

Empowering Women in India through Sports: A Study

Abstract

The Indian women have witnessed varied status and position in different periods. While they experienced a decline in their position from ancient to medieval periods, there took place the promotion of equal rights of women in modern period by dint of many reformers. But the fact is that even in the post-independent period, the gender- role socialization and societal stigmas often frustrate and discourage women from viewing themselves as strong, competent and self-determining individuals. In recent years, sport has emerged as a mechanism among others to help women counteract these self limiting perceptions. Women's participation in sports can have an immense impact on their self- esteem, self - confidence and educational aspirations. Although many of the clinical trials and epidemiological studies in health research have excluded women, the data available suggest that women derive many health benefits from an active life- style. The health benefits of women's participation in physical activity and sports are now well established. In addition to improvement in health, women and girls stand to gain specific social benefits from participation in sports and physical activity. Sport provides women and girls with an alternative avenue for participation in the social and cultural life of their communities and promotes enjoyment of freedom of expression, inter-personal network, new opportunities and increased self- esteem. It also expands opportunities for education and for the development of a range of essential life skills including communication, leadership, team-work and negotiation. Sport has enormous power to generate real social, economic, and environmental change and contribute to sustainable development, social cohesion and even to challenge mindsets and prejudice. According to the United Nations, when girls participate in sports, they are more likely to attend school and participate in the society. Nevertheless, women and girls continue to face discrimination in India in access to sports and games. Women face inequalities in professional sports and sponsorships. Media attention to women's sports in general is extremely low in comparison to men's here.

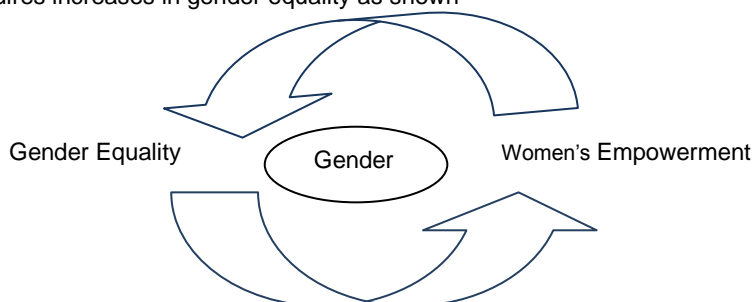


Sanjay Prasad
 Assistant Professor,
 Deptt.of History,
 Saltora Netaji Centenary College,
 Saltora, Bankura
 W. B.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Equality, Empowerment, Development.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, gender equality and women's empowerment have been explicitly recognized as key not only to the wealth of nations, but also to social and economic development. India's National Population Policy, 2000 has 'empowering women for health and nutrition' as one of its cross cutting strategic themes. Additionally, the promotion of gender equality and empowering of women is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to which India is a signatory. The pairing of the two concepts of women's empowerment and gender equality into one MDG implicitly recognizes that gender equality and women's empowerment are two sides of the same coin: progress toward gender equality requires women's empowerment and women's empowerment requires increases in gender equality as shown



Such gender inequality and women's disempowerment occur in all the different domains in which women and men interact and function. Therefore, it can be presumed that both concepts are multi-dimensional. Consequently, they give rise to a large number of potential indicators. Indicators of gender equality / inequality are typically designed to compare the status of women and men on particular characteristics of interest; whereas, by definition, indicators of empowerment/ disempowerment tend not to be relative indicators of empowerment are designed to measure roles, attitudes, and rights of women and sometimes men¹.

Objective of the Study

The most important objective of this research paper is to draw the attention of our patriarchal society regarding the importance of the games and sports for the girls and women for their empowerment. Sport has proven to be a cost-effective and flexible tool for promoting peace and development objectives. It is an important enabler of sustainable development. It is very easy these days for an individual to recognize the growing contribution of sports to the realization of development and peace. It also contributes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.

Review of Literature

In post- independent India, a galaxy of scholars and researchers have come forward to look into the subject matter associated with women and sport.

M .K.Singh (1990) in "Indian Women and Sports" have examined the social aspects of women participating in games and sports. The author has also taken into consideration the psychological and physiological aspects of sports- women personalities.

Boria Majumdar and J.A.Mangan (2005) in their edited book, "Sport in South Asian Society – Past and Present" have analyzed the arrival, spread and the advancement of sports in colonial and post-colonial South Asia. It also highlights the social history of South Asian sport by not simply looking at the history of a sport in one province or region.

D.K.Singh (2009) in "Women, Gender Equality and the State" reveals the sex discrimination against women in games and sports in India and its impact on their mentality. The book also contains valuable informations regarding the government policy for the development and empowerment of women.

The article of Vasanthi Kadhivaran (2010), "Status and Recognition of Sportswomen in Indian Society" deals with the manifold problems faced by the women sports personalities in India. It also mentions the feelings and thinking of the Indian patriarchal society towards the girls and women participating in games and sports.

In spite of having so many scholarly texts on women and sports, it can be easily said that some integrated and comprehensive books are the demand of the day which deal with the factors leading to the empowerment of India.

Women's participation in sport has a long history. It is a history marked by divisions and

discrimination but also one filled with major accomplishments by female athletes and important advances for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The relationship between gender equality and sport is not solely about achieving equality in women's participation and treatment within sports, but it is also about promoting 'sport for gender equality', or harnessing the potential of sport for social empowerment of women and girls². Although many of the clinical trials and epidemiological studies in health research have excluded women, the data available suggests that women derive many health benefits from the active life -style³. A number of researches along with international sport and humanitarian institutions have advocated the need to leverage the positive impact; sport can have on individuals, cultures and societies. Girls and women, in particular, are underrepresented in social, political, legal and educational positions in countries around the world. The United Nations suggests that national and international agencies provide girls and women equal access to sport. Access to sport has the potential to promote physical and mental health, social integration, self-esteem and skill development⁴.

International Scenario

In 1978, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the International Charter of Physical Education and Sport (referred to hereafter as the UNESCO Charter) in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UNESCO Charter promoted sport as a contributor to life-long education and as a conduit for achieving social needs through the development of sport programmes, coaches and facilities. National and International governing bodies were encouraged to promote universal participation in physical activity and sport with the belief that sport, as a common language , has the potential to promote peace, respect and friendship. Finally, the UNESCO Charter was one of the first documents to specifically identify sport as a human right. That is access to physical activity and sport should be assured and guaranteed for all human beings.

Historically, however, women in countries around the world have had limited access and opportunity to participate in sport. Girls and women are denied the physical, social, emotional and relational benefits of sport participation⁵. Inability to participate in sport and activity is perceived to inhibit development and contribute to a weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical matters. Today, women and girls have greater opportunities than ever before to engage in sports and recreation, up to the professional level. However, the number of female athletes lags behind the number of males in all countries around the world. Moreover, women are significantly under-represented in coaching positions, management of sports teams, and as referees and umpires. The absence of women at high levels limits the potential for meaningful reform toward equality in women's sports⁶.

Indian Scenario

The conditions in India for the women and girls to participate in games and sports are not conducive, especially at the international levels. The country's poor performance on women's empowerment and gender equality is also reflected in the Gender Development Index⁷. That is, India ranked 130 out of 188 countries on Gender Development Index as per the Global Human Development Report, 2015. Women in India are not encouraged to participate actively in sports. Conservative culture of the Indian society creates a lot of hurdles in the path of women from their participation in games and sports. But it is not so that they do not wish to participate. Rather the picture is quite different. When the entire nation was badly expecting a medal in the recently concluded Rio Olympics, 2016, the first one came from the hand of a woman, Sakshi Malik. She made the entire nation, whose population stands more than 130 crores, heave a sigh of relief, when she won the Bronze medal in 58 Kg. freestyle wrestling. Then the bonanza knocked at the door of the Indians, when the Badminton champion, P.V.Sindhu bagged the silver medal for India towards the end of the Rio Olympics, 2016. Sindhu's win sparked an enormous outpouring of national pride and celebrations among the Indians. But, that was not the end of road. Dipa Karmakar, an artistic gymnast from a small state of Tripura, became the first Indian female gymnast ever to compete in the history of Olympics and the first Indian gymnast to do so in 52 years. She narrowly missed a bronze medal by a whisker to finish fourth in the women's vault in the final but still created history by producing the best ever performance by an Indian gymnast in the Olympic history. Female cricketers like Mitali Raj, Jhulan Goswami and others participate at the international levels. We cannot forget the achievements of P.T.Usha, Shiny Wilson, Jyotirmoyee Sikdar, Sania Mirza and others in the past years. Despite that women in India are not encouraged to actively participate in sports. The Indians need to change their mentality towards the women and their innate qualities. The resources to make Indian women successful in the games and sports at the national and international levels are readily available, but just need to be utilized. In this connection, the Sports Council of India advocates several policies in favour of games and sports activities with the constant co-operation from the people especially from the female participants. In the light of its policy of gender equality, the Council attaches great importance to the promotion of girls and women. Besides that, the Government of India has several schemes for health promotion of the women devised by the Ministry of Public Health⁸.

Barriers to Women's Participation in Games and Sports

Barriers and difficulties are galore before the Indian women, who seek to achieve something from games and sports. They face a disproportionate number of life challenges, which reduce their ability to achieve their full potential. Recent studies have shown that despite formal guarantees of equality, the

overall rate of progress for women, particularly those from the poorest and most marginalized regions of the world has been slow⁹. Women and girls continue to encounter inequalities and deprivations in their daily lives, which prevent them from contributing toward both the creation of more equitable societies and sustainable development within their communities and beyond. Reaching out to girls in the period of adolescence is a key to confronting the problems of gender discrimination, the denial of basic human rights and outright gender-based violence. Gender-based discrimination as well as different degrees and forms of inequalities increase for girls during adolescence. International and local organizations in India, Government Bodies and individual activists have been strongly activating for gender equality by working tirelessly for the advancement of rights of all girls and women. They use various means and approaches but all share a common goal: to improve the lives of girls and women by fostering empowerment and gender equality¹⁰.

Sport and physical activity programmes provide opportunities for addressing discrimination faced by particular groups of girls and women. Girls and women with disabilities, for example, are frequently subject to multiple forms of discrimination. The low level of participation by girls and women is, in fact, a reflection of the double discrimination that they face both as disabled individuals and as females. Sport and physical activity programmes targeting girls and women with disabilities have proven that this often isolated group of girls and women are confronted with their abilities rather than their disabilities through sport and physical activity participation. The chance to meet other girls and women in similar circumstances as themselves allows them opportunity to share experiences and to learn about issues that they are often deprived of the knowledge about such as those relating to reproductive health. The participation of girls and women with disabilities in sport and physical activity challenges prejudices about disabilities and impairments and therefore positively contribute to their empowerment.

Other barriers preventing women from participating in sports and games and physical activities are equally relevant for developed and developing countries including India. Differences are clear in the rewards that boys and girls receive for their participation in sport. There have also been disparities in the acknowledgements of women's achievements in sports in the media. Male sport personalities like Sachin Tendulkar, M.S. Dhoni, Virat Kohli, Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and others flood news headlines, endorse all varieties of products and in this globalized world, are among the most recognized celebrities. Yet female sports figures are noticeably absent. As a result, girls, who aspire to participate in sports, have less exposure to the projection as female role models or sports ambassadors. Consequently, they are less likely to be benefitted from the positive example that these figures could serve. Even, when women's sports do receive media coverage, the language used to describe women athletes reinforces

notions of inferiority or difference concerning women's athletic ability and the acceptability of women's participation in sports. Last but not the least, around the world, cultural and religious factors prevent women and girls from engaging in sport. From an early age, boys are encouraged to participate in sports, while the girls may be told to stand and watch from the sidelines¹¹.

Expecting Social and Administrative Reforms

Despite advances in gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide including India - in the business place, politics, academia, and on the sports field- women continue to lag behind men in opportunities, support and resources. In order to ensure that girls and women enjoy the positive benefits offered by sport and physical activity involvement, participants and their families must feel comfortable and secure to attend regular sport and physical activity practice outside the home area. Addressing safety concerns should be an important priority of the Government of India for all sport and physical activity programmes that seek to empower girls and women. For girls especially, the idea of a safe and supportive environment is crucial, given the burdens and limitations placed on them by parents and social institutions that intensify as girls approach adulthood¹². Safety in this regard means physical safety, meaning that sport and physical activity programmes prioritize the requirement that girls and women are protected from bodily harm in the form of violence including sexual abuse and preventable sport injuries. This also includes emotional safety, meaning that girls and women feel comfortable and secure in their sport and physical activity environments enough for example, to feel that they can trust their peers and elders and openly communicate and express themselves. Sport and physical activity programmes may choose different methods to ensure safety with consideration to local contexts and the specific needs of participants. There are crucial elements, however, which all programmes should consider, when addressing safety. Female coaches, trainers and all staff interacting with the girls and women participants, for example, are indispensable to creating safe spaces. They are largely responsible for both assuring that the girls feel emotionally secure and comfortable within their sport environment and protecting them from physical harm. Communicating with families about the programmes and involving them, in different ways, in the sport is also crucial to ensuring safety. When the families of participants are supportive of their decision to take part in sports and games, then they are more likely to enjoy trainings with ease and free of stress. Moreover, trainings should take place in secure physical spaces and should be scheduled to avoid participants having to commute at unsafe hours such as in the evenings, when it is generally more unsafe for girls and women in many parts of the world.

Sport, a Panacea for the Problems of Women

In recent years, sports and physical activity as a strategy for the empowerment of girls and women has been gaining recognition worldwide. Sport and physical activity have not yet been used on a large scale as a strategy within women's movements.

Involvement in sport and physical activity can build life skills, create confidence and body awareness and may create social networks, which result in dramatic positive life changes for participants. Involvement in sport can positively change existing gender norms and help girls and women move into public spaces. Moreover, sport and physical activity programmes provide opportunities to bring communities together and help realize development objectives relating to such issues as conflict management, reproductive health and gender based violence¹³.

Sport and physical activity programmes can be used as a platform to provide girls and women with life skills education. Life skills education for girls and women taking part in sport and physical activity is an integral part of sport curriculum. These programmes recognize the importance of providing girls and women with knowledge and skills necessary to enhance the quality of their lives.

Participation of girls and women in sport has been correlated with numerous positive development outcomes. For example, compared to their peers, who do not participate in sport, participants have reported higher levels of self-esteem, emotional regulation, problem solving, goal attainment and social skills. In addition to the psychological, physical, social and academic benefits, participation of girls in sport is associated with numerous positive health behaviors such as increased fruit and vegetable consumption and trying to lose weight in a healthy manner. It has also been associated with higher contraceptive use, lower rates of sexual experience, fewer partners, later age of intercourse, and fewer past pregnancies¹⁴.

Culturally and socially, sport has dualistic qualities. Sport can divide people and countries by promoting racism, nationalism, discrimination, corruption, drug abuse and violence. Numerous scholars and practitioners, however, believe that sport can serve as a conduit for advancing social change through values of democracy, justice and human rights. Sport has the potential to resolve social problems including deficiencies in education, the spread of disease, poverty, inter-ethnic conflict and gender inequalities. Sport and physical activity programmes provide girls and women with the opportunity to convene in public spaces around a common interest. In this way, girls and women are given the chance to assert their independence outside their homes, to build strong social networks and to increase the likelihood of their participation as active citizens within their communities and beyond¹⁵. The health benefits of women's participation in sport and physical activity are now well established. Alex Skaggs, who is associated with the University of Tennessee states that sports can make you stronger, tougher, more confident, more resilient, and these qualities stay with you long after you finish the race or the final buzzer sounds¹⁶.

Role of Female Coaches, Trainers and Referees in the Empowerment of Women

These personalities are crucial to ensuring the success of sport and physical activity programmes aiming to empower girls and women. Prioritizing

female coaches, trainers and referees creates leadership opportunities for girls, where such opportunities may otherwise have been scarce or non-existent. Girls and women, who are coaches, for example, have the responsibility of making decisions about how best to conduct training and efficiently manage their practice time. As coach, they are given the chance to strengthen their decision making, organizational and management skills over time. Some sport programmes later recruit them as staff members, who are given responsibilities ranging from organization of tournaments to supervising teams. In the long term, with the appropriate technical training to develop their skills, these women and girls become strong candidates for influential position in traditionally male dominated sport governing bodies. Female coaches, trainers and referees are very important as role models for girls and women. Girls and women, who have strong female role models, may be encouraged to stay positive and to protect and take better care of themselves. These female role models often represent the possibility of a happier and healthier life despite hardships¹⁷.

Findings/ Result

Sport, in its most basic form, encourages balanced participation and has the capacity to promote gender equality. Female participation in sport also challenges stereotyped social roles commonly associated with women. Sport can help women and girls demonstrate their talents and achievements to society by emphasizing their skills and ability. This, in turn, improves self-esteem and self-confidence in women participants. Sport also offers opportunities for social interaction and friendship, which can raise awareness of gender roles among male counterparts and convey social and psychological benefits to both individuals and groups.

Suggestions

Parental encouragement to young girls in a country like ours is a must for their participation in games and sports. The government should take initiatives for introducing games and sports as a compulsory subject in schools and colleges. Subsidies for women's activities can make them more affordable. Sports require a proper place to participate and for many girls, especially in dense urban environments, it needs travelling to facilities through unsafe neighborhood. Despite recent progress in the participation of women in sports in India, cases of discrimination based on the real or perceived sexual orientation are found on several occasions. Practice of this type must be stopped. And most importantly, today's girls are bombarded with images of external beauty, not those of confident, strong female athletic role models.

Conclusion

Self- confidence, leadership and team work skills learned through games and sport equip the girls and women to challenge societal norms, which continue to oppress women and relegate them to the position of second class citizens. Though, in India, girls give up sport and physical activity at an earlier age than boys and are less likely than men to sustain participation in adulthood, as other domestic

responsibilities reduce their leisure time. Even those who are curious to continue to participate, there are problems of accessibility, availability of suitable facilities and problem of incurring expenditures of good training. But the Indian government and its different organizations are endeavoring for the smooth participation of girls and women in games and sport, so that they get themselves empowered. Even, the United Nations Resolution 58/5 adopted in 2003 calls on governments all over the world to use sports to promote education, health, development and peace.

References

1. Kishor, Sunita & Kamla Gupta , *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), India, 2005-2006, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Govt. of India, International Institute for Population Sciences, August, 2009, p.4*
2. "Women, Gender Equality and Sport," in *Women 2000 and Beyond, published to promote the goals of the Beijing declaration and the platform for action, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, December, 2007, p.2*
3. Oglesby, Carole A., in collaboration with the *International Working Group on Women and Sport, Women Sport International, the International Association of Physical Education for Women and Girls, and the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education* , "Positive Embodiment :Contribution of Sport, Exercise and Physical Recreation to the Lifelong Development of Girls and Women", 2006
4. Hancock M, A. Lyras and J. P. Ha, *Sport for Development Programmes for Girls and Women : A Global Assessment, Journal of Sport for Development, 2013, Volume 1, Issue1, pp.15-24*
5. Brady, M., *Laying the Foundation for Girls' Healthy Future: Can Sports Play a Role? Studies in Family Planning, 1998, 29 (1), pp.79-82*
6. See website of the *International Working Group on Women and Sport, available at: <http://www.iwg-gti.org/e/brighton/index.htm>*
7. A., Dr. Haseena V., *The Ways for Women Empowerment through Sports, Journal of Culture, Society and Development, Vol.10, 2015, p.67*
8. Krishnaveni, *Sports Participation of Women, International Journal of Academic Research, Vol.2, Issue-3(4), July-September, 2015, p.79*
9. *United Nations Development Fund for Women (2008), Progress of the World's Women, 2008/2009: Who answers to women? Gender and Accountability, New York,*
10. *United Nations Children's Fund (2006). The State of the World's Children ,2007, Women and Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality, New York, p.6*
11. Huggins, Allison and Shirley Randell, *The Contribution of Sports to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment,InternationalConference on Gender Equity on Sports for Social Change, Kigali, 2007, pp.3-6*

12. Brady, Martha and Arjmand Banu Khan, *Letting Girls Play: The Mathare Youth Sports Association's Football Programme for Girls*, Population Council, New York, p.1
13. Aafjes, Astrid and Cindy Cottman, *Empowering Girls and Women through Sport and Physical Activity*, Publication of Women Win, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2008, p.6
14. Holt, Nicholas L. and Kacey C. Neely, *Positive Youth Development through Sport : A Review*, University of Alberta, Canada, Vol.6, No.2, 2011, pp.299-316
15. Meier, Marianne, *Gender Equity: Sport and Development*, Swiss Academy for Development, Switzerland, 2005, p.11
16. Skaggs, Alexis and Dr. Nownes, *Empowering Women and Girls through Sports: An Evaluation of a U.S Department of State Sports Diplomacy Initiative*, University of Tennessee , Knoxville, May, 2015, p.2
17. Aafjes, Astrid and Cindy Cottman, *Op. cit.*, 17