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Gender Inclusivity in Sports: Indian Context

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The Indian Sporting Industry is known to be one of the fast-moving industries in terms of revenue generation. Several Indian athletes have emerged in the last few decades and have represented India in multiple competitions and athletic events. The country has taken multiple measures and steps to put an end to patriarchal and stereotypical beliefs. However, there is still not enough participation and representation of female athletes. For a nation with laws that promote equality of all genders, there are numerous hurdles, restrictions, and challenges faced by women and people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community on an everyday basis, exclusively in the sports industry. Through this short article, we will examine the inclusivity of women in various sports in India. Further, this article will delve into the various challenges and issues faced by female athletes and the changes that must be implemented in the sporting industry to resolve these challenges.

Keywords: *sports, LGBTQ, gender.*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Sports Industry has approximately estimated at INR 8000 Crores.¹ This is considered to be one of the fastest-growing industries in the world.² This estimation takes into account various factors such as viewership, sponsors, advertising, endorsements, etc.³ The Indian Premier League is worth over 6.3 billion USD as of 2019⁴, with many other sports taking inspiration from the game and following the same model. For an industry as vast as this, it is only right for people belonging to all genders to get equal opportunities and chances to take part and showcase their talent and skill.⁵ Concerning being gender inclusive and ensuring equal opportunities for all, the Constitution of India has multiple laws and sections in place which aims to break the concept of gender inequality and promote equality. Article 39[a] of the Indian Constitution states that all citizens, men, and women have the right to an adequate means of livelihood.⁶ Despite these laws,⁷ there still exists inequality and gender discrimination in the Indian Sports Industry. India is a country where the field of sports has been dominated by men for many decades, but this scenario has been changing in the last few years. Many Indian women have started taking part and shining on the world stage in many competitions, be it the Olympics, Asian Games, and many other such competitions. Despite the many challenges and problems that female athletes have faced, sports for women are on an implacable increase. The 2020 Tokyo Olympics saw the highest female participation ever from India. Many female athletes such as Saikhom Mirabai Chanu, PV Sindhu, Dutee Chand, Pooja Rani, and others have won medals at the 2020 Olympics and have been recognized for their outstanding performances and achievements. In this article, we will further be discussing the inclusion of women in

¹ Gadiya M, 'The Blockbuster Growth of Sports Industry in India' (*KreedOn*, 2022)

<<https://www.kreedon.com/growth-of-sports-industry-india/>> accessed 26 August 2022

² Business Insider, 'Indian Sports Industry in 2020 is estimated at Rs 5894 crore; cricket claims 87% share of sports sponsorship pie: GroupM ESP' (*Business Insider*, 2022)

<<https://www.businessinsider.in/advertising/media/article/indian-sports-industry-in-2020-is-estimated-at-rs-5894-crores-cricket-claims-87-share-of-sports-sponsorship-pie/articleshow/82253683.cms>> accessed 26 August 2022

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Gadiya (n 1)

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Constitution of India, art 39(a)

⁷ *Ibid*

multiple sports in India, the obstacles and issues faced by female athletes in each sport, inclusivity of LGBTQ+ athletes in various sports which will be followed by the conclusion.

INCLUSIVITY OF WOMEN IN SPORTS

In the last few years, Indian women have been given opportunities in various team and individual sporting competitions at the national and international levels. They have been representing the nation at major events such as the Olympics, World Cup, Asian Games, and many more. Although in India women playing various sports has been going on since the early 70s, they have received more recognition and are being given their due importance only in recent times.

- **CRICKET**

Cricket has always been known to be the “men’s game” even though the first Cricket World Cup was played in the women’s cricket tournament. Men were always known to have dominated the field of cricket. For many years, people in India were not even aware of the existence of the Women’s Cricket Team and its achievements. But, this has changed in the last couple of years, especially after the year 2017 when the Women’s Cricket Team beat Australia and reached the final. The BCCI has also announced that the Women’s T20 Challenge which has just been a short tournament for the past years will turn into a full league soon. The Indian Women’s Team qualified for the final for the first time in decades and also got the chance to play at the world-famous Melbourne Cricket Ground as well. This drew a lot of attention to the team and also increased the viewership by 21% in the year 2020 as compared to the year 2019. In June 2018, Smriti Mandhana, the Vice Captain of the Indian Cricket Team was voted to be the “Best Women’s International Cricketer” by the BCCI.

The record of 26 consecutive international wins across all formats in a span of four years, the most for any cricket team, belonged to the Australian cricket team until this feat was broken by the Indian cricket team. But to everyone’s surprise, this wasn’t done by the men’s team but by the ‘Women in Blue.’ Although the Indian Women’s Cricket team is emerging and is in the spotlight at the moment, there is a major pay disparity between the Men and Women’s cricket

teams. This is however justified to some extent since the Men's cricket team draws more revenue and is bigger in terms of marketing value as well. This is also agreed to by Anjum Chopra, a cricket commentator, and former cricketer, and captain of India's national women's cricket team who says that if the women's team starts showing excellent performance and goes on to win a World Cup then the pay disparity will cease to exist. The Indian women's cricket team is paid 13 times less than the men's team. Not only this does have they even played 50% of the total matches played by the Men's team. However, since the BCCI took over the women's cricket team, there has been a significant pay increase.⁸ The cricketer to have the longest ODI Career, Mithali Raj, among both men and women, has played a major role in bearing the flag of women's cricket in India. She has led the Indian team across multiple formats and holds several records to her name as well.⁹ Apart from being the most capped ODI player, she holds the record of playing the greatest number of World Cups i.e., six, scoring the most fifty-plus scores in international cricket and most runs in international cricket among women as well. She also holds the unique record of playing the number of matches, most wins, and most runs by any woman cricketer as the Team's Captain. Her legacy as Captain is unmatched in Women's cricket just like M.S. Dhoni's in men's cricket.¹⁰ Even after holding these records and achieving numerous feats, no more than 50% of cricket fans watch women's cricket. To no surprise, the Indian women's cricket team's last T20I series against Sri Lanka, which took place in 2022 recently, was not aired on television. Broadcasters gave the reason for 'low viewership' for not bidding for the telecasting rights. This exact scenario took place in 2018 as well when the Indian women's team toured South Africa. This shows that fans are equally responsible for the lack of inclusivity of women in cricket. Women are trying their best to perform and make the country proud, but if fans don't support them in their journey to glory, the whole process loses its path and purpose. At the same time, the Indian Government and the BCCI should look after their players and take

⁸ Gupta G & Base A, 'How close is Indian cricket towards gender equality' (*Msn.com*, 2022) <<https://www.msn.com/en-in/sports/other/how-close-is-indian-cricket-towards-gender-equality/ar-AAPboMR>> accessed 26 August 2022

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

measures to bring women's cricket to the next level if not equal to men's cricket. The process takes time, progress doesn't.

- **KABADDI**

Women are ruling several sports in the current era such as Badminton, Table Tennis, Tennis, Squash, and many others. This is, there is a game in which there is very less participation from females. Or it can also be said, women aren't promoted much to take up that sport for different several reasons. The game is India's very own Kabaddi. With Indian Men's Kabaddi team winning the Kabaddi World Cup 8 times out of 10, the Indian Women's Kabaddi team has clinched the World Cup title 4 out of 4 times. The first disheartening fact is that most people in India are not even aware of the existence of the Indian Women's Kabaddi Team. It comes off as a surprise to most people to hear the fact that the Women's Kabaddi Team has secured a 100%-win rate, which is lesser than the Men's team itself. Women are 'underrated' in such sports as Kabaddi. Strangely there has been no Women's Kabaddi World Cup after the Indian Women's 45-10 victory against the United States Women's team in the 2016 Kabaddi World Cup final. Unlike the Pro Kabaddi League, which is a domestic kabaddi tournament for men, there is no such league for women to promote their participation in the said sport. The governing body of Kabaddi in India, The All India Kabaddi Federation (AIKF) has a task in its hands, which is to promote women's participation in the sport. It is high time that the AIKF realise that women are just as talented as men in this sport and if given the right opportunities, they can bring an enormous amount of fame to the nation.

- **FOOTBALL**

Football is a sport that is widely played around the world, by both men and women. After Cricket, Football is the second-most revenue-earning sport in the Indian Sports Economy¹¹. The Indian Super League (ISL), the men's domestic football league of India has seen huge growth in recent years, especially during the pandemic era as it was the first sports event that was held in

¹¹Nogueira S, 'Infographic: How Much Has the ISL Grown in 5 Years?' (*Sportskeeda.com*, 2022) <<https://www.sportskeeda.com/football/infographic-how-much-isl-grown-5-years-indian-super-league-2018-19>> accessed 26 August 2022

India during Covid.¹² The Google search index about ISL saw a growth of 87% in the previous season.¹³ With this major increase in terms of sponsorship, viewership, and fame the ISL is considered to be the 5th biggest league in the world of football due to its massive audience attendance.¹⁴ In the year 2017, the FIFA Under-17 World Cup was hosted by India for the first time. With these facts, it is clear that football is a sport that is equally important as cricket in India with many individuals shining in the sport. It is no doubt that India is emerging and is gradually gaining popularity with the Indian Men's Team excelling in terms of national and international competitions.

The Indian National Football Team is regulated by the All-India Football Federation (AIFF) and is under the jurisdiction of FIFA. This includes both the Men's and the Women's football teams. For such a sport to get the recognition it deserves in India, the sport needs to be gender inclusive to ensure fairness and anti-discriminatory behaviour. As much as the Men's domestic and international competitions are given their due importance in India, it is not the same case for the Indian Women's Team. The AIFF governs the women's team as well but for a long time, the federation was unable to provide sufficient funds for the same. However, women's football is growing in terms of popularity. Women's football started in the early 70s and there were many complaints about the poor treatment of women in the football industry. There are some state-level competitions organised by the AIFF in which there were about 32 teams in the 2021-22 season. This competition is similar to that of the Santosh Trophy in which the men take part. Manipur and West Bengal are the lead contenders in the Women's Championship. However, in an interview conducted in the year 2015, Juhi Shah, who has been in the domestic football industry for many years claimed that it is extremely difficult for women to pursue a professional career in football as they have no kind of ISL or I-League that they can look forward to. While playing in provincial and small-scale tournaments can earn a minimal amount of money, it is still not enough for them to make a living out of it. This is not the case in men's football. The

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Chakraborty D, 'Hero ISL season 7 ends with high viewership & increased brand activations' (*afaqs!*, 2022) <<https://www.afaqs.com/news/brands-and-sports-marketing/hero-isl-season-7-ends-with-high-viewership-increased-brand-activations>> accessed 26 August 2022

¹⁴ *Ibid*

base salary that Sunil Chetri, an Indian footballer received was Rs.80 lakhs and this soon increased to Rs.1.20 crores which made him the highest paid ISL striker¹⁵.

CK Vineeth, a player at Kerala Blasters FC earns about Rs.2 crores making him the most expensive player in the 2018-19 season¹⁶. Thus, it is quite clear that the reason behind the inadequate women's participation in football is the lack of a proper professional structure. The AIFF is rather laid-back when it comes to the women's football team.¹⁷ There exists no national league for female footballers to compete in. The AIFF failed to conduct the Women's National Football Championship from 2011 to 2014, this is also a clear indication that the governing body does not give any importance to the women's football team. In the strategic plan published by the AIFF, about Rs. 30 Crores were allocated for the men's national team and about Rs.57 Crores for the I-League. It is not only the AIFF's responsibility to develop women's football in India but also the state associations as well. The AIFF has always been reluctant to spend money on the women's game and this even led to the national team not playing a single international friendly in the last few years. In such a situation where only the men's team is prioritised and the women's team is ignored in all aspects, we cannot expect the sport to move forward and gain as much fame.¹⁸

Recently, for the first time in 85 years, FIFA suspended the All India Football Federation (AIFF) for "undue influence from third parties"¹⁹. This has also resulted in the decision to ban India from hosting the U-17 Women's World Cup which was to be held in the month of October 2022.²⁰ One of the biggest advantages that come with hosting a game as big as the FIFA U-17 World Cup is that many players will get the due recognition they deserve. This would have resulted in many young female football players getting a chance to get shortlisted for the national team and

¹⁵ Ganguly S, 'Top 10 Highest Paid ISL Footballers' (*Sporteology*, 2022) <<https://sporteology.net/top-10-highest-paid-isl-footballers/>> accessed 26 August 2022

¹⁶ Kundu A, 'ISL 2018-19 Players' salary list: Lanzarote the most expensive player, CK Vineeth the highest paid Indian' (*Sports India Show*, 2022) <<https://www.sportsindiashow.com/isl-2018-19-players-salary-list-lanzarote-expensive-player-ck-vineeth-highest-paid-indian/>> accessed 26 August 2022

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Fifa.com, 'FIFA suspends All India Football Federation' (*FIFA*, 2022) <<https://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/associations/media-releases/fifa-suspends-all-india-football-federation>> accessed 26 August 2022

²⁰ *Ibid*

would have led to India's high point in women's football.²¹ Unfortunately, due to the probable unethical and illegal behaviour of the AIFF, many young girls who would have had a promising careers in football would suffer.²² However, there is some hope that this ban will get lifted and the AIFF comes back into action for the benefit of the women's football team before the U-17 World Cup. This is another instance where the lacking professional structure in Indian football results in many talents going unrecognized. Hence, the AIFF and the state affairs should function meticulously and fairly to make football in India as gender inclusive as possible.

INCLUSIVITY OF LGBTQ+ ATHLETES IN THE INDIAN SPORTING INDUSTRY

The times are changing hard and fast with more people accepting the truth of being a part of the LGBTQ+ Community. It's fair to say that they face difficulties and many hurdles in their professional life due to their gender preference and sports is no exception to this. However, to counter these difficulties and emerge victorious, is the goal that is to be achieved. We have seen LGBTQ+ athletes emerging in the sporting industry now, but not many are from India. It is a difficult task for the general public of India to name a single athlete who is a part of the LGBTQ+ community. The Tokyo Olympics was termed the 'Most Inclusive Olympics' with over 160 LGBTQ+ Athletes participating in the same. For such a huge participation number, strangely and surprisingly India had just 1 participation.²³ Dutee Chand, an Indian sprinter who is the current national champion in the women's 100m game came out as a lesbian in the year 2019²⁴ and was the first Indian athlete to openly acknowledge being part of the LGBTQ+ community²⁵. For a country with over 1 billion people, it is disheartening to see that only one has dared to come out and accept their sexuality. This shows the state of the LGBTQ community's inclusivity

²¹ Marar N, 'FIFA's Ban on AIFF Might Take a Toll on Future of Indian Women's Football' (*News18*, 2022) <<https://www.news18.com/news/football/fifas-ban-on-aiff-might-take-a-toll-on-future-of-indian-womens-football-5796991.html>> accessed 26 August 2022

²² *Ibid*

²³ Holmes J, 'Rainbow Laces in cricket in India would make a huge difference' (*Sky Sports*, 2022) <<https://www.skysports.com/cricket/news/12123/11783394/rainbow-laces-in-cricket-in-india-would-make-a-huge-difference>> accessed 26 August 2022

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ Browne K, 'India's Dutee Chand opens up about same-sex relationship: "I have found my soulmate"' (*Olympics.com*, 2022) <<https://olympics.com/en/featured-news/india-s-dutee-chand-same-sex-relationship>> accessed 27 August 2022

in Indian sports. Families and society should start being more supportive and encourage male, female and non-binary athletes to acknowledge and accept their sexuality. It is important for the athlete to feel accepted which would result in them feeling more confident and henceforth, achieving more.

In India, Cricket is the sport that is most popular with hundreds of players playing domestically and internationally. For a sport as famous as this, it is the unfortunate truth that not one player is from the LGBTQ+ community and nobody has dared to come out and openly acknowledge their sexuality. We can take the example of Manish Modi, an Indian-origin cricketer who didn't get enough opportunities in his home country and had to relocate to London.²⁶ It was in London that he found an LGBTQ-inclusive club named Graces where he got an opportunity to openly accept his sexuality and follow his passion for cricket.²⁷ Manish also stated that "Rainbow laces in cricket in India would make a huge difference."²⁸ He claimed that players using rainbow laces would encourage more people part of the LGBT community to come out. Many young women and men fear backlash from society and their families and this constitutes one of the major reasons to not come out of the closet. With the repealing of Section 377²⁹, things in India are changing slowly.³⁰ With Dutee Chand openly accepting her sexuality, we can only hope that many other Indian athletes develop the courage to do the same and that India moves forward in becoming a more inclusive place for all genders and sexuality.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

There are many obstacles that people belonging to genders other than men face daily in the Indian sporting industry. This is mostly due to centuries-old cultural beliefs, patriarchy, sexism, and excessive misogyny. Although the Indian legislations talk about all genders being treated equally without any discrimination, there still exists unfairness and inequity in the country. This is mainly found in the sports industry as we discussed in the previous sections.

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ Indian Penal Code 1860, s 377

³⁰ *Ibid*

Some of the most commonly faced issues by women³¹ in the sporting industry are below:

1. Gender pay gap
2. The social stigma that sports are for men
3. Biasness in awards
4. Lack of women coaches
5. Multiple sexual harassment and abuse cases
6. Role of Media and coverage
7. The derogatory language used to describe female athletes
8. Lack of strict legislation

These are just a few of many challenges that female athletes face in the country which leads to them not fulfilling their dreams, suppressing their talents, and not receiving any recognition like a male athlete playing the same sport does. These challenges are man-made most of the time. With changing times, most families of female athletes do not hold their children back from playing the sport. Thus, this is the fault of the management, the governing bodies, and other individuals who are running the show of sport in India.³²

The following steps can be taken to make sports in India more gender inclusive:

- The governing body and other such councils and federations should take a more active role in women's sports.
- More sponsorships and other similar financing and funding organisations should start showing more support and encouraging women's sports.
- The country should raise more awareness amongst society about female athletes and encourage more participation.
- More female coaches should be appointed.
- The federations should make sure the same opportunities that are given to men are given to women as well.

³¹ Koli D, 'Gender Discrimination in Sports: Depleting Respect of Women Players in India' (2017) 6(12) International Journal of Science and Research 1493-1497

³² *Ibid*

- There should be no biasness in selecting players and there should be a fair representation of all genders in national and international games.
- The government should offer more support to the athletes and their families. This support should also include some kind of job security.
- The families of female athletes should be educated on how to overcome the stereotype that sports are for men and make them encourage their daughters as well.
- The training centres should have appropriate and good facilities.

These are some of the steps and suggestions that India could take to make the nation more inclusive in the sporting industry. This is not just the government's job, but even the general public and the fans of such sports should play a role in supporting these marginalised athletes.

CONCLUSION

India is moving forward in terms of putting an end to patriarchal and stereotypical beliefs. Many female athletes have emerged and have represented the nation in multiple competitions and have made the entire nation proud. However, these numbers are not enough for a country as big as India. The participation number should increase massively. There are many reasons why we don't have as many female athletes in the Indian Sporting Industry. Some major reasons are pay disparity between male and female athletes, increasing incidents of sexual harassment against female players, lack of media coverage and derogatory language used by the media, and the lack of sponsorships and funding. Though there are numerous reasons pulling women and the LGBTQ community back from their inclusion in sports, the fire to perform within them should not decrease. Along with this, Government, and the boards responsible for their inclusion should take adequate steps to ensure maximum and fair opportunities are provided to the participants, be it men, women, or individuals belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Fans should also play a vital role in uplifting the spirits of these athletes, and motivating them to represent their nation. Athletes who don't identify as men are no less and are just as talented and hard-working, thus should not be deprived of any opportunities. It is unjust for people to be treated unfairly because of the gender they identify with.