

# Challenges and Opportunities in Women's Participation in Sports in India<sup>1</sup>

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DOI:10.37648/ijrssh.v13i03.037

Received: 31 July 2023; Accepted: 17 September 2023; Published: 28 September 2023

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## ABSTRACT

The number of women participating in sports in India has seen a great development yet female athletes continue to face hurdles in the form of social, economic, cultural, infrastructure and institutional restrictions. Participation in sport can enhance women's physical health, mental health, confidence, leadership skills, social inclusion and economic independence. Government programs such as Khelo India, ASMITA Women's League, and the current Khelo Bharat Niti are all instances of promoting the development of extra opportunities for women and girls to participate in sports and to continue participating in sports. The government of India said that 60,147 athletes participated in 575 contests in 21 different disciplines and 26 different states and union territories in women's sports leagues under the Khelo India umbrella during the academic year 2023-24. More recently, the ASMITA League reported that almost 300,000 women participated in a total of 2,600 leagues and 33 different disciplines. But increasing engagement alone is not sufficient to remedy the problem. There should be change in societal attitude, safe sporting facilities, conveniently accessible infrastructure, trained female coaches, financial support, health and nutrition services, career opportunities and improvements in general environment. The essay seeks to discuss the key hurdles and opportunities related to the participation of women in sports in India and suggest some initiatives that may be implemented to make the sports system more inclusive.

**Keywords:** *Women in sports; India; gender equality; female athletes; sports participation; health; empowerment; Khelo India; ASMITA*

## Introduction:

Participation in sports plays a crucial role in the development of physical fitness, mental health, social development and national development. Sport participation can offer women and girls benefits that go beyond those just linked with physical activity. Its implementation can boost confidence, teamwork, leadership, social connections and opportunities for education and employment.

India has produced women athletes that have succeeded at international level in several sports like badminton, boxing, wrestling, athletics, weightlifting, shooting and cricket. Because of their accomplishments, traditional beliefs about women and their athletic aptitude have been brought into question and future generations have been inspired to explore a career in athletics as a respectable occupational alternative. However, such achievements are not yet equally available for participation to all women. Poor facilities, social expectations, safety concerns, financial constraints, lack

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<sup>1</sup> How to cite the article: Rao M.R (September, 2023) Challenges and Opportunities in Women's Participation in Sports in India; *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol 13, Issue 3,421-425, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37648/ijrssh.v13i03.037>

of family support, limited access to coaching and gender stereotypes can prevent females from participating in sports or cause early dropout. A research done by the National Commission for Women on the subject of gender issues in sports found that the most important elements affecting women in Indian sports are health, nutrition, financial and social support, and gender bias.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The major objectives of this paper are:

1. To investigate the existing state of affairs regarding the participation of women in sports in India.
2. To determine the most significant aspects of the social, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints.
3. To investigate the positive effects that participating in sports can have on women's health and social lives.
4. To determine the opportunities that have been made available by the government through various sports development programs and initiatives.
5. To provide strategies that will increase and maintain the participation of women in sports.

### **Importance of Sports for Women**

Active participation in sports has the potential to make a significant contribution to the overall well-being of women. The practice of engaging in regular physical activity is linked to enhanced physical fitness and has the potential to promote mental well-being. It is also possible to improve leadership skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, discipline, and confidence through participation in organized sports. The Sports Authority of India states that increased participation of female athletes can help fight gender preconceptions, and that participation in national-level leagues can contribute to empowerment and leadership development. Both of these points are important from the perspective of the organization. The creation of educational and economic opportunities can also be facilitated by sports. Athletes who achieve success may be eligible for several benefits, including scholarships, jobs, sponsorships, prizes, and opportunity to serve as coaches or administrators in the sports industry.

### **Challenges Faced by Women in Sports in India**

#### ***Social and Cultural Barriers***

Traditional gender roles remain an important challenge. In some communities, girls may be expected to prioritize household responsibilities and education rather than competitive sports. Concerns about clothing, travel, interaction with male athletes or coaches, and social reputation may further restrict participation.

These attitudes can influence girls from an early age and may lead to lower participation or early withdrawal from sports.

#### ***Lack of Adequate Infrastructure***

Access to safe and quality sporting facilities is not equal across India. Rural areas and economically disadvantaged communities may have fewer playgrounds, training centres, equipment, changing facilities, and transportation options.

The government's Khelo India programme specifically includes infrastructure development, talent identification, sports academies, community sports, and promotion of sports for women.

#### ***Financial Constraints***

Sports can involve substantial expenses for equipment, coaching, travel, competition fees, nutrition, accommodation, and medical care. Families with limited financial resources may be reluctant to invest in daughters' sporting careers, particularly when professional opportunities appear uncertain.

Financial assistance and scholarships can therefore play an important role in retaining talented female athletes.

### ***Limited Access to Female Coaches and Support Staff***

Female coaches, trainers, physiotherapists, sports psychologists, and administrators can provide valuable support to women athletes. However, women remain underrepresented in many leadership and coaching positions.

Increasing women's representation throughout the sporting system—not only among athletes—can make sports environments more welcoming and responsive to women's needs.

### ***Safety and Harassment Concerns***

Safety is a major factor affecting participation. Athletes need secure training facilities, safe transportation, appropriate accommodation, and effective mechanisms for reporting and addressing harassment.

The Khelo India operational guidelines explicitly provide for gender-sensitization programmes and training concerning laws relating to sexual harassment and protection of children.

### ***Health, Nutrition and Menstrual Health***

Female athletes have specific health and nutritional needs. Lack of appropriate information about nutrition, menstruation, injury prevention, recovery, and reproductive health can affect participation and performance.

Sports programmes should therefore include access to qualified medical professionals, nutritionists, and health education rather than focusing only on athletic performance.

### ***Media Representation***

Women athletes may receive less media attention and commercial visibility than male athletes in many sports. Limited visibility can reduce sponsorship opportunities and public recognition.

Greater and more balanced media coverage can help normalize women's participation in sport and provide athletes with stronger professional opportunities.

### **Opportunities for Women in Indian Sports:**

- ❖ **Khelo India:** Khelo India has become an important mechanism for expanding sports participation. Its objectives include developing infrastructure, identifying talent, supporting academies, promoting competitions, and encouraging inclusiveness, including opportunities for women. The programme has also supported women's leagues as a pathway for competition and talent identification.
- ❖ **ASMITA Women's League:** The **ASMITA (Achieving Sports Milestone by Inspiring Women Through Action)** initiative has created competition opportunities specifically for women and girls. Government data reported nearly 300,000 women participating in ASMITA leagues across 33 sports disciplines and 2,600 leagues by March 2022. Such programmes are particularly important because regular competition provides athletes with experience, exposure, talent identification, and motivation to continue.

- ❖ **New Sports Policy and Investment:** India's Khelo Bharat Niti emphasizes a more inclusive and performance-oriented sports ecosystem and specifically identifies women among groups requiring wider access to sporting opportunities.
- ❖ **Role Models and Increased Visibility:** Successful Indian women athletes provide powerful role models for younger girls. Their achievements demonstrate that women can compete at the highest levels and pursue sports as a profession. Greater visibility of female athletes can also influence parents and communities by changing perceptions about the value of women's participation in sports.

### Recommendations

To increase women's participation and improve retention, the following measures are recommended:

1. Develop more safe and accessible sports facilities in rural as well as urban areas.
2. Increase financial assistance for girls and women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. Recruit and train more female coaches and sports administrators.
4. Provide comprehensive health and nutrition services for female athletes.
5. Strengthen safeguarding and anti-harassment mechanisms in every sports institution.
6. Encourage parents and schools to support girls' participation from an early age.
7. Increase media coverage and sponsorship for women's sports.
8. Provide educational and career pathways alongside athletic training.
9. Conduct more competitions at district and school levels to identify talent early.
10. Collect gender-disaggregated data to evaluate whether sports programmes are actually improving participation and retention.

### Conclusion

Women's participation in sports in India has made considerable progress, but significant barriers remain. Social expectations, financial difficulties, inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, limited access to specialized support, and gender stereotypes can prevent many women and girls from participating fully.

At the same time, India has important opportunities for progress. Khelo India, ASMITA, improved sports infrastructure, women's leagues, and the Khelo Bharat Niti 2025 demonstrate an increasing policy emphasis on women's participation. Recent participation figures from ASMITA also show the potential for large-scale engagement of women and girls in competitive sports.

The future of women's sports in India depends not simply on producing elite athletes but on creating a system in which every girl has the opportunity to participate, develop her abilities, remain safe, and pursue sport regardless of her socioeconomic or geographic background. Greater participation can contribute not only to India's sporting success but also to women's health, empowerment, equality, and social development.

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