4 Media coverage and social media

Media influence almost each and every individual in one or the way. Today is the time of the social media it embedded the thoughts in the people. Women sports get less media coverage which effect the female athlete's sponsorship and restrict them to become a role model. Media representation and sponsorships also reveal a deep gender divide. Women's sports receive only about 4% of global sports media coverage, limiting their visibility and the potential to attract sponsorships (Kakoti, 2024). While with the change in the mind set of people and social influence people are now watching the female athletes also. WPI is one the example in India that has got the coverage and people are watching it. In past few years we have seen an improvement in this sector but not for all sports but it is limited to some of the popular sports. It is important to understand that sports broadcast builds a brand value for the player which brings rewards and sponsors for the athlete irrespective to their gender.

02. Empowering Women in Sports: Government Policies, Societal Influence, and NGO Contributions

2.1 Societal Influence in women empowerment

01. **a) Parental Support:** It is important to understand that sports make person emotionally, mentally, physically and socially fit. It is also applicable for women. Sports help women to manage their stress and help them to became healthier. Sports training also helps in regulating the female hormones (Borja et al., 2022). Parents should be educated towards this, so that they can be much more supportive and change their attitude towards the sports. If parents are active and interested toward the sports, they can further influence the sports centre and school for providing equal opportunities to the females. This will help the females to get equality and foundation at the grassroot level
02. **b) Tailored Programme:** As women are different from men, they have different hormones and physiology (Hunter & Senefeld, 2024). The sports training should have a tailored specific programme according to

01. the female physiology (Kraemer et al., 2025). We cannot neglect that in this era women and their relation to the different fields are the new and emerging topics for the research which is helping the women to grow further. In sports also there have many researches that are helping the coaches and the authorities to make the training session specific to the demand of the physiology of the women.

02. **c) More Media Coverage and Role Model:** Media plays an important role in today's society whether it's a social media or print media it influences the mind of young and make aware the old generation (Sumadevi, 2023). As media is covering and promoting the male sports it should also give coverage to the female athletes also. Because of media coverage the female sports will reach to the people and it will help the people to understand that female also have career in sports and sports is not related to male dominant society. It will help female to grasp more opportunity in having the prize and scholarships. Idealizing and adverting the famous female athletes will make and set examples for the young girls. Such as in current scenario Mithali raj from cricket and P.V Sandhu get popularity among due to the media coverage.

03. **d) Equal Opportunity and Leadership at Management:** Women should get equal opportunity in all the fields such as job in the govt sector, accessible facilities, training centres and equal leadership role in the society. Its has been seen that still women get very less opportunity in higher authority and higher ranks. Giving more opportunity to women in higher rank will help and set example for others to reach that goal. Still, India only has 25% of women in high rank (Main et al., 2018). PT Usha setting high goals as president of IOA (Indian Olympic Association).

2.2 NGO'S and Organisations: NGO's play a vital role in a country to develop something and work for a specific goal. Sport popularity among women was one of a such goal. Because of the outdated mindset women was confined to the house chores but some NGOs work in the rural setup to demolish this mindset (BI et al., 2024) such as Kreda Bharati, Naandi foundation, Sportz Village Foundation and many more. These are improving sports level at the grassroot.

2.3 Govt Policies: Indian govt is taking different initiatives for the upliftment of sports among youth and for the equality treatment of women. Some of the initiatives are khelo India, TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme), ASMITA (Achieving Sports Milestone by Inspiring Women through Action).

2023. **a) Khelo India & ASMITA:** Khelo India "Dus ka Dum" Sports competition was launched on the occasion of International Women's Day in March 2023. Khelo India is a gender-neutral competition and provide equal opportunities to women to compete in the event Over 1500 events were conducted with participation of more than one lakh women athletes in various parts of the country. ASMITA was the portal that was launched on 22 august, 2023 for women upliftment that was intact with khelo India with a tag line "Khel se hi Pehchan" (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2023).

2024. **b) TOPS:** Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) of this Ministry, support is provided to promising sportspersons irrespective of gender, in terms of modern sports sciences, foreign exposure under experts of respective sports disciplines and participation in international events / competitions recognized by the Indian Olympic Committee (IOC). Out-of-pocket allowance of @ Rs.25,000/- per month is given for athletes under TOPS Developmental Group and @ Rs.50,000/- per month for athletes under TOPS Core Group. Currently, a total of 104 elite women athletes in various sports disciplines are covered under TOPS (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2023).

Conclusion

Women have struggle to make a place in the society from the past decade and the struggle going still. But women have come a far away from the house chores to the space as a such example is the latest Sunita Williams to the numerous examples from the field of sports. Women have struggles with lots of barriers of society, outdated mindset, inequality, security, less broadcast and difference in pays, scholarships and higher ranks. Women with the help of NGOs, organizations and govt policies women are excelling in the sports and bringing glory to the nation same as their counter parts. Now media is also giving coverage and importance to the female sporting events. Which is helping the women to grasp the scholarships, attention of the society

And breaking the stereotypical mindset that sports is a masculine field. The govt policies such as Khelo India, ASMITA are promoting more and more women in the field. This field still have a scope of research that will help the coaches, trainers, and the administrators to make the policies for women in the field and will help in upliftment. This will increase the ratio of women in sports and sports will affect the young mind and keep them healthy as youth is the future of any nation. And it is said that if a mother or a woman in a house is educated, she can educate the whole family (Sibulal, 2021).

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