

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORTS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS AND ENCOURAGING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

This article examines the urgent need for gender equality in sports, focusing on the socio-psychological barriers that prevent female athletes in India from realising their full potential. It highlights how entrenched gender stereotypes, physiological misconceptions, lack of resources and institutional bias restrict women's access not only to participation, but also to coaching positions and leadership roles within sports organisations. These constraints create a self-reinforcing cycle of underrepresentation that discourages future generations of women from pursuing sports. The article moves beyond identifying problems and proposes practical measures to increase women's participation, from nurturing family and community support to shifting societal norms and strengthening policy and institutional backing for female athletes. In doing so, it underscores the need to re-imagine how women in sports are perceived and treated, and argues that greater gender equality in this sphere is essential not only for individual empowerment but also for the holistic development of Indian society.

Keywords: Gender Equality in Sports; Socio-cultural Barriers; Gender stereotypes; Institutional Bias; Women in sports; Inclusivity in sports.

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I. Introduction

PANDIT JAWAHARLAL Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, had once said, “[T]o awaken the people, it is the woman who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the

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family moves, the nation moves".¹ Thus, the empowerment of women has the potential to catalyze the advancement of an entire nation. Therefore, every society should give equal opportunities to women and address and overcome gender disparities in every walk of life, such as health, education, employment, political representation, and sports. In modern times, a nation's cultural, societal, and health-related dynamics can all be seen via the intersectional lens of sports. Sports play a variety of critical purposes beyond their conventional perception as a testament to physical prowess. They reflect social health and fitness trends, inculcate vital life skills like leadership and decision-making, and positively impact mental well-being. However, cultural ideas and social conventions, particularly those about gender, are also reflected and perpetuated in the sporting arena. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to address the ongoing problem of prejudice experienced by Indian women in sports through the lens of society, culture, and law in order to eliminate gender inequities in sports to accelerate India's transition to a more egalitarian society.

The imperative of gender equality in sports

In the context of sports, "gender equality" refers to the fair and equitable treatment of every person, regardless of gender, in terms of the opportunities, resources, and benefits offered. Additionally, it entails combating any gender discrimination in this industry, ensuring equal representation in sports leadership, and fair media coverage.

Since the inception of United Nation, participation in sports and physical activity have progressively been seen from a rights-based perspective. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which established an international framework of human and rights in 1948, acknowledged that everyone individual has the right to rest and leisure², and education should be aim at full development of the human personality.³ Given that participation in sporting activities is important for recreation and personality development, an implied reference to the right to participate in sports and physical activity can be read within these provisions. Furthermore, the UDHR it also mentions that each individual has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, which indirectly suggests their freedom to participate in communal sports activities.⁴ However, the first International instrument to

¹Jantu Das, *Gender Issues in Society: Myths, Reality and Responsibility* 47 (Krishna Press, Bhavnagar, GJ, 2021).

²The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 24.

³*Id.*, art. 26.

⁴*Id.*, art. 27.

identify sport and physical activity as a human right was International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, adopted in 1978 by the UNESCO.⁵

At the same time, some international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) have specifically addressed the issue of gender equality issues in sports and physical education. The CEDAW, which India also ratified in 1993, imposes binding obligations on state parties to eradicate discrimination against women in all walks of life, including sports and physical education. The convention specifically insists on ensuring equal opportunities for women to participate actively in sports and physical education⁶, and to engage in recreational activities, sports, and all cultural facets of life on an equal footing with men.⁷

Women's participation in sports: Global and Indian scenario

Societal biases and gender roles have traditionally excluded women from participating in sports events. Historically, women were not allowed to participate in the main sports events, and their role was usually limited to audience members. If we look at the participation rates of women in the most prominent global sports event, the Olympics games, in the early years of its inception, the participation of women was negligible. When the first modern Summer Olympic games were held in 1896, only male athletes completed.⁸ However, after that, women participated for the first time in the Summer Olympic Games in 1900, and slowly and steadily, with each passing decade, their participation rates improved. The gender gap began to close after the 1980s.⁹ More than a century after women first competed at the Olympic Games, female athlete numbers were close to equal with those of the men at Tokyo 2020 and stood at 48%.¹⁰ In terms of gender diversity, the Tokyo Olympics also proved to be most diverse for India too, where participation of women athletes stood at 44%.¹¹ Despite the overall improvement in participation rates at international sporting events, at micro level, the

⁵ The International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, 1978, art. 1.1.

⁶ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, art. 10.

⁷ *Id.*, art. 13

⁸ Vasileios Stavropoulos, "The Evolution of Women Participation in Sports Events", *Statathlon*, February 9, 2018, available at <<https://statathlon.com/the-evolution-of-women-participation-sports-events/>> (last visited on May 23, 2023).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ IOC, "Tokyo 2020 first ever gender-balanced Olympic Games in history, record number of female competitors at Paralympic Games", March 8, 2021, available at <<https://olympics.com/ioc/news/tokyo-2020-first-ever-gender-balanced-olympic-games-in-history-record-number-of-female-competitors-at-paralympic-games>> (last visited on May 23, 2023).

¹¹ Nirmal Mehta, "56 Indian women athletes at Tokyo Olympics: India's highest-ever female participants", *The Bridge*, July 20, 2021, available at <<https://thebridge.in/tokyo-2020/56-indian-women-tokyo-olympics-highest-female-participants-23148>> (last visited on May 23, 2023).

participation of Indian women in sports is dismal. In 2020, a search carried out by BBC revealed that only 29% of Indian women participate in any form of sport, in contrast with 42% men.¹² Further, multiple studies seem to suggest that Indian women continue to be discriminated against men in sports because of a variety of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors, which are briefly discussed in the subsequent section.

Brief overview of factors perpetuating gender inequality in sports in India

The concept of gender is essentially socio-cultural and refers to societal constructs that set men and women apart from one another beyond biological differences. In this setting, sports frequently support and elevate masculine identities that emphasise physical dominance, aggression, and competitiveness. In this manner, socially acceptable feminine attributes, such as softness, gentleness, and emotional sensitivity, are contrasted with these masculine characteristics. This dichotomy perpetuates the idea that men are more capable and implies that women are unfit for athletics, which makes it peculiar for women to pursue sports as a vocation. Indian culture and conventional social standards frequently portray sports as a man's world, which discourages women from participating in and being represented in sports. The absence of easily accessible and female-friendly sports infrastructure, particularly in rural regions, exacerbates this gender gap even further.¹³ Additional obstacles come from financial restraints, since families experiencing socioeconomic gaps frequently prioritise a girl's schooling over her sporting interests due to budgetary constraints. Despite the existence of sports promotion policies, India lacks efficient implementation and strong gender-specific support structures, which discourages female involvement. Women are further discouraged from participating in sports, particularly in public places, due to safety and security concerns like fear of harassment or assault. Additionally, there is a significant gender gap in sports leadership, coaching, and administration positions, which feeds the cycle of gender inequality in sports.¹⁴

¹²Shantnu Chakrabarti, "New BBC research shows less than 30% of Indian women play any sports", *The BBC*, March 6, 2020, available at, <<https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/latestnews/2020/indian-women-play-any-sports>> (last visited on May 23, 2023).

¹³Shivani Naik, "Manipur is sporting powerhouse, but 48 % female athletes travel over 10km to reach practice facility: Pilot survey", *The Indian Express*, January 11, 2023, available at <<https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/sport-others/manipur-is-sporting-powerhouse-but-48-female-athletes-travel-over-10km-to-reach-practice-facility-pilot-survey-8374019/>> (last visited on May 24, 2023).

¹⁴Debashree Das, Patanjali Kumar Das, *et al.*, "The Missing Gender: Examining the Barriers to Women's Participation in Sports in India" *Business Perspectives and Research*, 43 (2023). Available at <<https://doi.org/10.1177/22785337221148557>> (last visited on May 24, 2023).

With the adoption of the Indian Constitution soon after gaining independence, the Indian State promised to promote equality amongst all societal segments. But despite “equality” being a constitutional aspiration for over seven decades, gender equality is still elusive. Even after adoption of constitutional protections, legal privileges, and policy initiatives, Indian women still experience vulnerability and marginalisation in their daily lives. Sports, which have just recently started to become a viable career option for women, are an area where this marginalisation is particularly obvious. These circumstances necessitate the immediate review of sports laws and policy to specifically address the difficulties experienced by female athletes and promote gender equality in sports. It is urgent to pass such laws because the lack of a legal framework leaves a gap in oversight and regulation.

This research article is divided into five parts. Part I introduces the research topic. Part II identifies and analyses the key barriers to women’s participation in sports in India. Part III outlines and evaluates the governance mechanisms of sports in India, while Part IV critically examines the law and policy measures aimed at increasing women’s participation. Part V concludes by summarising the main findings and setting out recommendations to overcome these barriers and improve gender balance in Indian sports.

II. Identification and Analysis of Barriers to Women's Participation in Sports in India

Sports have the potential to empower women in patriarchal societies by giving them a platform for self-expression, accomplishment, and pride. Sports can also help the societies re-examine norms pertaining to gender by questioning centuries-old gender assumptions, so as to bring about social transformation. Further, scholarly studies on sports, gender, and health issues point towards the multiple benefits of participation in sports for the well-being of women, such as improvement in physical and mental health, self-worth, social inclusion, and opportunities for leadership and accomplishment.¹⁵ Given the varied benefits of participation in sports for women, it is necessary to encourage their participation in such activities. Therefore, there is a need to identify the barriers that deter women’s participation in sports in India. This section aims to identify and critically analyse such barriers.

Cultural stereotypes and societal norms have traditionally governed gender roles and expectations. In most societies, women are expected to be nurturing, submissive and

¹⁵ Nandini Mathur Collins, Fred Cromartie, et al., “Effects of Early Sport Participation on Self-esteem and Happiness”, *The Sport Journal*, 3 (2018). Available at <<https://thesportjournal.org/article/effects-of-early-sport-participation-on-self-esteem-and-happiness/>> (last visited on May 24, 2023).

physically attractive, while men are expected to display power, independence and athleticism. Sports and athletics have historically been dominated by men, with qualities like strength, competition and sportsmanship being viewed as aspects of the masculine domain."¹⁶ Women, however, have historically been limited to roles that are associated with domestic responsibilities and femininity, such as childrearing, cooking, housekeeping, and maintaining a delicate physique.¹⁷ Over centuries, these expectations have evolved into rigid gender stereotypes. With the evolution of gender stereotypes, men and women are typically expected by society to follow the gender norms that apply to them, and any departures thereto are frequently met with labelling, questioning, and even ridicule.¹⁸ As a result of this stereotype internalization, men and boys perceive themselves as more capable and therefore exhibit more interest in sports than girls.¹⁹ More often than not, these stereotypes have prevented women from participating in sports.²⁰

In the Indian context, the widespread gender stereotypes regarding femininity and masculinity are seriously impeding women's participation in sports. Young Indian females, for instance, are sometimes discouraged from strength or muscle training because it is mistakenly believed that they will have a more "masculine" appearance and would jeopardize their matrimonial prospects.²¹ Post marriage and childbirth, women find it increasingly difficult to return to sports²² due to lack of familial support and societal encouragement. In this way, gendered expectations and persistent bias create systemic barriers that prevent Indian women from fully participating in sports.

Lack of adequate funding for sports infrastructure and ongoing safety concerns significantly constrain women's engagement in sports in India. In many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas, there is a serious shortage of sports facilities and safe spaces for training and competition, which further discourages women from participating. For instance, despite

¹⁶Joy.N Chinurum, Lucas O. Ogunjimi, *et al.*, "Gender and Sports in Contemporary Society", 4(7) *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 25 (2017).

¹⁷*Id.* at 26.

¹⁸Aina Chalabaev, Philippe Sarrazin, *et al.*, "Do achievement goals mediate stereotype threat?: An investigation on females' soccer performance", 30(2) *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 144 (2008).

¹⁹Jacquelynne S. Eccles & Rena D. Harold, "Gender differences in sport involvement: Applying the Eccles' expectancy-value model", 3(1), *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 9 (1991).

²⁰*Id.* at p. 13.

²¹Rakhi Bose, "Where Do We Play: Girls And Women Battle Stereotypes And Lack Of Public Space, Trainers In Pursuit Of Sports", *The Outlook*, February 6, 2023, available at <<https://www.outlookindia.com/sports/where-do-we-play-girls-and-women-battle-stereotypes-and-lack-of-public-space-trainers-in-pursuit-of-sports-news-259784>> (last visited on 25th May 2023).

²²News Desk, "Not easy to comeback after getting married and having children: Mary Kom", *The India Today*, December 16, 2019, available at <<https://www.indiatoday.in/sports/other-sports/story/mary-kom-agenda-ajitak-motherhood-tokyo-olympics-2020-dreams-1628746-2019-12-16>> (last visited on 25th May 2023).

Manipur being a hub for sports, a recent study conducted by NGO Simply Sport pointed out that nearly 48% of female athletes in the state have to travel more than 10 kms to reach their practice facilities.²³ In 2016, the All-India School Education Survey investigating the availability of playgrounds in schools nationwide revealed that only 39% of public or government schools in India have a playground, which means that a huge 62% of these institutions are lacking in this crucial amenity.²⁴ Furthermore, the facilities that do exist are frequently not women-friendly, which lowers the participation of women. Sports participation is severely hampered by safety concerns, particularly for women, with their families discouraging participation out of fear of harassment or violence. Lack of properly segregated residential facilities²⁵, coupled with ongoing concerns regarding women's safety are additional barriers to women's participation in sports.²⁶ It should be noted that infrastructure is seen as a foundation of sports development, and nations like China, Australia, and the United States have invested much in this field. For instance, Australia focuses on grassroots development through building community sports infrastructure, while China started investments in sports infrastructure as part of its National Fitness Programme in 1995.²⁷ Sports facilities have been integrated into the American educational system, a move that has helped these countries rise to the top of the international sporting world.²⁸

However, affairs are very different in India. India's regulations and policies governing sports provide peculiar challenges. The Indian Constitution's Entry 33 of the State List classifies sports together with entertainment, visual arts, and recreation. Constitutionally Sports is a state subject and there is no specific law for the entire country. Therefore, its regulation is still highly de-centralized and fragmented.²⁹ Grants for sports infrastructure projects are frequently difficult to obtain because of the complicated implementation requirements and

²³*Supra* note 13.

²⁴News Desk (n.d.), "All Work And No Play: 62% Gov Schools Lack Playgrounds, Indian Sports Suffers", *Go News India*, available at <<https://www.gonewsindia.com/latest-news/education/all-work-and-no-play-62-percent-gov-schools-lack-playgrounds-indian-sports-suffers-25479>> (last visited on 25th May 2023).

²⁵Shruthi H M Sastry, "Government sports facilities in Karnataka's lack gender parity: Study", *Deccan Herald*, January 26, 2022, available at <<https://www.deccanherald.com/state/top-karnataka-stories/government-sports-facilities-in-karnatakas-lack-gender-parity-study-1074694.html>> (last visited on 25th May 2023).

²⁶*Supra* note 21.

²⁷PWC, "Sports infrastructure: Transforming the Indian sports ecosystem" 13 (March, 2019). Available at <<https://www.pwc.in/assets/pdfs/industries/entertainment-and-media/sports-infrastructure.pdf>> (last visited on 25th May 2023).

²⁸*Id.* at p. 3.

²⁹*Id.* at p. 4.

regulations, especially under the Khelo India initiative.³⁰ Furthermore, because only government organisations are eligible for these funding, the private sector cannot participate, which causes delays in project completion. Several government-owned grounds and facilities held by urban local bodies are present, along with about 100 sports facilities that exceed international standards.³¹ Despite this, these resources are frequently under-utilised and poorly maintained. These facilities are primarily utilised to host games, often operated at low occupancy rates and rely financially on regulatory authorities, limiting their accessibility to sports enthusiasts, especially women.³²

In addition to the above, *economic constraints* severely limit the level of sports engagement by women in India, and this problem is exacerbated by a number of factors. Firstly, participation in sports frequently calls for specialised training and gear, which can be prohibitively expensive for families with little finances. The economic disparities that exist across India's many regions make the problem even worse, particularly in rural areas. Families living in poverty must prioritise providing for their fundamental needs, which leaves little time or energy for sporting pursuits. Secondly, a prevalent mentality in many Indian households, particularly those who are resource-constrained, is to give priority to male child's needs over a female child.³³ This view is based on the idea that men will offer a better return on investment as prospective future breadwinners. As a result, funds that might have supported a girl's involvement in sports are frequently diverted to her schooling or other urgent household requirements. Another significant economic constraint that is discouraging Indian women to take up sports as a viable career option is the glaring pay gap between male and female athletes. The inequality is obvious, ranging from inferior travel accommodations for international games to a significant pay gap, as demonstrated by A-grade cricketers in India, where a male cricketer earned approximately fourteen times more than his female counterpart till recently.³⁴ This pay disparity indirectly sends a negative signal that women's contribution to sports is less valuable than that of men.

³⁰Ranjit Bhattacharyya, Anoushka Gupta, *et al.*, "The Gaps in India's Sports Administration and Governance," *The Wire*, June 28, 2021, available at <<https://thewire.in/sport/gaps-india-sports-administration-governance>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

³¹*Supra* note 27 at p. 8.

³²*Id.* at p. 16.

³³Gautam Shahuraje Jadhav, "Indian Sports: Contribution of Women" 5(4) *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research* 1149 (2018).

³⁴Alshaar Khan, "Male v Female: How Much Pay Equality Do We Have In Indian Sports?," *Mans World Indian*, October 17, 2017, available at <<https://www.mansworldindia.com/sports/norway-equalises-male-female-football-salary-indian-sports-stand/>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

A significant barrier preventing female involvement and success in sports is *institutional bias against women* in India. Although there have been a few improvements over the years, there are still many instances where bias is present, including in media coverage, sexual harassment, leadership and coaching positions, and conferment of sports awards or honors. The pervasive issue of sexual harassment poses a significant violation of women's right to equality and dignity, with several athletes quitting due to continuous harassment and abuse.³⁵ Although legal measures are in place, only a few instances get reported. *Media bias* is another obstacle. The portrayal of female athletes is often skewed, contributing to harmful gender stereotypes. Female athletes are often covered as women first and athletes second, with lesser focus on their sporting prowess and more on their personal lives or physical appearances.³⁶ For example, successful athletes like Sania Mirza and Mary Kom received less attention for their achievements and more for their non-sporting activities or related films. This bias extends to sports awards too, with the Arjuna award, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna, the Dhyan Chand awards, and Dronacharya awards all having a higher percentage of male recipients.³⁷

Lack of female representation in sports administration continues to deepen gender inequality in Indian sport. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles, coaching positions and decision making bodies, which limits their influence on policies, resource allocation and opportunities for future generations of sportswomen. Despite the increase in sports participation opportunities for women in India, they continue to face hurdles in securing influential roles within sports administration and coaching. Women representation in Indian sports governing bodies varies between a sparse 2% to 8%, with Hockey India being an outlier at 34%.³⁸

³⁵ Akshay Sawai, "Sexual Harassment: The Chronic Illness Of Indian Sport", *The Outlook*, April 27, 2023, available at <<https://www.outlookindia.com/sports/sexual-harassment-the-chronic-illness-of-indian-sport-news-281578>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

³⁶ Shinjinee Mishra, "How Does Mainstream Media Represent Sportswomen?" *Feminism In India*, November 21, 2017, available at <<https://feminisminindia.com/2017/11/21/sexist-media-representation-sportswomen/>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

³⁷ Dipti Jain & Sachin P. Mampatta, "India's sports awards have a palpable gender bias", *Livemint*, September 16, 2017, available at <<https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/gFXCC5dLy0yT3ZsRRVwxUK/Indias-sports-awards-have-a-palpable-gender-bias.html>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

³⁸ Mustafa Sapatwala, "Is India ready to embrace the need of women sports managers?" *IISM*, June 4, 2023, available at <<https://www.iismworld.com/is-india-ready-to-embrace-the-need-of-women-sports-managers/#:~:text=In%20Indian%20sports%20association%20governing,representation%2C%20is%20the%20only%20exception>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

III. Governance mechanism of sports in India

The present section discusses the governance mechanism adopted to encourage women's participation in sports in India. In India, there is a multi-tiered mechanism of sports governance, ranging from local to national. Under the Indian Constitutional scheme, “sports” together with “entertainment, visual arts, and recreation” is a State subject.³⁹ Therefore, there is currently no comprehensive national law that governs and controls sports in India. Instead, state-specific, decentralised, and diverse structures continue to govern various sports. The Central Government's role in the area of sports governance is not, however, negated by this distinctive scenario.

Even in the absence of a comprehensive sports law, the Central Government has a significant and indirect impact on how the nation's sports landscape is shaped. It remains a crucial player in India's sports governance framework since it exerts its influence through monetary and organisational support. The Centre provides states with financing and consulting services to help them organise athletic events. It also provides guidelines to the national sports federations and is crucial in the hiring of coaches and players.

The Ministry of Sports, afterwards known as the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MYAS), was first established by the Central Government in 1982, many decades after the country gained its independence in 1947.⁴⁰ This significant move represented the government's formal acknowledgment of the need to develop sporting talent in the country. This national body, through the Department of Sports, has assumed the responsibility for formulating and implementing sports policies and programmes across the country.⁴¹ Two years after its establishment, in 1984, the MYAS introduced the National Sports Policy, which served as its first formal declaration of policy regarding sports. The government's commitment to promoting and fostering sports at various levels was shown by this important initiative. Through the implementation of this policy and its subsequent versions, the MYAS has exercised control over a number of sports-related departments and organisations, including the Sports Authority of India (SAI), different National Sports Federations (NSFs), and the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA).⁴² The figure III.I below illustrates the organisational structure of sport in India.

³⁹ Entry 33, List II, Seventh Schedule, Constitution of India, 1950.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, *Available at* <<https://yas.nic.in/about-ministry>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

⁴¹ Department of Sports (MYAS). *Available at* <<https://yas.nic.in/sports/about-sports-department>>

⁴² Kushal Gulati, “Governance of Indian Sports Body”, *Krida Legal*, *available at* <<http://www.kridalegal.com/post.php?id=28>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

Governance Level	Governmental Structures	Intermediary Structures	Non-Governmental Structures
National Level	Government of India thru Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sport (MYAS)	Sport Authority of India (SAI)	National Sport Federations (NSFs)
State Level	State Government thru Ministry or Department dedicated to Sports or Youth Affairs	Regional Sports Authority	Member Associations of different NSFs
Local Level	District Council	-	Educational Institutions

Figure 3.1: The organisational structure of sport in India.

The establishment of the SAI in 1984, with headquarters at Delhi, proved to be a watershed moment in India’s sporting landscape. It is an apex sports body with the mission to not only encourage participation in sports and physical activities but also focus on priority capacity building measures such as the training of coaches and physical education teachers, and building necessary sports infrastructure.⁴³ Two important sports academic institutes are included under the aegis of SAI, namely, the Lakshmibai National College of Physical Education (LNCPE) in Thiruvananthapuram and the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sport (NSNIS) in Patiala. Additionally, it runs a vast network of 67 Sports Training Centres, 23 Centres of Excellence, and 12 Regional Sports Centres across the country.⁴⁴ The backbone of SAI i.e., the Training of Elite Athlete Management Support (TEAMS) division, extends its backing to the National Sports Federations (NSFs) as they prepare National Teams for international competitions.⁴⁵ The TEAMS Division also coordinates each NSF's Long-Term

⁴³Sports Authority of India, Available at <<http://sportsauthorityofindia.nic.in/index.asp>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Joanne Clarke & Sarthak Mondal, “Sport policy in India”, 14:4, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 732 (2022), available at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2022.2127838>>(last visited on May 30, 2023).

Development Plan and provides logistical and training support at a variety of academic institutions, other Regional Centres of SAI, as well as a few training facilities outside the SAI domain.⁴⁶The SAI, therefore, has become a pivotal force shaping and driving the sports culture within India.

In India, the National Sports Federations (NSFs) also play a crucial role in managing and promoting sports. These federations are autonomous organisations that have been registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860.⁴⁷ They represent several sports disciplines and act as a conduit between international bodies, athletes, and the Indian government, primarily the MYAS. The National Sports Policy of 2001 laid down specific guidelines for the functioning of NSFs and providing financial assistance to nurture talent in the various sports disciplines.⁴⁸The National Sports Development Code of India (NSDCI) adopted in 2011 amalgamated these guidelines in one comprehensive document. One of NSFs' main duties is to promote the growth of the sports discipline they represent at both the grass root and competitive levels.⁴⁹ They are in charge of organizing competitions and tournaments at several levels, including district, state, and national, identifying and nurturing talent, preparing and training teams for competitions abroad, and making sure Indian athletes and teams participate in international sporting events.⁵⁰Each NSF complies with the international norms and regulations of that sport and is a member of its specific International Federation (IF).

NSFs often have an Executive Committee, which is made up of the President, Secretary, and Treasurer as well as additional members. The member associations of various states and union territories elect this committee. The administrative staff is in charge of managing daily operations while the Executive Committee is in charge of making decisions and formulating policies. However, NSFs have frequently come under fire for their lack of professionalism, poor administration, and incidents of corruption.⁵¹ Over the years, suggestions have been made for changes to the way NSFs operate in order to increase their accountability, transparency, and receptivity to the needs of the athletes.

IV. Policy measures to overcome barriers and increase participation of Indian women in sports

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷*Supra* note 42.

⁴⁸The National Sports Policy, 2001.

⁴⁹*Id.*, Para. 12.

⁵⁰*Id.*, Para. 13.

⁵¹*Supra* note 30.

This section discusses the policy initiatives that have been undertaken to confront and overcome the barriers that prevent Indian women from participating in sports. By highlighting these measures, we aim to shed light on their impact and effectiveness in promoting diversity and gender parity in sports and address a variety of problems, such as financial constraints, cultural norms, and institutional biases. Since independence, India has adopted various policy instruments to promote sports in the country. In the following paragraphs, several key policy instruments have been referred to, which specifically emphasize upon increasing participation of Indian women in sports.

The *National Sports Policy of 2001* provides a comprehensive framework for the development and promotion of sports in India. It places a strong emphasis on broadening the base of people who participate in sports, achieving excellence in international sporting competitions, developing contemporary sports infrastructure, improving coaching abilities, and ensuring that national sports federations run effectively.⁵² Notably, it also acknowledges the need to boost the number of women who participate in sports.⁵³ Further, *the National Sports Development Code of India of 2011*, specifically recognises how crucial it is to protect gender equality in sports, underscoring the need for inclusive policy changes to boost women's participation.⁵⁴

The *Khelo India* initiative, launched in 2017, has become a crucial instrument for encouraging Indian women to participate in sports. It is intended to instil a strong sporting culture in India, starting at the grassroots level. It is a comprehensive package that includes the creation and upgradation of sports infrastructure, conduct of sports competitions and talent identification cum development, and the promotion of inclusiveness through sports. The program's "Sports for Women" initiative, which tries to encourage women to participate in sports, is a standout feature. In an effort to promote more participation, a particular emphasis is placed on sports disciplines where women and other disadvantaged groups are underrepresented.⁵⁵ The scheme calls for holding women-only competitions at the international and national levels that cover a variety of sports and not simply those with lower

⁵² The National Sports Policy, 2001, para 4.

⁵³ *Id.*, Para. 7.

⁵⁴ The National Sports Development Code of India, 2011, para. 1.3.

⁵⁵ Khelo India - Operation Guidelines for Sports for Women, 2018, para. 2. Available at <<https://yas.nic.in/sites/default/files/Khelo%20India%20-%20Sports%20For%20Women.pdf>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

female participation rates. The participating NSFs, the Indian Olympic Association (IOA), and other pertinent stakeholders are involved in the implementation of this component.⁵⁶

The *National Youth Policy of 2014* aims to enable young people, including women, to realise their full potential. It lists eleven priority areas, one of which is sports, and provides detailed policy recommendations for each.⁵⁷ The provision of equal opportunities for all, with a focus on economically disadvantaged youth, women, youth with disabilities, and young living in conflict-affected regions, is a key goal of the policy.⁵⁸ The *Draft National Youth Policy of 2021*, further expands the focus on inclusion. There is a particular push to include marginalised communities, including women in sports and fitness programmes.⁵⁹ The policy ensures that marginalised groups, such as women and people with disabilities, have fair access to sporting infrastructure, equipment, and instructors.⁶⁰ It also intends to boost the media coverage of indigenous sports, women's sports, and athletics for people with disabilities.⁶¹

Despite the Indian government's efforts to frame holistic sports policies, several structural problems continue to impede gender equality in sports. As emphasized in part II, *cultural and societal barriers* remain powerful, as deep-seated prejudices and gender stereotypes discourage women's participation and are not adequately addressed within existing policy frameworks. Policies also fall short in providing safe, accessible and *women-friendly infrastructure*: basic needs such as secure restrooms, hostels, changing rooms and well-equipped training spaces are often unmet, and safety measures like proper lighting, secure boundaries and surveillance are not systematically integrated.⁶² *Economic constraints* further limit women athletes, who face fewer funding opportunities, lower prize money and restricted avenues for professional growth, resulting in a persistent gender pay gap that reflects entrenched stereotypes and systemic bias. This pay gap is often justified on grounds of male sports receiving more significant media coverage and sponsorship deals.⁶³ However, this creates a self-perpetuating loop where visibility influences popularity and, in turn, compensation. In 2020, female athletes received just 1% of corporate sponsorship and 5% of

⁵⁶*Id.*, Para. 3.

⁵⁷ The National Youth Policy, 2014, p.7.

⁵⁸*Id.*, P. 22.

⁵⁹ The Draft National Youth Policy, 2021, para. 6.45.

⁶⁰*Id.*, Para. 6.44.

⁶¹*Id.*, Para. 6.46.

⁶²*Supra* notes 23 & 24.

⁶³ Hariharan S, "A Legal Outlook on gender-based Pay Gap in Sports: A Male Dominated Mafia", 3(2) *Jus Corpus Law Journal*, 484 (2023).

media attention, a striking mismatch that results in a lack of women role models in sports.⁶⁴ Only recently in 2022, some sports bodies such as the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) have announced addressed gender pay gap in cricket, meaning that women cricketers will be paid on par with their men counterparts.⁶⁵ While such efforts are appreciable, more sporting bodies need to come forward to address these issues. It is to be noted that *institutional bias* compounds these challenges: gender-specific support remains limited, sexual harassment in sports settings is underreported and poorly addressed, and effective codes of conduct, gender-sensitivity training and enforcement mechanisms are still lacking. Existing policies also do not sufficiently tackle biased media coverage, unequal sponsorship, or the fair recognition of women athletes through awards. Finally, women remain *underrepresented in leadership* and decision-making roles in sports bodies, an area where policy intervention is largely absent. Taken together, these cultural, institutional, infrastructural and economic shortcomings sustain systemic gender inequalities in Indian sports and underline the need for a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy to achieve genuine gender justice in this domain.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

Recap of the urgency to address gender inequality in sports

The aforementioned sections have demonstrated that gender inequalities in sports in India is a serious problem that has to be addressed comprehensively and promptly. It has tremendous effects on society as a whole in addition to the athletes who are immediately impacted. The concepts of fairness and equality are substantially undermined by the persistent disparities in pay, visibility, opportunities, and recognition between male and female athletes. These gaps have become significant barriers to participation of women and send also send negative signals about the value and worth of women's contributions in Indian sports. The pay gap in sports serves as a vivid illustration of cultural biases that undervalue women's accomplishments and potential. Lack of funding and media coverage contributes to this inequity by limiting female athletes' recognition and perpetuating the cycle of discrimination. In addition, the pervasive social and cultural notions deter many women and girls from

⁶⁴ Priyanka Gulati, "No sports/sponsorships: Dual pandemic that hit sportswomen globally, Feminism in India", *Feminist India*, February 5, 2021, available at <<https://feminisminindia.com/2021/02/05/no-sports-sponsorships-dual-pandemic-that-hit-sportswomen-globally/>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

⁶⁵ Saikat Ghosh, "BCCI Fills In Gender Pay Gap With Historic Move, But It's Not the First Cricket Body To Do So", *News18*, October 27, 2022, <<https://www.news18.com/cricketnext/news/bcci-fills-in-gender-pay-gap-with-historic-move-but-its-not-the-first-cricket-body-to-do-so-6252001.html>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

engaging in sports, depriving them of the multitude of benefits that come with it, including better health, personal development, and social advancement. These biases also prevent women from holding leadership positions in sports, which results in a lack of representation and influence. In addition, inadequate gender specific policies and infrastructure frequently put female athletes' safety and welfare at risk. These issues range from a lack of secure and accessible sporting facilities to insufficient measures to prevent and address harassment and discrimination. The above discussion makes it clear that a comprehensive and multi-layered approach is required to address gender inequalities in sports, with strategies ranging from micro to macro. In order to establish an atmosphere where women can participate in sports without restriction, micro-level strategies work to win over the support of families and transform societal norms. On the other side, macro-level interventions necessitate legislative changes, institutional adjustments, and changes to policy in order to create a framework that is supportive to female athletes. The forthcoming sections offer potential solutions in both of these areas, paving the way for achieving gender parity in sports.

Micro-level Changes: Strategies for encouraging family support and changing societal norms

It is necessary to begin making significant changes at the micro-level, specifically within families and communities, in order to overcome the obstacles that women experience in sports. Strategies aimed at changing societal standards and gaining family support are crucial to these initiatives. Campaigns to raise awareness are crucial tools for achieving this goal; by concentrating on families and communities, they can help debunk common stereotypes about women in sports while highlighting the advantages that participating in sports has for one's health, social life, and career. At the same time popularizing the stories of successful female athletes serves a dual purpose; firstly, it encourages young girls and women, and secondly, it shows parents and communities that a career in sports is both attainable and respectable for women. A supportive environment for female athletes can be created by encouraging families to participate in sporting events and activities. Starting grassroots sports initiatives for women and girls can encourage their active participation in sports from a young age while also giving the community a place to recognise their accomplishments. A network of individuals and families who respect women's engagement in sports can be built through the establishment of peer support groups, creating a protective environment that mitigates social pressures. All of these initiatives can work to change cultural perceptions of women in sports, starting at the community and familial levels. Countries such as Australia have been highly successful in

increasing participation of women by fostering community sports participation through strategic policy development.⁶⁶ The policy initiatives of the Australian government emphasized the need for community engagement, focusing on improving accessibility, inclusivity, and safety in sports. Integrating sports with education can also prove to be beneficial. In the United States, the inclusion of women in sports was greatly increased due to a federal law known as Title IX, enacted in 1972.⁶⁷ While Title IX applies to all aspects of education, one of its most noticeable impacts has been on athletics.⁶⁸ The law mandates equal opportunity for men and women in athletics, which means that schools must provide equal opportunities for participation, equal access to scholarships, and equal benefits and services such as facilities, coaching, and publicity.⁶⁹ Through Title IX, the U.S. used education policy to significantly boost women's participation in sports, thereby promoting gender equality in athletics.

Macro-level Changes: Policy modifications, legal measures, and institutional changes to support female athletes

A coordinated and comprehensive strategy is required to address gender inequality at a macro-level. It is necessary to *amend existing policies* so that all athletes, regardless of gender, shall be entitled to get equal pay, media coverage, and access to resources. Additionally, it is crucial to *increase legal protection for female athletes*, which calls for stringent laws against sexual harassment in sports as well as the development of effective reporting and enforcement mechanisms. The governance of sports in India also requires immediate attention. In Indian Constitution, "Sports" currently falls under the State List, which means that state governments are primarily in charge of administration and promotion of sports activities within their jurisdiction. This framework has led to some degree of *fragmentation in sports law and policy* among various Indian states, which in turn has caused inconsistencies in the treatment and administration of athletes and sports throughout the nation. It has been suggested to move "Sports" to the Concurrent List of the Constitution of India in order to solve these issues and provide uniformity in sports law. This would

⁶⁶Murray Drummond, Claire Drummond, *et al.*, "Girls and Young Women in Community Sport: A South Australian Perspective", 3 *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 1 (2022).

⁶⁷Title IX is a part of the United States Education Amendments and states: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

⁶⁸Mary I. O'Connor, "Equity360: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity—Title IX Turns 50: Women Athletes Are Still Fighting Against Gender Disparities in Sports" 480(1) *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* 29 (2022)

⁶⁹*Supra* note 67.

allow the central government to influence sports administration, legislation, and policy more significantly across the nation, while simultaneously allowing state-level involvement. In fact, the central government is already considering a proposal to this effect.⁷⁰ If put into practice, it has the potential to bring about transformative changes in the governance of sports in India, creating a more cohesive and efficient sports system. Further, reforms are also needed for introducing more *transparency and professionalism* in the functioning of the NSFs. In fact, the Indian Government had established an expert panel in 2017 to develop the National Code for Good Governance in Sports (NCGGS) in an effort to improve sports governance.⁷¹ However, this code has yet to be implemented because major stakeholders keep disagreeing with certain reforms. The NCGGS 2017's primary points of dispute revolve on prohibiting politicians from serving on the boards of National Sports Federations (NSFs), establishing a 70-year-old retirement age for NSF board members, and instituting a four-year cooling-off period for NSF board members after two consecutive terms.⁷² If implemented these reforms will promote honesty, accountability, and eventually fair play in Indian sports. *Institutional reforms* are crucial as well. This includes initiatives like creating quotas for female representation in leadership positions in sports' bodies, ensuring that women's opinions are taken into account during decision-making. In addition, gender-responsive budgeting, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all strategy, can help distribute resources more fairly across men's and women's sports, adapted to individual requirements and circumstances. A major area that should be given attention is *education and training*, with a special emphasis on gender-sensitivity education for all sports-related personnel, including athletes, coaches, officials, and administrators. Such education can be very helpful in eradicating deeply rooted biases and fostering an environment of equality and respect. In addition, proactive interaction with media outlets can guarantee more impartial reporting on women's sports, thereby dispelling preconceptions and raising the profile of female athletes. And finally, *encouraging public-private collaboration* can result in creative solutions. Initiatives promoting women's sports, supporting female athletes, and providing crucial funding for women's sports programmes can be driven by partnerships between governments, corporates, and NGOs.

⁷⁰PTI, "Resolution passed to transfer sports to Concurrent List: Sports Minister Vijay Goel", *The Indian Express*, October 27, 2016, available at <<https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/sport-others/resolution-passed-to-transfer-sports-to-concurrent-list-vijay-goel-3105888/>> (last visited on May 30, 2023).

⁷¹*Supra* note 45 at p. 738.

⁷²The National Code for Good Governance in Sports, 2017, para. 7.

It is obvious how urgent it is to overcome gender imbalance in Indian sports. The sporting world will continue to fall short of its potential as a powerful platform for promoting equality, respect, and empowerment without concerted efforts to challenge and rectify these injustices. We can create a supportive and equal athletic environment for female athletes only through such extensive, micro and macro-level interventions, enabling them to realise their full potential. All stakeholders, therefore, must demonstrate a commitment to fostering a sporting environment that is more equitable and inclusive, including legislators, sports organisations, media outlets, and society at large.