

# SPORTS - A GATEWAY TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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**Abstract :** In India, there exist stark gender inequalities in economic and social indicators such as health, education and political opportunities. Women lag behind men in almost all respects causing a large and worrying gap in all indicators of development. This has caused policymakers to think about ways to close it.

In recent years, sports is seen as a tool to bridge the gender gap. Greater involvement of girls and women in sports not only improves their physical and mental health but also helps to break traditional stereotypes and empower them in various ways. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen talks about development by enhancing capabilities. He has long argued that women's agency and voice should be increased to deal with gender inequalities. The focus should be on women's education, ownership rights and employment opportunities outside home. Sports provides a platform for girls to showcase their talent and earn a life of independence and dignity. The present paper highlights the role of sports in gender mainstreaming and empowerment of girls and women. We also examine the gender inequalities that exist to equal participation of girls in sports as well as obstacles to sports serving as a vehicle for women empowerment. We provide important policy suggestion to remove these obstacles.

**IndexTerms - Gender gap, women empowerment, sports**

## INTRODUCTION

Women constitutes half of India's population but lags behind men in all the economic as well as social indicators of development. There exist a huge gender gap in the political opportunities as well. The global gender gap report (2018) ranks India 108 on the global gender gap index out of 149 using a composite index of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. The disaggregated score in the context of India is significant. On economic participation and opportunity India's rank is 142, on educational attainment rank is 114, on health and survival it is 147 and political empowerment it is 19. There exist huge gender gap in economic and social indicators such as health, education and political opportunities. The sex ratio is a good indicator of gender discrimination and according to the 2011 census, the sex ratio is 934 females per 1000 males. Amartya Sen coined the term "missing women" referring to the women who would be likely to be alive today had they been born male in most of Asia and North Africa. These women are missing due to lack of access to nutritious food, medical care and social services comparable to men. The disparities are strikingly large when looked at in terms of health, education, unemployment and social exclusion. NFHS 4 provides the most recent indices on fertility, mortality etc. Fertility rate is 2.2 children per woman in 2015-16 which declined from 2.7 children per woman and is just above the replacement fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman. Under- five and infant mortality rate has been persistently declining and stood at 50 deaths per 1000 live births and 41 deaths per 1000 live births in the five years preceding the survey in 2015-16. However, anaemia, wasting and malnutrition among children and adult women is still high. 58 percent of children age 6-59 months have anaemia, 38 percent under 5 years are stunted, 21 percent are wasted and 36 percent are underweight. Any anaemia in women of different age groups hovered between 52-54 % in sharp contrast to men which lied in the range of 19- 29% .

Adult literacy rate for males according to the 2011 census is 79 is much higher as compared to women which stands at 59%. Women are underrepresented in the formal sector and overrepresented in the informal sector with female labour force participation rate at 25.5% vis a vis that of males which stands at 53%. Given this dismal state of affairs, there is a need to focus on gender mainstreaming policies. This shall also help us achieve the United Nations MDG of "Promote gender equality and empower women". Sports can help achieve these goals in creative ways.

## SPORTS IN INDIA

In India, in recent years women have done extremely well in sports drawing attention of the world towards them. Table 1 lists recent success stories of women in sports in India in the year 2018.

**Table 1: Recent achievements of women players**

| PLAYER         | GAME         | ACHIEVEMENTS   |
|----------------|--------------|--|
| Dipa Karmakar  | Gymnastic    | clinched the gold medal in the vault event of the FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Challenge Cup at Mersin, Turkey in July  |
| PV Sindhu      | Badminton    | silvers at the Commonwealth Games, Asian Games and World Championship ; runners-up finishes at the India Open and Thailand Open ; BWF World Tour Finals title  |
| MC Mary Kom    | Boxing       | four gold medals in 2018- including a record sixth world title and the CWG top honours; silver at a prestigious European tournament in Bulgaria  |
| Manika Batra   | Table tennis | four medals, including two golds in the Commonwealth Games ; mixed doubles bronze medal at the Asian Games   |
| Mithali Raj    | Cricket      | first female cricketer to score 2000 runs in T20Is; scored two back to back half-centuries in ICC Women's World T20  |
| Harshita Tomar | Shooter      | won a bronze medal in the open laser 4.7 sailing category at Asiad games   |
| Hima Das       | Sprinter     | won a gold medal at an international track event; clinched the top spot in the women's 400m final race in the IAAF World Under-20 Athletics Championships in Finland; won 3 medals at the Asian Games, including one gold and two silver |
| Vinesh Phogat  | Wrestling    | won the gold medal in the Asian Games 2018;  |
| Dutee Chand    | Athletics    | women's 100m silver medal at the Asian Games   |

|              |              |  |
|--------------|--------------|--|
| Sania Nehwal | Ace shuttler | won a gold and a bronze respectively at the Commonwealth Games and Asian Games ; reached the finals at the Indonesia Masters, Denmark Open and Syed Modi International ; won a bronze medal at the Asian Championships |
|--------------|--------------|--|

Source: Newspapers

Government initiative in sports should be given due credit . A new umbrella Scheme “Khelo India” was launched by the Ministry of sports during 2016-17 after merger of existing scheme Rajiv Gandhi Khel Abhiyan (RGKA), Urban Sports Infrastructure Scheme (USIS) and National Sports Talent Search System Programme (NSTSSP). In order to enlarge the scope of the Khelo India , the scheme was revised into revamped Khelo India- National Programme for Development of Sports in the year 2017. Under this scheme, special steps have been taken to encourage women’s participation in sports. These are:

- Exclusive avenues for women to participate in Sports through a National Level Competition for Women. This will encourage more and more women to participate without any fear or inhibition.
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- Infuse a sporting culture among women and encourage them to adopt sports as a way of life.

### SPORTS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The World Bank defines empowerment as “the process of increasing assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform these actions into desired actions and outcomes”. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has played a pioneering role in raising awareness regarding gender inequalities and argues that women’s voice and agency can be increased through their independence and empowerment. He says that development can be brought about and gender gap can be reduced by expanding this agency through investments in women’s education, ownership rights and employment opportunities outside home. This shall increase capabilities of women to achieve what they want for their wellbeing.

Sports act as a vehicle for greater gender equality promoting girls and women empowerment. It aids in building capabilities in women in the sense talked out by Sen. Participation promotes decision making and leadership and employment. By being success stories, these women act as role models motivation young girls to take up sports. Sports is worldwide accepted as human right for all including children and women with disabilities (UN, 1948; UN, 1989; UN, 2006a). Sports plays a very important role in women development and empowerment. Girls and women in India are denied opportunities for independence and development due to limited mobility, poor education and healthcare, early marriage and a lack of decision making power. Sports helps in achieving the objective of women empowerment through the following:

- Forum to learn skills

Sports helps to learn skills such as discipline, confidence and leadership. This is important as these skills can prove to be useful in practical day to day life of a woman. Women tend to be shy and unable to assert her rights. If these traits are instilled in her due to participation in sports, she can realise the power within and assert herself in all facets of her life. Sportsmanship also teaches the value of effort and how to deal with success and failure. It is not easy to break or mould the social norms and patriarchal mindsets which are deeply engraved in our society. Therefore to achieve success in breaking these norms, one needs to show sportsmanship and invest consistent efforts. Sports also fosters the idea of team spirit where one rises over individual or community differences and play for a common goal. This is important in life too where women needs to understand that a family, a society, country and this world as a unit is one and her individual actions should be such so as to contribute to the well-being of each.

- Contributes to physical and mental wellbeing

It is well established that higher levels of physical activity among girls and women has health benefits and it reduces the incidence of noncommunicable diseases, particularly heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers and effects of osteoporosis (Oglesby, 2006; WHO, 2007a; WHO, 2007b; UN, 2003). Exercise is also associated with improving the quality of life of older women (Oglesby 2006). Higher Participation in sports has psychological benefits such as reducing depression and improving concentration. Moreover, physical activity promotes health and wellness among girls with disabilities and exposes them to skills such as teamwork, goal setting, pursuit of excellence etc which are self- empowering at personal and collective level (Oglesby, 2006 ; Guthrie and Castelnuovo, 2001). Girls are more prone to anxiety disorders and depression and significantly more likely to consider suicide by the age of 15 (Bailey, Wellard and Dismore, 2004). Participation in sports improves the mental wellbeing of women of all ages and

helps in management of mental diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (WHO, 2007c). Sports improve concentration, problem solving and academic performance (UN, 2003).

- Avenue for employment

Participation in sports opens up employment opportunities for women in sports- related jobs such as coaches, managers, sport administrators, trainers, game officials, physical education teachers, sports therapists, journalists and editors. Proportion of women in sports related jobs is quite less as compare to men.

- Social connections and mobility

Girls especially in adolescence have fewer opportunities to interact outside home and family as compared to boys (United Nations, 2003). Sports brings people together from diverse backgrounds and promotes communication which helps in building social capital. It gives girls and women a platform for participation in social and cultural life and aids self expression. This is very important for women as building networks outside home is a means for empowerment. Social connections also increase the mobility of women outside home as it is more acceptable for women to be involve in group as compared to individual activity. There is evidence that participation in sports increases school attendance (United Nations, 2003). The various traits instilled by sports such as cooperation, teamwork, communication, problem solving etc. helps in long lasting group relations. As a group, these girls report to fight social evils such as child marriage.

- Women education

Physical education is also an important form of education when given to women can be fruitful in developing inter-personal skills and opening new avenues for productive employment. Participation in sports thereby promotes gender parity in education. The successful women in sports becomes role models for other girls and encourages them to achieve something in their life. Well-designed sport programs have shown to increase school attendance and build skills that promote employment (United Nations, 2003). Sporting activities can provide an important platform where young girls can be made aware about their sexuality and health including reproductive health. In fact, studies shows that adolescent girls participation in sports tends to reduce teen pregnancy (Sabo, Miller, Farrell, Barnes, and Melnick, 1998).

- Forum to promote gender equality

The promotion of education can also be facilitated by sport. Sports teams and organizations, as well as local, national and international competitions, provide an excellent opportunity to provide information and knowledge on the importance of girls' education.

### Obstacles

Gender disparities exist everywhere and sports is no different. Opportunities for women to participate in sports may be restricted . Even when participation is there, due to patriarchal mindsets regarding women's traditional roles and doubts regarding physical abilities and competence, gender disparities exist in opportunities for women in sports too.

- Due to stereotype attitudes and traditional gender roles, women's sport is valued lower, resulting in inadequate facilities and opportunities being devoted to them as compared to their male counterparts. This act as a further demotivating factor for women's participation in sports. In the South Asian Federation games in the year 2016, men's team was given accommodation in a four star hotel nearby while the women's relay team was made to stay in a local institute 20 km away from the stadium. The sports authority of India ignored Dipa Karmakar request for a physiotherapist before her finals in the Rio Olympics. The list of these forms of discrimination based on gender is endless.

- Certain sports such as rugby and wrestling are considered male sports and women are excluded form them . They are frequently encouraged into different types of sports which are more "feminine" for example iceskating and gymnastics.

- Female sports player are discriminated in terms of unequal wages, prizes and other financial incentives. Commercial endorsements and sponsorship are form a significant part of a sportsperson salary. There exist gender disparities since women sportsperson getting less of these as compared to their male counterparts. Gender Inequality Issue of the Global Sports Salaries Survey, 2017, indicates that the gender pay gap in sport is more than in politics, business, medicine or even academics. The average salary in top men's football competition in England, the Premier league is 99 times as much salary in the top women's football competition ( Gender Inequality Issue of the Global Sports Salaries Survey, 2017). Forbes 2018 in its list of top 100 does not include a single sportswoman. In the Indian context, A grade women cricketers receive about half the pay of C grade men cricketers. Moreover, Indian women Football team earn between 5-10 lakhs per year while their counterparts earn around 70 lacks per annum.

Women receiving about one fourth Arjuna awards as compared to their male counterparts is another example to show gender biased attitudes (Annual Report, 2017-18, Ministry of youth affairs and sports).

- Women sportsperson receive inadequate media coverage that they deserve as compared to their male counterparts. Not only that but media coverage is presented in a different style that reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Sportswomen also require media to provide a critique to their performances, which can give them an opportunity to learn and will showcase honest interest in the women's sports. Globally, only 4% of sports media content is dedicated to women's sports and only 12% of sports news is presented by women. Less media publicity has the drawback of not sufficiently motivating the young girls to become future sportswomen which further worsens the problem by setting a vicious cycle.

- Harassment in sport is very common and is a manifestation of the perceptions of men's dominance and physical strength and power. Various cases has been seen in the past which shows how women have been victims of sexual harassment for example, 31 members of the Indian hockey team filed a case against their coach M. Kaushik in 2010. There is also underreporting in these cases due to lack of trust on the system.

- One of the primary reasons for low women's participation in sports is due to traditional gender roles which leaves them with little time and energy to engage in sports. India lags behind in promoting a culture of participation in sport. Girls and women have not understood the value of sports as well its importance for wellbeing. The gender disparities in sports are reinforced due to lack of interest of women choosing sports over other career options. It is considered as either luxury or leisure, leading to unstructured efforts to encourage participation.

- Another significant reason for the existence of inequalities is the lack of adequate women's representation in decision making boards of organisations such as National Sports Federations (NSF) or Olympic Committees (NOC). In India, women's representation in the NOC is a mere 3.57%. Similarly, of all NSF's in India, 8 were without any women representation while the remaining constituted 2-8% of the governing bodies. Due to low representation, women sports is neglected as with less women policymakers, women's preferences and problems in sports is largely ignored and male domination remains.

### Suggestions

In Amartya Sen's words, "if we want better capability, then we need better capacity" i.e. if we want to empower women in sports we need to invest our time, money and energies on putting in place good gender sensitive institutions at all levels which can further this agenda. There is a need to ensure that policies and programmes on school-based physical education fully incorporate gender perspectives. Also, there is a need of girls centric approach wherein specific need of girls should be understood and addressed. In particular, it is imperative to take steps to increase representation of women in the governing body of the various sports committees. This argument is in line with the critical mass theory which states that when the size of a group reaches a critical mass or is of certain size, then it gets the power to influence. When women takes up decision making positions, they can ensure that policies are undertaken to safeguard the interest of the women players as well as are conducive for greater participation in sports. They can keep a check on gender biased action whether in resource allocation or sexist attitude towards female players.

- It is necessary to invest in education and healthcare of the girl child. She should be provided access to the resources necessary for growth and development so that she can exploit the sports opportunities that comes her way for a better living.
- Promoting and documenting the successes of women and girl leaders in the world of sport is an important step in raising awareness and providing encouragement and support to other aspiring leaders. Role models in sports are important for promoting participation of women in sports.
- Recognition of girl's work burden and time constraints is required and serious consideration must be given to ways to address these problems. It is must to encourage every girl to come out to play, and by nurturing their talent, help some of them to become champions and leaders of tomorrow. In this, teachers of school, colleges and other institutions have an important role to play. Taking parents and guardians into confidence to promote girls to participate in sports can be helpful. Girls should be encouraged to freely undertake the sport of their choice and not just the traditional ones.
- Safe playgrounds that are accessible to girls in their locality, school/academic institution and sports institution should be provided. There could be separate timings and schedule for girls so that they can engage in self-expression without any male domination.
- Employment of more female coaches, referees and trainers in school and other sports institutions can greatly help in increasing participation especially of young girls. In that case, parents fears regarding their daughter's safety can also be allayed. These trainers and teachers should also be provided with gender sensitive training.

### Conclusions

Given the sorry state of affairs in sports, gender mainstreaming is the need of the time which requires that sports bodies and institutions identify and address the relevant gender issues at every level i.e. in policy development, planning processes, budget allocations, human resources development including recruitment, promotion, retention and training as well as in research and statistics. The mainstreaming of gender perspectives into all sport policies and programmes shall require a deeper understanding of the various barriers girls and women face in India in accessing, participating and benefiting from sports and physical activity, and the identification of ways to remove them. One of the important way in which this can be done is to increase the representation of women in decision making bodies of the various sports committees and institutions.

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