

# Problems and Challenges of Indian women in Sports: A Sociological Analysis

**Dr. Kavita Kulkarni**

Associat Professor, Department of Sociology, Government First Grade College,  
Kittur, Belagavi, Karnataka State.

## Abstract

In Indian society women are participating in every section of society and making their identity in society in this journey of development, present paper examines different challenges that Indian women athletes face, focusing on the enduring institutional, societal, economic, and geographic constraints that hinder their development. Although women's participation in sports has improved optimistically in India, structural injustices still prevent female athletes from realizing their full potential. The study emphasizes how ingrained gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and expectations deter women from participating in competitive sports. These issues are made worse by economic disparities, which include inadequate infrastructure, unequal compensation, and limited funding as compared to their male colleagues. The study also focuses at regional and geographic disparities, pointing out how rural and urban areas differ in terms of training facilities and resources. Women's freedom to participate in sports is further restricted by cultural and religious factors, particularly in conservative societies. These difficulties are made worse by the intersections of caste, religion, gender, and social class. Furthermore, the systemic undervaluation of women's accomplishments is exacerbated by the absence of sponsorships and media attention for these sports. Indian women athletes continue to break prejudices and perform well at international competitions like the Olympics and Asian Games in spite of these challenges. However, the systemic biases ingrained in the sports industry cannot be addressed by individual accomplishments. Eliminating the gender pay gap, granting equitable access to infrastructure, increasing media involvement, and fostering community support are just a few of the tactics the study suggests to promote inclusion. In addition to attaining gender parity in sports, addressing these issues is crucial for changing public attitudes and motivating upcoming generations of female athletes. In order to foster a long-lasting and encouraging atmosphere that supports women's athletic talent in India, this paper concludes by proposing regulatory changes, scholarships, and grassroots projects. The study emphasizes that in order to fully realize Indian women's sporting potential, structural change is required.

**Keywords:** Development, Women Athletes in India, Gender Inequality in Sports, Sociocultural Barriers, Economic Disparities in Sports, Intersectionality in Sports, Gender Pay Gap in Athletics.

## 1. Introduction

While India has witnessed a heartening surge in women's participation in sports, female athletes continue to grapple with multifaceted challenges that hinder their progress and recognition. This research paper aims to analyse the diverse barriers that women athletes in India face, encompassing sociocultural, religious, economic, gender and institutional factors, and propose strategies to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for their athletic pursuits. These obstacles encompass deeply ingrained societal prejudices, pervasive gender bias, and inadequate infrastructure support. Furthermore, female athletes often encounter unequal access to resources, including financial incentives, compared to their male counterparts. Restrictive societal norms often discourage women from pursuing athletic endeavours, while systemic barriers, such as stark salary disparities, limited media representation, and a dearth of sponsorships, further obstruct their path to success. The absence of robust support systems, coupled with instances of prejudice, harassment, and a lack of appropriate mentorship, further restricts their ability to thrive in the competitive sporting arena. The added burden of navigating societal expectations, personal responsibilities, and work obligations often places immense emotional and psychological strain on these athletes. Despite these formidable obstacles, Indian women have consistently shattered glass ceilings and showcased their extraordinary talent on the global stage, clinching victories and accolades at prestigious events like the Olympics, Asian Games, and Commonwealth Games. A nuanced understanding of these multifaceted barriers is paramount to dismantling systemic obstacles, fostering gender equity, and unlocking the boundless potential of women in Indian sports.

**Sociocultural and Religious Barriers**

Traditional societal norms and religious customs in India often pose significant barriers to women's participation in sports. Deeply entrenched gender stereotypes, which associate athletic pursuits with masculinity, result in the social stigmatization and discouragement of women's involvement in sports. Furthermore, the emphasis on maintaining societal notions of female modesty, as well as the expectation for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over athletic endeavours, directly impede their ability to dedicate time and resources to training and competition. Additionally, the lack of supportive social networks, including family and peer encouragement, can further exacerbate these obstacles, as women athletes often face criticism and discouragement from their immediate social circles. Initially, women were not considered to be fit for some sports like boxing, wrestling etc. Research has shown that religious beliefs and cultural norms in certain regions of India, particularly regarding appropriate attire and gender roles, can also serve as significant deterrents to women's sports participation (Naseer et al., 2020). A study exploring the constraints faced by Indian women in sports highlighted the lack of encouragement from family members and the persistence of traditional living as significant hurdles to their participation (Constraints of Indian women participation in games and sports, 2010). These findings underscore the powerful influence of societal expectations and familial pressures on women's choices regarding sports. Moreover, the lack of female role models and mentors in the Indian sports landscape further perpetuates the perception of sports as a predominantly male domain (Lack of opportunities and respect – Where are women leaders in the Indian sports ecosystem? 2024). The absence of visible, successful female athletes can make it challenging for aspiring girls and women to envision themselves pursuing similar paths. e.g. Kabaddi is one of the sports of national importance in India, and in recent years, we have witnessed a gradual increase in women's participation in this sport at the national level, showcasing their exceptional talent and determination to excel in traditionally male-dominated fields.

**Economic and Resource Disparities**

Beyond sociocultural barriers, economic and resource disparities present significant obstacles for women athletes in India. The allocation of funding, sports infrastructure, and training opportunities

often reflects a deep-seated gender bias that favours male athletes. Though Indian women have consistently outperformed their male counterparts in international sporting events like the Olympics, the disparity in prize money and endorsement opportunities is stark (Main et al., 2018). For instance, the winner of the 2022 Commonwealth Games cricket tournament, where the Indian women's team emerged victorious, received a prize of \$330,000, while the winning men's team in the 2024 T20 cricket World Cup is expected to receive a substantially higher prize, a testament to the ongoing gender-based discrepancies in the sports ecosystem. Franchises spend relatively negligible amount on sponsorships in Women's Premier League as compared to that of Indian Premier League. Moreover, the lack of access to quality training facilities, equipment, experienced coaches, and specialized support staff, such as nutritionists and physiotherapists, further compounds the challenges faced by women athletes. This disparity in resources can severely impact their ability to train effectively, develop their skills, and compete at their full potential. Furthermore, the stark wage gap between male and female athletes in India reflects a systemic devaluation of women's athletic achievements. (Lack of opportunities and respect – Where are women leaders in the Indian sports ecosystem, 2024) This disparity in earnings not only creates financial strain for female athletes but also sends a discouraging message about the value placed on their dedication and talent. Whereas, the annual remuneration for male cricketer's ranges from 1 crore to 7 crores per annum for Grades C to A+, the compensation for their female counterparts is significantly lower, ranging from 10 lakhs to 50 lakhs per annum (Main et al., 2018). Statistics show that out of the total budget allocation for sports in India, a meagre 5-7% is directed towards women's sports, highlighting the stark imbalance in resource distribution. This resource disparity not only hinders women's ability to excel in sports but also reinforces the societal perception that their athletic pursuits are less valuable and deserving of investment.

**Women and their Remuneration:** One ingrained (and unsavoury) aspect of the social and economic life of many nations is the unequal treatment of women in comparison to men in terms of compensation. According to estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO), women's wages in 2015 were 77% of men's worldwide, and at current rates of decrease, it would take 70 years for the gender gap to significantly close (ILO, 2015). Women were overrepresented in low-paying occupations, which is a common feature of labour markets, and their rising representation in higher-paying managerial and professional roles has not been sufficient to offset this disparity. However, even in high-paying professions, a significant number of women reported experiencing pay discrimination: in the United States, one in four working women reported earning less than a man performing the same job, while only 5% of men reported earning less than a woman performing the same job (Gender pay gap remained stable over past 20 years in US, 2021). In India, where the IPL is held, many of these characteristics are present. India was placed 140th out of 156 nations in the World Economic Forum's Table 1.1 for the total gender gap, barely above Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco, and Oman. However, there are a number of perplexing aspects that lie behind this general outcome. India ranked 51st out of 155 nations in terms of political empowerment, outperforming countries like Australia and Luxembourg in terms of the sub-indices of gender imbalance (World Economic Forum, 2021, Table 1.2). India came in at number 114 out of 156 nations in terms of educational attainment (World Economic Forum, 2021, Table 1.2). However, it ranked a miserable 151st (out of 156 countries) in terms of economic participation and opportunity, with only Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan ranking lower. Thus, it would seem that Indian women were unable to escape the patriarchal straitjacket that limited their economic success, even after gaining political freedom and a high level of education.

## Methodology:

This paper is purely based on Secondary Source of the data collection.

In spite of the fact that conventional models of pay inequality highlight employer discrimination against particular groups. In the setting of patriarchy in India, Mukherjee and Sarkhel's (2021) story took a unique turn. They maintained that Indian women, who valued their families more than their careers, accepted lower pay for less difficult positions. Thus, a gender wage gap would develop even in the absence of employer discrimination because women, adhering to patriarchal traditions, prioritized their function in the home above their role outside of it. The female labour force participation rate (LFPR) fell 34% between 2005 and 2019, despite India's GDP growing 241% during that time (World Bank, 2019). This is another conundrum in the country's labour sector. Just 4% of Indian workers were women in 2018, and 90% of those employed were engaged in informal work, which includes unpaid or irregular labour. (Sili, 2021) Two explanations have been proposed by economists to explain the decline. The first is that the expansion of India has led to the creation of jobs in industries like construction that are often inaccessible to women.

The second relates to culture: Indian households prefer the status that comes with keeping women at home, unless their decisions are influenced by extreme poverty. (In India, a Small Band of Women Risk It All for a Chance to Work, 2016) it has been argued that this decline was mainly associated with patriarchal values that discouraged women from working in the industrial and service sectors. Geographical Disparities While the challenges faced by women athletes in India are widespread, there are also significant regional variations in the opportunities and support available to them. Studies have found that urban areas generally have better infrastructure, access to training facilities, and more avenues for women to participate in sports, compared to rural and semi-urban regions. (Rao, 2010) (Main et al., 2018). The disparities in resources and cultural attitudes towards women's sports can further exacerbate the challenges faced by female athletes hailing from less-developed regions. Addressing these geographical inequalities is crucial in ensuring equal opportunities and support for women across the country. Lack of access to proper training facilities, equipment, and coaching, particularly in rural areas, can hamper the development of female athletes and limit their ability to compete at the highest levels. This further reinforces the perception that sports are not a viable career option for women, perpetuating the cycle of gender-based inequalities. Another barrier for the girl's participation in sports in India is the lack of safety and security, especially in the rural and semi-urban areas.

The incidents of harassment, assault, and societal stigma can deter parents from encouraging their daughters to pursue sports, fearing for their safety and well-being. Poverty and limited access to education can also be significant obstacles, as families may prioritize more immediate needs over investing in their daughters' athletic pursuits. These regional disparities highlight the importance of targeted interventions and policy measures to address the unique challenges faced by women athletes in different parts of the country. Most of the sports require suitable facilities and infrastructure, which are often lacking in remote areas, hampering the growth of women's participation in sports. Cost of sports gear and equipment's also prove to be a major barrier for women and girls belonging to low-income families (Rao, 2010). Bias in selection process, lack of role models, and limited media coverage of women's sports further contribute to the challenges faced by female athletes, especially those from marginalized regions (Marwat et al., 2021) (Naseer et al., 2020) (Main et al., 2018). Athletes from tribal areas, especially north-east India, have

highlighted the lack of access to coaching, training, and exposure opportunities as key impediments to their progress (Rao, 2010). Religious and Caste Barriers The challenges faced by women athletes in India are further compounded by the intersectionality of gender with other social identities such as religion, caste, and socioeconomic status. (Naseer et al., 2020) (Marwat et al., 2021) (Rao, 2010) Islamic and certain Hindu practices, such as restrictions on women's physical mobility, dress code, and social interactions, can create significant barriers for Muslim and women from conservative Hindu families to participate in sports. Caste-based discrimination and prejudices also play a major role in limiting the opportunities available to women athletes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Lack of financial resources, social capital, and support systems can make it extremely difficult for these women to break into the male-dominated world of sports. Intersectionality: The Cumulative Impact The intersectionality of these factors, such as gender, geography, religion, caste and socioeconomic status, creates a complex web of challenges that female athletes in India must navigate, underscoring the need for a multifaceted, holistic approach. It can lead to the marginalization of women athletes from minority communities, who face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion. Incapacitating these challenges requires targeted interventions that address not just gender-based barriers, but also the specific obstacles faced by women from diverse backgrounds.

**This could involve measures such as:** scholarships and financial assistance for underprivileged girls, setting up sports facilities and training centres in underserved regions, sensitizing communities on the importance of women's sports, and ensuring equal representation and leadership roles for women in sports governance and administration. Long-Term Impacts The paucity of opportunities and the challenging environment for women athletes in India can have far-reaching consequences. (Mahata et al., 2023) (Chatterjee et al., 2015) (Gupta, 2017) (Arora, 2020) First, it can discourage young girls from pursuing sports, leading to a dearth of female representation in the athletic landscape. This, in turn, deprives the country of tapping into a vast pool of talented individuals, hindering the overall development of sports in India. Furthermore, the lack of role models and inspirational stories of successful female athletes can perpetuate the societal perception that sports are a predominantly male domain. This can have a detrimental impact on the self-esteem and confidence of young girls, dissuading them from exploring their athletic potential (Rao, 2010). In the long run, the persistent gender-based challenges faced by women athletes in India can have broader societal implications. The undervaluation of women's sports and the limited support they receive can contribute to the perpetuation of gender biases and discrimination in various spheres of life, including education, employment, and decision-making processes (Arora, 2020) (Mukherjee & Patel, 2020) (Mahata et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

With their unwavering energy, tenacity, and exceptional talent, women athletes shine a light on the way in the wide tapestry of Indian sports, frequently in spite of ingrained institutional, societal, and financial restrictions. However, they face challenges along the way as they navigate the intersections of cultural norms, economic disparities, and insufficient support systems. Nevertheless, Indian athletes have distinguished themselves on the international scene by demonstrating not just their skill but also their capacity to defy social norms. True progress, however, requires not only a few isolated successes but also the destruction of the systems that prevent them and the reconstruction of an ecosystem in which equality is the rule rather than the exception. Change must happen immediately. Unlocking the full potential of

female athletes will require addressing systemic injustices, lack of infrastructure, gender bias, and geographical discrepancies. This study emphasizes that achieving gender equality in sports involves more than just fighting for justice; it also entails changing the perception, empowering the next generation, and creating an environment where sports prowess is valued without bias.

### Suggestions:

To nurture a more inclusive and empowering landscape for women in sports, the following measures are recommended:

- 1. The Policy and Governance:** The Making sure women are represented in leadership positions by enforcing gender-equal policies in sports governance. Establish stringent anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies to provide a secure atmosphere for female athletes.
- 2. Scholarships and Incentives:** Aspiring athletes from underrepresented groups, such as those influenced by socioeconomic position, caste, or religion, should be given financial aid and scholarships. Provide athletes with incentives and flexible work opportunities so they may manage their personal obligations and athletic goals.
- 3. Media Representation and Visibility:** Increase media coverage and positive portrayal of women's sports to inspire the next generation and change societal perceptions. To change the cultural narrative, honour the accomplishments of female athletes with national campaigns, documentaries, and prizes.
- 4. The Infrastructure and Resource Development:** To Create specialized training centres and academies for women in underrepresented areas, especially in rural areas. Assure equitable access to coaching, high-quality equipment, and auxiliary services including dietary counselling and physical therapy. Raise funding for women's sports and close the gap in prize money, sponsorships, and salaries.
- 5. Community Engagement:** Launching awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the importance of women's participation in sports. Empower local communities, families, and schools to support and encourage girls' involvement in sports from a young age.

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