



GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS IN SPORTS

Kumar S.V.

Hislop College, Nagpur (M.S) India

Abstract:

Introduction:

Woman in our country face discrimination in every sphere and phaseright from the time they are born and continue to face discrimination even in their careers. One such field where discrimination is rampant is sports. Although India boasts of several sportswomen who have achieved accolades and made India proud, female discrimination is far more common in the field of sports than in other field. In the contemporary context sports is more associated with gender inequality which is highly evident across the globe. It is a dreadful fact in the wake of modernization and globalization forces which technologically and scientifically driven, women are treated indifferently, especially in sports.

Women's participation in sports has a long history marked with discrimination, but also one that is filled with major accomplishments by female athletes and important advances for gender equality. Among many, some of the most notable achievements of women in sports are those of Helene Madison of the United States of America, the first woman to win the 10-yard freestyle in one minute at the 1932 Olympics, Maria-Teresa de Filippis of Italy, the first woman to compete in a European Grand Prix auto race in 1958, and TeglaLoroupe of Kenya, who in 1994 became the first African woman to win a major marathon. These achievements were made in the face of numerous barriers based on gender discrimination.

Many factors have led to the continuance of this ill practice; one such factor being the media. By lesser

representation of the achievements of women in sports, the media has cut down the possibility of a farther reach of talent possessed by female athletes to the audience. Several studies done on media coverage of women sports go on to prove that women sports are generally ignored or are given very less importance. In addition, sexual harassment has also been a major concern, especially in developing countries like India. The recent accusation of coach M K Kaushik by the 31 members of the Indian women hockey squad bring out in the open, a badly kept secret – that Indian sportswomen are constantly exploited.

Physical ability of women, efficiency and performance in the male dominated sphere is also one of the major concerns affecting the participation of women in sports and other allied activities. It is a general perception that women are weak and not suitable for any sport, particularly endurance sports like marathons and weightlifting. Furthermost, the assumption and belief that sports are harmful to women's reproductive health is generally carried by the men which is proved to be wrong. However, from the existing data it is observed that women derive many health benefits from participating in sports. Several studies indicate that the fact that sports can result in lifelong improvements to educational, work and health prospects. Participation in sports can prevent many non-communicable diseases which account for over 60 percent of global deaths, 66 percent of which occur in developing countries. In this manner sports can have a positive impact on childhood health as well

as reduce the risk of chronic diseases in later life.

Social and Cultural barriers

Holistically speaking if we observe the participation rates among women and girls are much lower comparatively to that of men. It clearly demarcated that there exists gender gap which is responsible for such dismally low participation among women in sports. In other word these gaps or lacunas can also be referred as barriers which can be categorized as 'personal' and 'social and cultural'. These play a significant role in women and girls' attitudes and behaviour. It is imperative to make a mention of few of the main social and cultural barriers, with recommendations of how sports deliverers can help to overcome them.

The male-dominated culture of sport.

The culture of sport itself presents a problem. Some argue that sport has traditionally been defined, organised, promoted and constructed as a male activity. Some women are turned off 'sport' altogether because they see it as a male-dominated activity. For many girls, being sporty is felt to be at odds with being feminine.

Attitudes and prejudices about sexuality.

Homophobia is the hatred or fear of homosexuals (i.e. lesbians, bisexuals and gay men). It includes another factor which is particularly relevant to the world of sport – 'homo-negativism' – which is a fear among heterosexuals that they may be perceived as homosexual. Women's sport (especially male-dominated sport such as football and rugby) is still regarded by some as fundamentally unfeminine.

Attitudes and prejudices about disability.

Girls and women with disabilities are less likely than women without disabilities to participate in sport at all levels. There are several reasons:

- Physically inaccessible facilities, venues and equipment.
- Coaching staff who don't know how to adapt their teaching to help individuals take part in enjoyable, fulfilling activities •

unwelcoming attitudes by other sports participants and staff.

- A lack of role models to inspire, motivate and encourage. Attitudes and assumptions about people with disabilities can make sport seem even more inaccessible. The assumption that all disabled people are wheelchair users (when only about 5% are) ignores the diversity within and between different impairment groups and their needs. The assumption that removing physical barriers will automatically increase participation is also damaging; more significant barriers are discriminatory attitudes, lack of training and lack of awareness.

Attitudes and prejudices about ethnicity.

Although many people believe that different ethnic groups share similar experiences, differences between black and minority ethnic groups are significant. For example, rates of participation in sport among different ethnic minorities vary from considerably lower than the national average to somewhat higher. Similarly, the gap between men and women's participation in sport is greater among some minority ethnic groups than it is in the population as a whole. Assumptions about BME people – for example, that Asian people don't play football, that no Asian girls are allowed to wear swimsuits, that all African and Caribbean people are good at athletics and basketball – can limit their opportunities to take up sport or to participate in the full range of sports. Low participation rates lead to low rates of volunteering, coaching, employment and leadership in sport.

Sexual harassment and abuse.

Sport-based research on this topic is lacking, but recent studies indicate that sexual harassment and abuse is a problem in sport, just as it is in the wider community. Research shows that the vast majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment and abuse are men, and that women and girls are more frequent victims than men and boys. Many women and girls drop out of sport rather than continue being subjected to the undermining effects of constant harassment and abuse. Others

endure the sexual attention of their male coaches or peers because of fear, desire for athletic reward, low self-esteem or ignorance of who to turn to for help. Typically, abused athletes keep quiet because they fear that they will be accused either of consenting or of inventing their claims. Risk of sexual harassment or abuse arises from a combination of factors such as weak organizational controls within sport clubs, dominating and controlling behaviour by coaches, and vulnerability, low self-esteem and high ambition among athletes.

Female invisibility—media representations and lack of role models in sport.

At all levels and in all roles, community participation, elite athletics, coaching, leadership women, especially those from marginalized groups, have been under-represented in the sports sector. Working in a sector where they are in the minority can give women the sense that they do not belong in the world of sport. In addition, media coverage focuses almost entirely on men's sports. On average, only 5% of sports coverage in national and local print media is dedicated to women's sport. This is significant because the media plays a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions and attitudes about women and sport, which, in turn, influence participation levels. A few sportswomen such as Kelly Holmes and Paula Radcliffe have high media profiles, but in general, a lack of coverage of women's sports leads to a dearth of female role models to inspire sportswomen and create the next generation of healthy, active women.

Conclusion:

To conclude the following recommendations can minimize the socio-cultural barriers faced by women in sports. To challenge sexist assumptions and behaviour inside your organisation and among participants. Women and girls are more open to ideas about 'health' and 'wellbeing' than sport. Combine physical activity with health promotion; offer guest speakers on active lifestyles, nutrition, body image, etc. Combine physical activity with expressive

arts. To confront discrimination. Be aware that homophobia can be subtle as well as open. There is a need for more open discussion in this area, as well as educational projects to raise awareness and stimulate debate. Be aware of the tendency to depict sportswomen as overly feminine in a bid to counter 'homonegativism', or as unfeminine. It's important to have more girls and women with disabilities as role models. Think about the publicity material and information in your sporting venue; does your organisation work with and promote coaches and staff who have disabilities. Inclusion of having positive role models of BME women and girls taking part in a range of sports and a range of roles in sport is important and can make a difference to individuals and groups of BME women and girls. To adopt rigorous screening procedures and establish codes of ethics and conduct for all staff and volunteers, whether they work with adults or children. Staff and volunteers should be required to sign an agreement to abide by the code. Ensure all your staff and volunteers who work with children are trained in Child Protection and have gone through the necessary checks. Distribute information about sexual abuse and child protection for all parents, athletes, coaches and volunteers. Foster a climate of open discussion about issues of sexual harassment and abuse so that athletes feel confident enough to speak out if they experience them. To instill coach education programmes, which inform and advise about the ethical and interpersonal issues of sexual harassment and abuse and about the technical aspects of physical touch in coaching the sport. Be constantly vigilant and avoid complacency. Expect and demand the highest standards of accountability at all levels of sport. Finally use press releases and good relations with your local journalists to promote girls' and women's sports achievements. Seek media coverage of your club or organisation's achievements at all levels and regardless of the gender of the athletes. Include representatives of all your local community in any press coverage.

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