

Intersections of Disability and Gender in Sports: Experiences of Indian Female Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This qualitative study aimed to compare the experiences of two groups of female athletes- those with and without visual disability- who participate in sports.*

Method: *In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 athletes and thematic analysis of the data was done.*

Results: *Both groups identified various benefits of engaging in sports, including increased fitness and higher self-esteem. Para-athletes felt that sports provided them with opportunities to break stereotypes associated with disability. Both groups also identified certain barriers impeding sports participation, the most pervasive of these being poor infrastructure. In terms of differences, athletes without disability were initiated into sports at a much earlier age, had enjoyed more freedom in choosing their sport, and were given more family support than the para-athletes.*

Conclusion: *An analysis of the findings in terms of the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) indicated that needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness were being more wholly met through sports-related experiences for athletes without disability than for the para-athletes.*

Implications: *Current conditions within para-sport need to be improved by providing more sporting choices to athletes with disability, easier access to sports opportunities at an earlier age, development of self-efficacy with regard to sports, challenging of stereotypes, and generating awareness among parents that sports can be a viable and safe option for their daughters.*

Keywords: *Athlete, visual disability, sports, qualitative research, Indian.*

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INTRODUCTION

Engagement in sports is influenced by several intersecting factors, such as family support, a household's economic status, government support, availability of infrastructure and cultural traditions (Berger et al, 2008; Schiavon & Soares, 2016). Two variables intrinsically interwoven with sports participation are gender and disability. Despite the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calling for States to enable persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in sporting activities, research has found that presence of a disability continues to negatively impact sports participation. The Active People Survey conducted in June 2014 in the UK found that 72.1% of persons with disability do not take part in any sport or physical activity, compared to 47.8% of persons without disability. Also, 17.8% of persons with disability take part in sport for 30 minutes, once a week, compared to 39.2% of persons without disability. While media coverage of para-sports is now on the rise, elite athletes with disability continue to remain less visible than their counterparts without disability (Rees et al, 2017). Furthermore, para-athletes tend to earn less than able-bodied athletes. It was only in 2018 that the US Olympic Committee voted to start awarding Paralympians the same medal bonuses as Olympians receive.

Sport has traditionally been a male dominated arena, with men participating in greater numbers than women. Even within the European Union where gender disparities appear to be relatively fewer, men practise sports more often than women (Global Sport Report, 2016). When women participate in sports there is evidence of a gender pay gap, including athletes' contractual earnings and prize money (Thompson & Lewis, 2014). Although approximately 40% of sports participants are women, they receive only 4% of all sports media coverage (Tucker Centre for Research on Girls and Women in Sport, 2014). Certain gender gaps are also visible in para-sports. The Active People Survey (2014) found that men with disability are more likely to take part in sport than women with disability. While 20.1% of men with disability take part in 30 minutes of sport a week, only 15.5% of women with disability do the same. Many studies (e.g., Blinde & McCallister, 1999; Hardin & Hardin, 2005) have asserted that women with disabilities suffer from a 'double disadvantage', both inside and outside of sport contexts.

Despite gender-related biases, sports participation of women with and without disability is on the rise. The 'Women in Intercollegiate Sport: A Longitudinal, National Study' report (2014) states that 40 years after the passage of federal legislation to prevent gender discrimination in college sports, female participation

opportunities have reached a record high in the US. In another development, the England and Wales Cricket Board reported an increase in the number of women playing cricket (BBC, 2013). The 'Women's Football across the National Associations' report in 2014-15 noted the increase in the number of registered female football players and the number of football academies dedicated to girls.

Nations such as India are also witnessing the growth of sports for women, marked noticeably by a number of young female sporting stars gaining popularity over the last few years. Developments such as these are paving the way for young Indian women to envision a future for themselves as professional sportspersons. Indian female athletes have also begun to demonstrate success in other sporting events, the most recent being the Commonwealth Games 2018 (Kathuria, 2018) where women won 12 of the country's 26 gold medals.

While male para-athletes have won more medals for India, female para-athletes are also beginning to make their mark. In 2016, Deepa Malik created history by becoming the first Indian woman to win a Paralympics medal in shot-put. This was followed by Karamjyoti Dalal's bronze medal in the women's discus throw F-55 event. The success of Indian athletes in international arenas has prompted the Indian government to take some initiatives towards the promotion of para-sports in the country. For instance, an Open Para Athletics Championship took place in the city of Bengaluru in 2018. Earlier, on 5th February 2017, the Sports Minister of India laid the foundation stone of the first-ever training centre for para-athletes, to be equipped with world-class facilities, in Gujarat (Press Information Bureau, 2017). On the other hand, although India was slated to hold the inaugural National Para Games in 2018, the Games never took place. Not surprisingly, a World Bank report, released in 2007, concluded that while India has a very progressive disability policy framework, implementation remains poor. India presents a unique sporting paradox, where the tremendous popularity of sports exists alongside inadequate facilities, limited institutional support and gender and disability-related inequalities.

Given this kind of milieu, one research question that arises is how young Indian female athletes and para-athletes perceive their sporting journeys. Their narratives, and particularly those of female para-athletes, have remained largely undocumented. From this topic arises another research question pertaining to the barriers that impede sports participation. While these have been identified among female athletes and para-athletes in other nations, little research has been conducted in India. The limited work that has been done on able-bodied

female athletes shows that barriers range from lack of money to buy equipment to misconceptions about the effect of sports on girls' bodies (Kumari, 2017). Alongside understanding the barriers, it is also important to understand the benefits gained through participation in sports and to take note of the changes athletes and para-athletes desire to see in the sporting systems of the country. The present study attempts to answer these questions by eliciting the personal accounts of athletes and para-athletes.

Objective

This study aimed to understand, compare and contrast the sporting experiences of Indian female athletes with and without disability. The study focusses specifically on the sport of athletics as it has received less attention than other sports. Each type of disability may pose unique challenges to sports participation. Hence the challenges faced by persons with a sensory disability may vary distinctly from those with locomotor disabilities. However this research limits itself to athletes with visual impairment.

Important Definitions:

The following definitions were adopted for the current study. These have been incorporated from the International Paralympic Committee Handbook (1992).

- **Athlete** - Any person training regularly in preparation for competition in a sporting event and having participated in at least one sporting competition in the last 1 year (inter-college, state or national level).
- **Athlete with (visual) disability** - Any person with visual impairment in the categories B1, B2 and B3, training regularly in preparation for competition in a sporting event and having participated in at least one sporting competition in the last 1 year (inter-college, state or national level).

B1, B2 and B3 are medical-based Paralympic classifications for blind sport.

B1. Those placed in this classification are totally or almost totally blind. Athletes in this category receive assistance while participating in sports events.

B2. Competitors in this classification have vision that falls between the B1 and B3 classes. Athletes in this category are given the choice of receiving assistance while participating in sporting events.

B3. Athletes in this classification have partial sight, with visual acuity from 2/60 to 6/60. Athletes in this category do not receive assistance while participating in sporting events.

METHOD

Research perspective

This research stems from a liberal feminist perspective. The pioneers of this framework challenged essentialist notions around femininity and the dichotomy that conjectured rationality as masculine and emotionality as feminine. Scraton & Flintoff (2013) explain that liberal sports feminism sees sport as a positive experience that women must have access to. It attributes differences in male and female sports participation to socialisation practises of institutions such as the family, schools and media that present sports as more viable options for boys than girls. Discriminatory practices prevent women from having equal access to sporting opportunities and resources. Supporting evidence for this notion has been provided by Eccles and Harold (1991) who, in evaluating the utility of Eccles' expectancy-value model for understanding gender differences in sport participation, found that differences in children's attitudes toward sport are quite strong. They emerge at a very young age and seem to result mostly from gender-role socialisation rather than "natural" aptitudinal differences between girls and boys. Liberal feminist research also focusses on the underrepresentation of women in decision-making, coaching and leadership positions in sports (Scraton & Flintoff, 2013). This study grounds itself in the concept of intersectionality embraced by feminist researchers. An intersectional lens can be beneficial in understanding the relationship of gender to other social categories in sporting contexts including disability, race, caste and socio-economic strata. This study specifically looks at the intersectionality between gender and disability.

Study Design

The current study was qualitative and exploratory. An interpretive, naturalistic approach to the subject matter was adopted. The naturalistic approach is grounded in studying people in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research is context bound. It was therefore understood that the research process had to remain sensitive to the social systems and the feedback loops in which

the participants were embedded. Such research also involves reflecting on how the researcher is located vis-à-vis the participant, especially in terms of power differentials and considering how these power differentials have been addressed (Bryman, 1988). In line with a great deal of qualitative research, the study adopted a non-judgemental and empathetic stance towards the views of the participants. Qualitative research demands reflexivity from the researcher. In the present study therefore, the researcher was engaged in a constant process of self-reflection to recognise the on-going interaction between own values and conceptions on the one hand and the unfolding research process on the other hand. In qualitative research, the data is represented or summarised in narrative or verbal forms, so data collection methods which obtain detailed, descriptive data are preferred. The method chosen in this study was in-depth interviews with participants. This type of interview allows flexibility in terms of the questions that may be posed to the participants, and allows the researcher to enter previously unanticipated areas while interviewing them.

Study Sample

The sample consisted of 16 female athletes, recruited through purposive sampling, from Delhi, the capital city. Half the participants were athletes with visual disability (B1, B2 or B3) and the other half were athletes without disability. All the participants were between 18 and 21 years of age. They were included in the sample only if they were training regularly for sporting competitions and had participated in at least one competition during the past year. These individuals were competing in Inter-college, Inter-university and National level events. None had participated as yet in any international competition. The researchers chose to work with a young group of athletes who were striving to make a mark in the world of sports. These initial journeys often remain undocumented and, if documented, are usually narrated and written in retrospect.

Female athletes who met the inclusion criteria for the study were contacted and requested to participate. The purpose of the study was explained to each of them. They were told that the study aimed to understand the experiences of athletes with and without visual disability, and that participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research process without fear of consequences. They were also assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not be revealed to any coach or sporting authority. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts and experiences freely as there were no 'right' and 'wrong' answers. Their queries, if any, were also addressed.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed for the study. The domains on which the schedule was based included the sports background of the athlete, perceived benefits of sports participation, barriers impeding sports engagement, the role of significant others, and sports and disability (explored mainly with athletes with disability). These were developed through an in-depth review of literature. English and Hindi (local language) versions of the schedule were devised and pilot-tested before use.

Those who were willing to be interviewed were met at a convenient time. All the interviews were audio-taped with their consent. Each interview was brought to a close by thanking the participants for sharing their experiences and assuring them that they were entitled to know the results of the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants and later transcribed. They were then analysed using the six-phase approach of thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes Familiarising yourself with the data, Generating initial codes, Searching for themes, Reviewing potential themes, Defining and naming themes and Producing the report. In conducting the thematic analysis, the inductive approach was followed wherein the themes identified are strongly linked to the data. In such a case, coding of the data occurs without attempting to fit it into pre-existing categories and frameworks. Nevertheless, Braun and Clarke (2006) aver that induction in thematic analysis is not 'pure' induction as it is not possible for the researchers to free themselves from paradigmatic assumptions. Thus, the coding process shall inevitably reflect the researcher's standpoint and values. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is a highly systematic technique that helps in identifying shared meanings and experiences of participants or the commonalities across different data sets. However, the researcher ensured that individual perspectives were noted in the analysis.

Many criteria have emerged that may be used to evaluate the quality of qualitative work (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Different means were used to achieve quality, including member checking, peer de-briefing and engagement in a constant practise of reflexivity. These checks were in place to minimise subjective biases and produce an account that authentically represented the experiences of the participants.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The analysis presented below focusses on capturing similarities as well as differences in the experiences of the two groups of athletes.

Initiation into Sports

All athletes without disability began participating in sporting competitions between the ages of 7 and 17 years, while they were still in school. Most of them had been encouraged to join sports by a significant adult in their life, such as a coach, parent or teacher. The reasons for having chosen athletics over other sports, as mentioned by athletes without disability, were that they had a natural aptitude for it, were good at it, felt a connection with athletics, and that they had started winning competitions very early.

The interviews of athletes with disability presented a different picture. All the para-athletes had begun to participate and compete in sports only after entering college. For some, their schools had presented few opportunities, with minimal or no sports equipment for persons with disability. The para-athletes reported that their main motive for sports participation in college was necessity-based. Engagement in sports (or social service) for a specified time period was necessary for them to graduate with their academic degrees. Also, the para-athletes chose athletics for very different reasons from those given by typical athletes. Some said that they chose athletics because certain other sports such as badminton and volleyball required good vision. Others said that they had chosen athletics because most other visually impaired students in their college had done so, or because it was the most "*accessible*" sport for them in college.

A comparison of the responses provided by the two groups indicates that the reasons given by athletes without disability were more closely associated with a sense of accomplishment or pride. Those given by athletes with disability were associated more with the feeling that their choices were limited in some way. One implication of this finding is the need to create more options with respect to para-sports (especially at school and college levels) so that athletes with disability can have more choice when making sporting decisions. This is likely to result in higher feelings of autonomy and enjoyment of sports for para-athletes (Van Prooijen, 2009). This point will be revisited further on in the analysis.

Sports and the Self

All the athletes without disability explained that sports had become a significant part of their lives by making them fitter and by fostering discipline, perseverance and sportsmanship in them. They also believed that sports had brought them and their parents praise and recognition. Athletes without disability had the tendency to express a strong athletic identity, which in turn has been linked to physical fitness (Marsh, 1993), self-esteem (Marsh et al, 1995) and improved confidence (Petitpas, 1978). Sport-related benefits are manifested most strongly in athletes whose self-concepts are strongly tied into the athlete role (Martin, 1999).

In comparison, only four out of eight para-athletes expressed a strong athletic identity. Research on athletic identity among athletes with disability has produced mixed results. Some studies have found athletic identity to be stronger in athletes with disability than among their able-bodied counterparts (e.g., Van de Vilet et al, 2008), while others (e.g., Tasiemski et al, 2012) have found athletic identity levels of able-bodied athletes to be significantly higher than among para-athletes. The strength of one's athletic identity is thought to vary with past and current athletic experience and the relative success or failure in this domain (Horton & Mack, 2000). It is also linked to the reactions of others to one's sports participation (Guerrero & Martin, 2018). These factors may not have been as potent in the case of athletes with disability as in the case of athletes without disability. For example, given that sports had become a part of their lives recently, they may not have enjoyed as much success to date as athletes without disability. Not all athletes with disability may have garnered recognition for their efforts. Also, their families have not been as supportive of their sports endeavours as in the case of athletes without disability. This point is discussed further, in the theme 'Role of family and coaches.' Yet, the para-athletes did regard sports as integral to their lives and felt that sports participation had brought them many benefits.

Benefits of Sports Participation

Participants across both groups reported multiple benefits of sports participation.

In terms of physical benefits, athletes with and without disability believed that engaging in sports had led to increasing their stamina, endurance, fitness and strength. Athletes in both groups also identified several psychological benefits of sports participation, such as the increased ability to deal with life pressures and greater feelings of optimism, independence and self-esteem. The para-athletes interviewed in this study mentioned that sports had given them confidence to

express themselves and do things they never thought they could. Most para-athletes believed that joining sports had opened up a new vista in their lives. It had provided them opportunities to break boundaries and stereotypes imposed on persons with disability. It has been suggested that among those with disability, physical activity may be used as a means to project an image of the active and skilled person helping to counter societal stereotypes of incompetence. Scholars have argued that the sporting space empowers athletes with disability to transcend disabling social contexts (e.g., Ashton-Shaeffer et al, 2001), as was the case here.

In terms of social benefits, participants in both groups mentioned that engaging in sports had helped to widen their social circle and make new friends from diverse backgrounds. Four athletes without disability also said that they had been able to develop strong bonds with their teammates, although only one athlete with visual disability reported the same. Earlier research has found 'community experience' to be an important social benefit of sports for athletes with and without disability (e.g., Goodwin et al, 2009). This may not have been mentioned too often in this study because athletics is an individual sport, where team events are limited to relay races. Also, in the present sample, athletes with disability had participated in even fewer team events than athletes without disability, which may explain the fewer instances of team bonding.

A social benefit derived from sports could be the recognition it brings from others. All athletes without disability in this study said that their sporting performance had brought them appreciation and praise. However, only three participants with disability reported having received similar feedback. This lack of recognition may be grounded in the general perception of para-sports. It has been found that there is resistance on the part of the public to acknowledge athletes with disabilities as genuine athletes. Such resistance may simply reflect a bigger phenomenon rooted in the long-standing debate about which activities qualify as real sports (Lagaert & Roose, 2014). Sport is viewed as an emblem of strength and skill. In contrast, disability is often erroneously equated with deficiency and incompetence. When faced with such assumptions, people tend to downgrade disability sport and deem it inferior to able-body sport (Donnelly, 1996). One participant with disability expressed the need to challenge these notions by saying, "*So I know that people don't believe much that we can do it....there is a lot of need for creating awareness.*"

Barriers in Sports Participation

Despite the benefits that sports offered, only half the participants in each group were sure of having a long career in sports. Decisions to quit after a few years or remain with sports were heavily influenced by the perception of barriers. For some the barriers appeared surmountable. However for others, they appeared rather formidable. Among the barriers identified by athletes without disability were infrastructural constraints, including the lack of a running track within their college campus. Three participants also mentioned the poor state of their college gym. These points were raised by athletes with disability as well. Outside college, the stadia that the participants without disability frequented for practise also lacked basic infrastructure and adequate training equipment. Moreover, several athletes without disability said that the accommodation arranged during tournaments was very poor.

The para-athletes interviewed in this study did not discuss the condition of stadia or travel accommodation. However the reason for this may primarily be that they mostly trained in college and had not travelled outside Delhi for sporting events. It may be noted that in case they do travel, they may face the same issues mentioned by the athletes without disability. A leading newspaper of India highlighted the poor quality of accommodation offered to para-athletes at the 18th National Para Athletics Championship held in 2018 (Press Trust of India, 2018), ranging from washrooms with doors too narrow for wheelchairs to enter, to poor drinking water (Raj, 2018).

Interestingly, despite belonging to a country with strong gender-biases, none of the participants felt that being young and female had impeded their sports participation. Most participants in the present study believed that sports was opening up as an arena for women and promised good opportunities for female athletes. It was anticipated that safety would frequently be mentioned as a barrier, as the participants were females living in a city considered highly unsafe for women, but only two athletes without disability mentioned this. They spoke of safety concerns in three different contexts- in terms of being stared at by men, of getting injured, and of being lured into using performance-enhancing drugs. Only the first issue (being stared at) was gender-based. Safety was mentioned as a barrier by four athletes with disability, but they spoke of it in terms of the dangers of getting injured. Some mentioned that they had been injured in the past because of the multiple games taking place at a single venue and because they were unable to see their surroundings. Uneven ground, obstacles and narrow spaces also posed dangers.

Role of Family and Coaches

All athletes without disability believed that their families had played a significant role in encouraging them to pursue sports. However, half of them also reported that their families still held high expectations that they would succeed in academics because it was seen as a more secure route to gainful employment. Furthermore, the athletes agreed with their parents' views.

Among the athletes with disability, family support varied from being strong to virtually non-existent. The absence of parental support in the lives of some athletes with disability is a critical factor to be considered. Parental involvement, although at times a double-edged sword, has a very important role to play in an athlete's development (Lindner & Johns, 1991; Siekańska, 2012). In the present study, in instances where parents were unsupportive, the reasons included believing that sports was an inappropriate option for their daughters, that there was no future for their daughters in sports, and that the risk of injury was too high. Clearly these athletes lacked a significant form of social support for their sporting endeavours.

Both groups of athletes reported that their coaches played an extremely vital role in their engagement with sports by motivating them, providing guidance and sharing their expertise.

The nature of interactions between the coach and the athlete has important implications for the athlete's well-being, skill development, and performance (Jowett, 2007; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). The athletes with disability considered the coach's role to be crucial as they had begun to play sports only in college. In cases where family support for sports engagement was lacking, the support provided by the coach may have been the only source of motivation.

As an exception to the positive notions mentioned in the theme, there were two athletes without disability who mentioned being discriminated against by certain coaches they had encountered. No instances of discrimination were mentioned by athletes with disability. Earlier studies have identified problems between coaches and athletes, such as poor communication, lack of quality coaching (Sherrill & Williams, 1996; Robbins et al, 2010) and changing of coaches. No such problems were reported in this study. While this may be an appreciable and positive finding, it is also possible that the participants' responses related to this theme could have been affected by social desirability, despite assurances of confidentiality.

CONCLUSION

The Self-Determination Theory or the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002) argues that the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy are essential to psychological health. The interviews indicated that sports participation was fulfilling these needs in both groups of athletes, albeit to varying extents. For instance, sports enabled both groups of athletes to feel more competent, physically as well as psychologically. Yet, a major difference between the two groups was that while sports had served as a source of competence since school years for athletes without disability, it was happening only at a later stage for athletes with disability. Regarding relatedness, sports had opened newer social avenues for the athletes. They had made friends, met superior athletes, found role models and inspiring coaches through sports. Yet again there was one major difference between the groups, as athletes without disability appeared to receive more recognition and support for their endeavours than the para-athletes. Autonomy refers to the regulation and endorsement of the self. The capacity to act autonomously is strongly impacted by the social environment which can vary from being controlling to supportive. Regarding feelings of autonomy, these can be inferred to be higher among athletes without disability on certain counts. First, it was generally their own choice to opt for and pursue sport and athletics, while athletes with disability expressed some sense of compulsion for these choices. Also, some athletes with disability reported feeling that they would eventually have to leave sports due to lack of family support. It may be supposed that such feelings, derived from an unsupportive social environment, can undermine a person's sense of autonomy.

These findings are important because the fulfilment of these needs has a relationship with an individual's levels of intrinsic motivation. Activities that more fully fulfil these needs are experienced as interesting and enjoyable, and as offering opportunities for learning and personal accomplishment. This in turn can have a direct impact not only on well-being but also on practise and performance (Gagne et al, 2003). If adequate opportunities and infrastructure are provided, sports can be a source of basic need fulfilment of persons with and without disability. However current conditions regarding sports participation largely favour the fulfilment of these needs in persons without disability. This must be altered by providing athletes with disability with more sporting choices, easier access to sports opportunities at earlier ages, development of self-efficacy with respect to sports, and awareness generation among parents regarding sports being a viable and safe option for their daughters. The sporting culture in

India requires efforts to challenge the misperceptions of families and institutions which doubt the ability of athletes with visual disability to succeed in sport. Parents may also be more encouraging if they believe that their children with disability shall find better employment due to their sporting careers, an aspect that must be looked into through government policies. The findings also point to a need for policies detailing a programme or the obligation of educational institutions to provide physical activity and sports opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Limitations and Implications

This study has explored the perspectives of a small sample. While this allowed in-depth study of their perspectives, small samples are considered unrepresentative. Experiences of sports participation and experiences of disability can be varied across individuals. Hence the findings cannot be generalised beyond this sample. The researcher's presence during data gathering, could have affected the subjects' responses. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality may have prevented some participants from expressing certain views.

Future research on the sporting experiences of young females must assess perspectives of the people who play a significant role in their lives, such as family and coaches. Also, while this study assessed views of athletes with visual disability, future research must look at other types of disability and explore the experiences of those who participate in different sports. Cross-national studies of sporting experiences of young women are also important as they could throw light on facilitators and inhibitors of sports participation in different national settings.

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