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Women In Sports: Breaking Barriers and Redefining Athletic Identity

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Abstract

Research has consistently highlighted that physical inactivity is a major public health concern and is associated with an increased risk of chronic illnesses, including cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. In many countries, the health burden linked to sedentary lifestyles has become comparable to that of other major preventable risk factors. Unlike theoretical knowledge gained through classroom learning, these qualities are cultivated through practical involvement in sports and physical activities. Regular participation in sports not only contributes to physical fitness but also supports mental well-being, social inclusion, and personal growth. Consequently, health experts recommend promoting regular physical activity across all age groups to improve fitness, enhance quality of life, and reduce the incidence of lifestyle-related diseases. The global movement for women's participation in sports has gained considerable momentum over the past few decades, recognizing sports as a powerful medium for gender equality and empowerment. Despite this progress, women continue to face barriers such as cultural stereotypes, unequal opportunities, limited access to resources, and inadequate representation in leadership and decision-making roles. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from governments, educational institutions, sports organizations, and communities to create an inclusive sporting environment.

Introduction

The involvement of women in sports has undergone a significant transformation over time. For centuries, sporting activities were largely associated with men, while women were discouraged from participating because of social traditions and patriarchal attitudes. Sports institutions, leadership positions, and decision-making structures were predominantly controlled by men, resulting in limited representation of women within the sporting system. Such practices reinforced the perception that competitive physical activity was primarily a masculine pursuit. With changing social values, however, women gradually challenged these restrictions and established their presence across different sporting disciplines.

The emergence of women in organized sports represents an important part of sporting history. During the nineteenth century, women began entering competitive activities despite considerable social limitations. An early example can be traced to 1866, when women participated in baseball at Vassar College, marking an important development in the history of women's involvement in organized sport (Sandoz and Winans, 1999). These early participants had to overcome doubts regarding women's physical capabilities and their suitability for competitive activities. Although opportunities were initially restricted, their participation helped create a foundation for subsequent generations of female athletes.

The increasing representation of women at elite and international levels has further strengthened their position in sports. The gradual growth of female participation in Olympic competition demonstrated that women could achieve high levels of physical performance and compete successfully at the highest level (Bennette, Howell, & Simri, 1983). Nevertheless, progress was neither immediate nor consistent. Women's participation developed through periods of advancement as well as resistance, reflecting broader changes in society's understanding of gender and physical activity.

Historically, women athletes were frequently judged according to expectations that extended beyond their sporting abilities. In certain periods, successful female athletes were celebrated, while women who devoted substantial time to sport could simultaneously be criticized for failing to conform to conventional expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, and family responsibilities (Lutter and Jaffee, 1996). Such attitudes were supported by the belief that women were naturally delicate, emotionally sensitive, and physically less capable of tolerating demanding physical activity (Klafs and Lyon, 1978).

Traditional concepts of femininity created another major obstacle. During the Victorian period in particular, strenuous physical activity was often regarded as unsuitable for women. Athletic exertion was believed to conflict with ideals of modesty, grace, and emotional restraint. There were also misconceptions that intense physical exercise could negatively influence women's reproductive health or interfere with their ability to fulfill expected maternal and family responsibilities (Eitzer and Sage, 1978). These assumptions contributed to the restriction of women's participation in physically demanding sports.

Consequently, sport developed as a social institution strongly associated with masculinity. Women were often denied equal opportunities to train, compete, or gain recognition, and their involvement could even be viewed as socially inappropriate (Coakley, 2001). The fear that athletic participation might make women appear less feminine became an important source of discrimination. Miller and Levy (1996) suggested that women's involvement in sports could be accompanied by social stigma because traditional sporting environments were frequently considered inconsistent with conventional expectations regarding women's roles (Goldberg and Chandler, 1991).

Female athletes have also had to negotiate conflicting expectations concerning athletic strength and femininity. Characteristics such as

physical power, competitiveness, endurance, and aggression were traditionally associated with men. Therefore, women displaying these qualities through sport were sometimes perceived as challenging established gender norms. Nixon, Maresca and Silverman (1979) discussed the gender-related expectations surrounding female athletes, while Kiovula (1995) observed that women were often encouraged toward sporting activities emphasizing characteristics culturally associated with femininity, including elegance, beauty, and grace.

This contradiction created a difficult situation for female athletes. They were expected to demonstrate athletic competence while simultaneously conforming to conventional standards of feminine behavior and appearance. Adler and Kless (1992) highlighted the tension between socially accepted feminine identity and the athletic identity that could be negatively judged or stigmatized. Hall (1996) further discussed how highly athletic women could face stereotypes questioning their femininity and personal identity. These attitudes demonstrate that barriers to women's participation were not limited to physical access but were also deeply connected with social perceptions.

Research examining gender and athletic identity has produced varied findings. Some studies have characterized female athletes as less restricted by traditional gender stereotypes and as possessing a combination of characteristics conventionally labelled masculine and feminine. Such findings indicate that participation in sport may provide women with opportunities to develop confidence, independence, strength, and resilience without necessarily diminishing their feminine identity. Metheny's (1965) review presented a comparatively positive perspective by indicating that female athletes could still be recognized as feminine by both athletes and non-athletes.

Broader social movements have also contributed substantially to the expansion of women's participation in sports. The women's movement encouraged women to question traditional limitations and recognize their physical capabilities as an important part of personal development. Fasting (1996) emphasized that changing perceptions of women's physical abilities encouraged greater participation in sports and recreational activities. These developments helped girls and women view athletic involvement as a legitimate and valuable aspect of their lives rather than an activity reserved for men.

Changes in women's professional and family roles have further influenced their involvement

in sports. As women gained greater educational, professional, and social opportunities, they also gained increased access to time, resources, and environments in which physical activity could be pursued. Coakley (2001) noted that changing definitions of women's roles contributed to the creation of greater opportunities for participation in sport. Athletic involvement consequently became an important means through which women could express competence, independence, leadership, and achievement.

Despite considerable progress, gender inequality in sports has not been completely eliminated. Women and girls continue to encounter barriers that can affect their opportunities to participate, develop skills, compete, and progress toward elite levels. Social expectations, gender stereotypes, inadequate sporting infrastructure, limited financial assistance, insufficient training opportunities, unequal representation in leadership, and restricted access to resources can all influence participation. These challenges demonstrate that increasing the number of female participants alone is insufficient; broader structural and cultural changes are also necessary.

For this reason, understanding social perceptions of women in sports remains an important area of research. Attitudes toward female athletes can be influenced by cultural traditions, personal experiences, gender expectations, and exposure to different forms of physical activity. Examining these perceptions can help identify the factors that encourage or discourage women from participating in sports and can provide a basis for developing more inclusive sporting environments.

Governments, educational institutions, sports organizations, communities, and other stakeholders therefore have an important role in promoting women's participation. Policies and programmes should focus on providing equal access to facilities, coaching, financial assistance, competitions, and leadership opportunities. Efforts should also address stereotypes that associate athletic ability exclusively with men or restrict women to particular types of sports.

Creating an inclusive sporting environment requires more than simply encouraging women to participate. Women must also be provided with meaningful opportunities to develop their abilities, compete at different levels, occupy leadership positions, and receive recognition for their achievements. By removing social and institutional barriers and ensuring equitable opportunities, sports can become a powerful platform for the physical, psychological, social,

and professional development of women and girls.

Review Of Literature

Women's participation in sports has emerged as an important area of research due to its contribution to physical health, social inclusion, gender equality, and economic development. Over the years, several researchers have examined the opportunities and challenges faced by women in sports, emphasizing the need for supportive policies, equal access to resources, and increased representation in leadership roles. Coakley (2017) highlighted that sports play a significant role in promoting confidence, discipline, leadership, and teamwork among women. The study emphasized that participation in sports helps women develop life skills, enhances social interaction, and contributes to personal growth. However, gender stereotypes and unequal opportunities continue to restrict women's full participation.

United Nations Women (2021) reported that sports serve as an effective platform for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. The report emphasized that sports improve physical and mental well-being, encourage education, strengthen leadership abilities, and create economic opportunities for women. It also recommended policy interventions to eliminate discrimination and increase female participation in sports.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2022) stated that although women's representation in international sporting events has improved considerably, disparities remain in coaching, sports administration, governance, and decision-making positions. The organization recommended strengthening leadership programs, promoting equal opportunities, and ensuring inclusive governance to achieve long-term gender equality.

UNESCO (2023) emphasized that equal access to sports contributes to sustainable development by improving health, promoting education, and fostering social inclusion. The report highlighted that encouraging girls and women to participate in sports can reduce social inequalities while supporting community development and national progress.

Kumar and Sharma (2020) examined the status of women in Indian sports and found that despite remarkable achievements by female athletes, barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, cultural stereotypes, and lack of institutional support continue to affect participation. The authors suggested stronger government initiatives, improved training

facilities, and awareness programs to encourage women in sports.

Gupta and Singh (2021) studied women's leadership in sports organizations and concluded that female representation in governance remains limited because of traditional gender norms and unequal access to leadership opportunities. The study recommended transparent recruitment processes, mentorship programs, and gender-inclusive policies to increase women's participation in decision-making roles.

Women's Sports Foundation (2022) reported that girls who participate in sports demonstrate higher levels of self-confidence, leadership skills, academic achievement, and career success compared to those with limited participation. The report also emphasized that sports participation positively influences physical fitness, mental health, and long-term professional development.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that sports are a powerful instrument for women's empowerment and national development. While significant progress has been made in increasing female participation, challenges related to gender discrimination, limited infrastructure, unequal funding, and underrepresentation in leadership continue to exist. The reviewed studies collectively suggest that stronger policy implementation, investment in sports infrastructure, awareness initiatives, and inclusive governance are essential to creating an equitable sporting environment where women can participate, lead, and excel.

Women and sports

Although women constitute nearly half of the global population, their representation in sports governance remains disproportionately low. In many countries, including India, women occupy only a small percentage of positions on the governing boards of national sports federations. This imbalance is largely influenced by long-standing patriarchal practices, restricted professional networks, and recruitment systems that tend to favor existing male leadership. As a result, gender inequality continues to persist within sports administration and governance. Several misconceptions further contribute to the underrepresentation of women in leadership. Assumptions that women lack the necessary skills, commitment, or interest in governance roles often prevent them from being considered for such positions. In reality, many qualified women are simply not provided with equal opportunities or encouraged to participate in leadership and decision-making processes. Eliminating these stereotypes is essential for

creating a more inclusive and equitable sports environment. Greater participation of women in sports leadership and governance can significantly strengthen the effectiveness of sports organizations. Diverse leadership teams bring broader perspectives, encourage innovation, improve decision-making, and promote transparent and inclusive governance practices. Furthermore, increased female representation sends a strong message about an organization's commitment to gender equality and equal opportunity. Measures such as transparent recruitment processes, leadership development programs, gender diversity targets, mentorship initiatives, and supportive policy frameworks can play a crucial role in increasing women's representation in sports governance and fostering sustainable development within the sporting sector.

Conclusion

We are dedicated to making sure that we offer possibilities for ladies to excel in anything discipline they selected and we understand that game presents ladies with possibilities to lead. Together there are 4 wide regions in which we will paintings collectively collaboratively on this space, the use of game as a car for development, selling health, enhancing educational fulfillment and growing network safety. Deakin WISE hopes to persuade cultural alternate and sell high-quality function fashions with the purpose of assisting all ranges of lady participation and engagement in game. We welcome expressions of hobby to pursue these paintings collaboratively transferring forward.

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