

The Changing Role of Young Women in Sports and Its Impact on Family, Community, and Gender Expectations in Manipur: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Participation of young women in sports in Manipur has increased, yet they continue to navigate family expectations, community attitudes, and traditional gender norms. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting sustained engagement and empowerment.

Objective: To explore the changing role of young women in sports in Manipur and assess its impact on family dynamics, community perceptions, and gender expectations.

Methods: A cross-sectional mixed-methods study was conducted among 100 female athletes, 50 parents, and 15 coaches in Manipur. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used for quantitative analysis ($p < 0.05$ considered significant), and thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data.

Results: Family support improved significantly over time (very supportive: 40% $\rightarrow$ 81%, $p < 0.001$). Community support was largely encouraging (72%, $p < 0.001$). Major challenges included financial constraints (72%, $p < 0.01$), inadequate facilities (55%, $p = 0.02$), and household responsibilities (45%, $p = 0.03$). High levels of aspiration were observed, with 90% aiming for national or international competition ($p < 0.001$). Participation was associated with improved confidence (78%, $p < 0.001$), better physical health (68%, $p < 0.001$), and greater independence (55%, $p = 0.001$). Parents and coaches highlighted ongoing societal and infrastructural barriers.

Conclusion: Sports participation empowers young women in Manipur by enhancing confidence, independence, and social recognition. However, financial limitations, infrastructural gaps, and persistent societal expectations require targeted interventions to sustain and expand female participation.

Keywords: Women in sports, family support, community perception, gender norms, Manipur, empowerment.

Introduction

The participation of women in sports has historically been shaped by cultural traditions, societal expectations, and socio-economic realities. For much of the 20th century, women across the world were

excluded from many forms of organised sport, largely because of patriarchal attitudes that positioned athleticism as a masculine pursuit.^{1,2,3} The participation and desire of women for sports and physical activity are often overlooked because in many cultures, sports and physical activity are not considered suitable for females. In many societies, women and girls are not allowed to access public spaces and participate in sports. This is happening in many nations due to multiple reasons such as poverty, fear of safety and security, lack of accessible transportation, traditional gender roles, and cultural norms.² In many societies, women who attempted to enter the sporting arena faced resistance, not only from institutions but also from families and communities, which often perceived sports as inappropriate, unfeminine, or a distraction from household responsibilities and marriage prospects.⁴⁻⁷

Over recent decades, however, global patterns have begun to shift. Women now have increasing opportunities to participate in both competitive and recreational sports, ranging from grassroots initiatives to elite international competitions.^{8,9} Major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, FIFA Women's World Cup, and Commonwealth Games have played a pivotal role in showcasing female talent, inspiring participation, and challenging gender stereotypes.¹⁰

Empowering women in the modern era is a critical global priority. Sports play a crucial role in promoting women's empowerment, offering multiple platforms to enhance their agency. Sports Programmes can accelerate the empowerment process through encouraging the physical participation of women in public spaces, promoting gender equality, reducing restrictions and offering greater mobility to women and girls. Sport offers leadership positions that can boost girls' self-confidence, such as coaching, officiating, and captaincy. These roles appreciate a sense of belonging, ownership, decision-making ability, and a sense of identity beyond the home, all of which are improved when girls and their families appreciate their own capacities more. "Sports is the most effective tool of empowerment", says Suheil Tandon, who established Pro Sports Development (PSD), a social organisation that uses sports for the comprehensive development of youth.^{2,11}

Research has shown that involvement in sports contributes positively to women's confidence, self-esteem, leadership capacity, physical health, and career opportunities.¹²⁻¹⁴ At the same time, participation often creates tensions as women navigate traditional gender roles, educational expectations, and financial barriers.¹⁵ In the Indian context, women athletes have made significant strides despite structural and cultural challenges. Families often prioritise the education and careers of male children, while daughters are expected to manage domestic work, enter early marriage, or contribute to household income.^{16,17} This unequal distribution of opportunities has historically curtailed women's involvement in sports. Yet, over the last two decades, India has celebrated the rise of several world-class female athletes, including P.V. Sindhu in badminton, Sakshi Malik in wrestling, and Mary Kom in boxing.¹⁸ These athletes also act as role models to help keep girls and women in sport. Further, government initiatives and policies aimed at promoting sports, such as the Khelo India programme, have also contributed to increased participation rates. Nonetheless, challenges such as unequal opportunities and persistent gender biases in the sports domain remain.^{18,19} Their achievements have not only brought pride to the nation but also reshaped public perceptions about the role of women in sports.^{20,21}

Manipur, a small state in Northeast India, holds a particularly prominent place in this transformation. Despite its modest population, the state has produced a disproportionately high number of female athletes who have represented India on national and international platforms.²² Sporting icons such as Mary Kom (boxing) and Saikhom Mirabai Chanu (weightlifting) have become household names, symbolising both excellence and resilience.¹⁷ Their journeys have inspired countless young women in the state to pursue

sports, often against considerable odds. Scholars and policymakers alike recognise Manipur as a “sports powerhouse,” particularly due to its traditions of martial arts, indigenous games, and community-based sporting culture.^{24,25}

At the same time, traditional expectations continue to shape the experiences of young women athletes in Manipur. Families often expect daughters to balance household duties with training schedules.²⁶ Community members sometimes view female athletes with scepticism, questioning their clothing, travel routines, or late-night practices.²⁷ Financial challenges remain a persistent barrier, with limited resources for equipment, infrastructure, and training opportunities disproportionately affecting girls.²⁸ Moreover, gendered expectations regarding marriage, caregiving, and family honour can conflict with the aspirations of young women who seek to build long-term careers in sports.²⁹

Previous studies have highlighted that family encouragement, institutional support, and community acceptance are critical factors in enabling female athletes to succeed.³⁰ Conversely, lack of support can lead to early dropout, psychological stress, or compromised performance.³¹ In states like Manipur, where patriarchal norms coexist with strong sporting traditions, this tension becomes particularly pronounced.³² This study aims to examine how young women athletes in Manipur balance traditional expectations with their sporting ambitions. Specifically, it examines the challenges they face in accessing resources and opportunities, the evolving role of families and communities in supporting or discouraging sports participation, and the broader impact of athletic involvement on perceptions of gender. By integrating the perspectives of athletes, parents, and coaches, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how sports contribute to shifting family dynamics, community attitudes, and the redefinition of gender roles in Manipur.

Methods

Study Design

This research employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach was chosen to capture both measurable trends (family support, community perception, challenges) and deeper insights into the lived experiences of female athletes in Manipur.

Study Setting and Population

The study was conducted in Imphal and the surrounding districts of Manipur, which have an active sports culture and a strong representation of female athletes across various disciplines, including football, boxing, weightlifting, judo, cricket, and athletics. The study population consisted of female athletes, their parents, and coaches affiliated with sports academies, clubs, or federations.

Sample Size and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants, ensuring diversity in sport type, competition level, and socio-economic background. For the quantitative survey among athletes, the sample size was calculated using the standard formula for estimating a proportion:

$$n = (Z^2 \times p \times (1-p)) / d^2$$

Where:

- n = required sample size
- Z = Z-score for 95% confidence level (1.96)

- p = expected proportion of athletes facing common challenges (assumed 0.5 to maximize sample size)
- d = margin of error (0.10 or 10%)

$$n = (1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)) / 0.10^2$$

$$n = (3.8416 \times 0.25) / 0.01 \approx 96$$

To account for potential non-response, 100 female athletes were recruited. Additionally, 50 parents/guardians and 15 coaches/officials were included to capture complementary perspectives. The qualitative sample size for interviews was guided by the principle of thematic saturation, ensuring that all major themes regarding family support, community perceptions, and gender-related barriers were adequately captured.

Inclusion Criteria

- Female athletes residing in Manipur and actively engaged in competitive sports for at least one year.
- Parents and coaches willing to participate and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Athletes with less than one year of sports participation.
- Individuals unwilling or unable to complete the questionnaire.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected between June and August 2025 using the following tools:

A structured questionnaire was developed based on existing literature and validated by subject experts. It had three sections:

- **Section A:** Athlete demographics, sports participation, family/community support, and perceived challenges.
- **Section B:** Parent/guardian perspectives on female sports participation, support, and expectations.
- **Section C:** Coaches' observations on barriers, facilities, and societal attitudes.

Additionally, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with a subset of participants (20 athletes, 10 parents, and 5 coaches) to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences.

Variables

- **Independent variables:** Age, education, marital status, and type of sport.
- **Dependent variables:** Family support index, community perception index, challenge index, opportunity/empowerment index.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in person at training centres, academies, and sports clubs. Questionnaires were self-administered in either English or Meitei (the local language), based on the participant's preference. Data were collected both online and in person. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and entered into SPSS v.25. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, SD) were calculated. Correlation analyses were performed to assess relationships among key indices.

Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s six-step framework: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed consent** was obtained from all participants; for minors (<18 years), consent was taken from parents.
- Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Board, RIMS, Imphal
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

Results

Participant Demographics

A total of 165 participants were surveyed, comprising 100 athletes, 50 parents, and 15 coaches. The mean age of athletes was 22.6 ± 3.4 years (range 15–28). Athletes represented multiple sports, including football (40%), boxing (20%), Wushu (16%), weightlifting (14%), cricket (12%), and other sports (8%).

Family and Community Support

Family support increased significantly over time. At initiation, 40% of athletes reported “very supportive” families, which increased to 81% currently ($p < 0.001$). Opposition decreased from 13% to 3%. Community support was largely positive, with 72% reporting encouragement ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Change in Family Support Over Time (n = 100)

Family Support	At Initiation (%)	Currently (%)	p-value
Very Supportive	40	81	<0.001
Somewhat Supportive	27	11	0.002
Neutral	20	5	0.001
Opposed	13	3	0.003

Table 2. Community Response (n = 100)

Community Reaction	Number (%)	p-value
Encouraging	72	<0.001
Neutral	23	0.02
Discouraging	5	0.03

Challenges to Sports Participation

The most common challenges were financial difficulties (72%, $p < 0.01$), inadequate facilities (55%, $p = 0.02$), and household responsibilities (45%, $p = 0.03$). Academic pressure (30%), safety concerns (23%), and gender bias/social restrictions (20%) were also reported.

Table 3. Challenges Faced by Female Athletes (n = 100)

Challenge	Number (%)	p-value
Financial Difficulties	72	<0.01
Inadequate Facilities/Equipment	55	0.02
Household Responsibilities	45	0.03

Academic Pressure	30	0.05
Gender Bias / Social Restrictions	20	0.07
Safety Concerns	23	0.04

Aspirations and Career Goals

High levels of ambition were observed. Overall, 90% of athletes aspired to compete at national or international levels ($p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Sporting Aspirations (n = 100)

Aspiration	Number (%)	p-value
Represent India Internationally	76	<0.001
Compete at National Level	13	0.002
Secure Government Job via Sports	27	0.01
Recreational Participation Only	4	0.05

Perceived Benefits of Sports Participation

Athletes reported multiple benefits: improved confidence (78%, $p < 0.001$), better physical health (68%, $p < 0.001$), greater independence (55%, $p = 0.001$), increased social respect (42%, $p = 0.02$), and academic/professional benefits (20%, $p = 0.05$).

Table 5. Positive Impacts of Sports Participation (n = 100)

Impact	Number (%)	p-value
Improved Confidence	78	<0.001
Better Physical Health	68	<0.001
Greater Independence	55	0.001
Increased Social Respect	42	0.02
Academic/Professional Benefits	20	0.05

Parental and Coach Perspectives

Eighty percent of parents expressed pride and support for daughters' sports participation, though 35% highlighted financial concerns and 30% academic disruption. Coaches noted persistent gender norms and infrastructural gaps, particularly in rural areas, as barriers to female participation.

Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of young women's participation in sports in Manipur, highlighting the evolving nature of family support, community perceptions, challenges, and empowerment outcomes. The findings indicate a significant positive shift in family attitudes, high levels of ambition among athletes, and notable personal and social benefits, although barriers such as financial constraints, infrastructural gaps, and societal expectations persist.

Family support improved markedly over time, with 81% of athletes currently reporting "very supportive" families compared to 40% at initiation ($p < 0.001$). This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the crucial role of parental encouragement in sustaining female sports participation.^{1,3} Supportive families

facilitate access to training, equipment, and travel, while also buffering societal pressures and traditional gender norms.

Community perceptions were largely encouraging, with 72% reporting support ($p < 0.001$), though a small proportion (5%) faced discouragement. Community endorsement is pivotal for normalizing female athleticism, challenging patriarchal norms, and promoting broader social acceptance.^{5,9}

Financial difficulties emerged as the most common barrier (72%, $p < 0.01$), followed by inadequate facilities (55%, $p = 0.02$) and household responsibilities (45%, $p = 0.03$). These findings reflect broader patterns in India and other low- and middle-income countries, where female athletes face systemic inequities in access to resources, training infrastructure, and competitive opportunities.¹⁰ Academic pressures, safety concerns, and gender-based restrictions further highlight the complex interplay of cultural, educational, and physical challenges young women face in pursuing sports.

High ambition levels were observed, with 90% of athletes aiming for national or international competitions ($p < 0.001$). This reflects growing self-efficacy and confidence among young women in Manipur. The presence of local role models such as Mary Kom and Mirabai Chanu likely contributes to inspiring these career-oriented aspirations.¹⁴ The desire for government employment through sports suggests that athletes value structured pathways and recognition, emphasising the importance of policy support and scholarship programs.³⁰

Participation in sports was associated with multiple personal and social benefits. Improved confidence (78%, $p < 0.001$), better physical health (68%, $p < 0.001$), and greater independence (55%, $p = 0.001$) indicate that sports serve as a transformative tool for empowerment. These findings align with the international literature, which links sports participation to enhanced self-esteem, leadership skills, and social recognition for women. The benefits also suggest that sports may enable young women to negotiate traditional gender norms, fostering autonomy within family and community contexts.³³

Parents were largely supportive (80%), though concerns about finances (35%) and academic disruption (30%) were common. Coaches reported that gender norms continue to influence participation, particularly in rural areas. These results indicate that despite increasing support, structural and cultural barriers remain, requiring targeted interventions such as community sensitisation, financial aid, and gender-sensitive infrastructure.³⁴⁻³⁶

Implications

The study highlights that sports participation among young women in Manipur is increasing, contributing to shifts in gender perceptions, empowerment, and social recognition. Sustaining these gains will require multi-level support, including policy reforms, community awareness programs, improved facilities, and financial assistance. Promoting female role models, flexible academic schedules, and inclusive community sports programs can further enhance participation.³⁷

Limitations

The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, and purposive sampling may affect generalizability. Self-reported measures may introduce response bias. Longitudinal studies and intervention-based research are necessary to assess changes over time and evaluate strategies to reduce barriers to female participation in sports.

Conclusion

Sports play a vital role in empowering women and girls worldwide. Despite societal and cultural barriers, an increasing number of women are participating in sports, reaping physical and mental health benefits, boosting their self-esteem, and developing leadership skills. This study highlights the transformative impact of sports on young women in Manipur, with increased family support, positive community perceptions, and enhanced confidence, independence, and ambition among athletes. However, challenges such as financial constraints, limited facilities, household responsibilities, and societal expectations remain. Sustaining and expanding female participation requires financial support, gender-sensitive infrastructure, community awareness, academic flexibility, and promotion of role models to consolidate empowerment and professional opportunities.

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