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Breaking the Silence on the Harm to Sportswomen

By: Meena Gopal

The nation celebrates with gusto the joys and exhilarations of sporting moments. But it falls silent when the powerful are interrogated for violating the rights of sportspersons under their care, especially the women. The wrestlers are ending this silence.

The modern Olympic Games were inaugurated in 1896, but it is [only since 2004](#) that women have comprised about 40% of its total participants. Gender discrimination is writ into sport, along with race and caste, as we can see today. In the first Olympics that women participated in, there were only 22 of them, less than 3% of all the athletes at the event.

While the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 may have seen almost the same number of women (48%) participating as men, it was still a far cry for women coaches (13%), and women officials and administrators (32%). This underscores the deep structures of exclusion and discrimination at the core of sport worldwide. For any realm that aspires to be equal, the increased presence of the excluded and marginal is a good augury. However, even at the Tokyo Olympics, there were [only 52 women to 68 men](#) in the Indian team.

Transcending sexualisation

For women, entering the domain of sport is the same as entering public life, a sphere that has kept them out till then. Ronojoy Sen pertinently points out in *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (2015) that women are “absent from much of the story” despite doing exceedingly well in recent times. In South Asian cultures, women who choose sport are transgressing several barriers, most notably that of objectification and the male gaze of their bodies. Modern sporting achievements offer women freedom from the sexualisation that results when their bodies are objectified by a largely male spectatorship.

Women have to cross multiple barriers to enter a sporting competition. Family support is essential because physical training is a challenge to the femininity that marriage markets demand. More importantly, they require support and care from their clubs and colleagues, as well as the administrative body that oversees their sport.

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Most young women have to pay extra attention to the clothing they wear on the sports field when they begin their careers. It is only through biographies that we learn of the struggles young women from humble circumstances have to go through and the straight faces they have to maintain even when they are coarsely heckled for having their bodies on display, and harassed by uncouth male spectators.

Sabah Khan (2021) discusses how young trainees in sports-for-development football camps of Mumbai’s ghettos shed their modest clothing over time to don shorts and t-shirts, learning to ignore the male crowds that gathered to watch young women play football. They slowly began to shed shame and gather pride in their bodies, which were now being prepared for competition. Women have always had to thus ward off sexual objectification and moral surveillance to prove their mettle as sporting citizens. Even an internationally acclaimed tennis star like Sania Mirza was not spared when she was issued a fatwa for wearing clothing that was deemed immodest by her religion though it was appropriate for her game.

Sexual harassment

As most commentators point out, the two things that are a bane to modern sport are doping and sexual harassment. It is well known that enhancing one’s performance by using drugs, often with the collusion of coaches and officials, can cause lasting damage to an athlete’s body and career. But the [sexual abuse](#) of vulnerable youth and women is hardly mentioned, indicating that the deeper malaise of sports in India is the [all-pervasive presence](#) of patriarchal and feudal structures and attitudes.

In 2022, a champion woman cyclist [revealed the toxic abuse](#) by officials she had undergone for more than a decade when she spoke out against coach R.K. Sharma and his assistant (Vasavda 2022). In September 2014, international gymnast Chandan Pathak and coach Manoj Rana were [charged with sexually harassing](#) and body-shaming a female trainee gymnast during a practice session. In 2022, the Andhra Pradesh women’s cricket team [accused the secretary](#) of the Andhra Cricket Association and manager of the Indian women’s T-20 team, V. Chamundeswaranath, of seeking sexual favours in exchange for selection.

The feudal nature of sports in the country is seen in the patronage, power, and politics that pervade it. In 2023, Sandeep Singh, a former India hockey captain and Haryana sports minister, who was charged with sexual harassment and wrongful confinement by a woman coach, denied the charges. A probe by a special investigative team is [now on](#). Olympian wrestler Sushil Kumar’s arrest for murder in 2021 also brought out the links between feudal patronage, crime, politics, and sport. Luring aspiring wrestlers in search of livelihood opportunities from *akhadas* to crime is [relatively easy](#).

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Sexual harassment humiliates and shames women who work very hard to prepare themselves for competition. Women’s rights activists have rightly demanded that all sports federations and their state units set up internal complaints committees (ICCs) and implement the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment Act, 2013. It was to ensure safety for women working in public places that the Supreme Court enacted the Vishakha Guidelines in 1997.

Despite the MeToo movement surfacing in the sporting arena, cases where the heads of federations are accused of sexual harassment are very much weighted against the complainants, and the powerful state and sporting establishments end up protecting the perpetrators. We only have to think about the [sexual harassment complaints](#) that were made in 2019 against Rahul Johri, the former CEO of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and against Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, the President of the Wrestling Federation of India, now.

It is no surprise that in 2020 the *Indian Express*, using the Right to Information Act, found that over 10 years, there had been 29 cases of sexual harassment of women athletes (mostly minors) training under male coaches in 24 centres of the Sports Authority of India (SAI). These were only those who dared to come out and complain—quite like the protesting wrestlers of today. It goes without saying that the lack of gender equity [increases the vulnerability](#) of all who are not male in sports.

Gender discrimination

Along with sexual harassment, gender discrimination also needs attention. In recent times, several intersex and transpersons have overcome several barriers to enter sport. Queer and trans activist, Praveen Nath, whose recent passing after a brief career in bodybuilding as a transman, [was crowned Mr. Kerala](#) in the transgender category in 2021.

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Madeleine Pape, a former Olympian and sociologist, writes how in 2015 “scientific evidence” and expertise were at the bottom of denying sprinter Dutee Chand the right to compete in international track and field competitions. Pape writes how the International Association of Athletics Federations’ Hyperandrogenism Regulations, which indicate how much naturally occurring testosterone is allowed in women’s bodies, worked against women athletes, especially from the global South. Such policing of natural differences did not stretch to male athletes, such as Usain Bolt or Michael Phelps, for whom it just seemed a natural advantage.

In global competitions, the prevalent binary gender poses barriers to those assigned female gender at birth and who have participated and competed as women and girls throughout their lives till the moment when international sporting bodies choose to arbitrarily scrutinise their bodies and gender. Arbitrary because such tests are based on flawed assumptions of gender and directed only at women.

A complaint about gender can be registered through mere suspicion and there are as yet no parameters to test what is really an evolving subject of research, feminist science studies show. Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca Jordan-Young in their 2019 book,

Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography, unravel the misconceptions around the hormone by showing how the socially constructed narrative around it has elevated it to the level of the “scientific”.

The president of World Athletics, Sebastian Coe – a former Olympian himself – is dismissive of what he calls “second-rate sociologists” trying to tell him or the science community that there may be an issue with testosterone. But he insists on the necessity of gender testing, claiming no woman would ever win a sporting event otherwise. Nothing could be more eloquent about the high ground that male, white privilege occupies in global sporting to justify the policing of bodies of women in the global South.

In international competitions in the last many years, along with several women athletes from African nations such as Caster Semenya, Indian athletes have also been subject to gender eligibility regulations. In 2015, Chand was suddenly subject to a ban, which she later successfully challenged, while Santhi Soundararajan was stripped of her silver medal at the Doha Asian Games in 2006. While the Tamil Nadu government stood by her, the Indian Athletic Federation abandoned her though she was subjected to an arbitrary gender test at the games.

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Athlete’s rights activist and researcher Payoshni Mitra notes that the culture of surveillance and suspicion is very much part of competitive sports today. It permits anyone at a sports event who suspects a woman athlete’s gender to register a complaint and force a gender test on them. Athletes with differential sexual development (DSD) have become targets of arbitrary suspicion and testing.

It is only when the targeted raise their voice that the powerful can be questioned. The protest by women wrestlers is akin to the struggles of workers, civil society, and political activists for basic human rights and decent treatment. It has to be seen against the background of a long history of athletes’ activism within the realm of sport.

Labours of care

One of the ways to help steer sport away from violence and exploitation is to establish a labour perspective, with due importance accorded to the care, nurture, and remuneration of sportspersons at all levels. Sport is built through labour and sacrifice. Hard work goes into schooling sportspersons, who invest their own time, energy, and money as well, for national and international competitions. The labours of sportspersons have to be brought to the forefront to shred the myth of sport being a realm free of politics and violence (Bijanwila 2018).

Since the late 1980s, after P.T. Usha almost won an Olympic track and field medal in 1984, the role of the state in nurturing sport has emerged centre-stage. The support and promotion of sports takes place through the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, and its programmes are implemented through the SAI. The SAI has four academic institutions, 12 regional centres, 23 national centres of excellence, and 66 sports training centres (Nair and Eapen 2021). Despite such an elaborate structure, it remains weakly connected to both the state and private school system, and so misses out on catching young talent and nurturing it. It is school- and collegiate-level competitions that have over the years thrown up talented youngsters, who have gone on to become national and international competitors.

Since most of the competitions are conducted by the National Sports Federations and its affiliates at the state level, the burden of nurturing sportspersons remains a state responsibility. Kerala has been unique in having a proactive Sports Council that has numerous sports hostels under it to cater for the needs of school children (Sreekumar 2004).

The national Khelo India programme was introduced in 2017 to encourage mass participation and excellence, while the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) was introduced in 2014 to support elite talent. However, this programme has to proceed through the state and district federations, with some budgetary allocation from the central kitty (Nair and Eapen 2021). While elite sportspersons do need support, the pool from which this talent emerges ought to be much larger.

The nurture of sportspersons for elite competition also happens through private clubs and institutions. In the last couple of decades, this has gained a fillip through numerous academies and centres of sports training, several founded by sportspersons, including Usha herself. These are in the private sector, such as the P. Gopichand Badminton Academy in Hyderabad or the Chhatrasal Akhada in Delhi, perpetrating their own exclusions and concentration of talent and money. Such developments short-circuit the funnel approach that aims

to democratically nurture sport in schools to generate talent for the competitive level. Thus the nurture of sportspersons has gone on with a mixed model of public and private initiatives, which is still wanting in cohesiveness.

Federations are powerful entities with much political and commercial clout, and little interest in the promotion of sports or sportspersons. They need to be made accountable.

Economic incentives are important for sportspersons if they are to withstand and challenge a culture of dominance and violence. Support and care are imperative, not just for their sporting careers but also for their subsequent employment. The sports federations in the country have done very little to care for, promote, and nurture sportspersons, especially women. It is the sports quotas in universities and the public sector (in the Railways, services, banks, and public sector undertakings) that enable sportspersons to continue their careers as competitive athletes. Federations are powerful entities with much political and commercial clout, and little interest in the promotion of sports or sportspersons. They need to be made accountable.

In a world of sport that is intertwined with the media, we do find inspiring stories of care and success. A clutch of films that show us the underrepresented: *Jhund* (2022), a feature film by Nagaraj Manjule about a retired sports teacher, Vijay Barse; *Chak De! India* (2007), another feature film by Shimit Amin on Mir Ranjan Negi, a hockey player and coach; and *Burqa Boxers* (2016) a documentary by Alka Raghuraman on Razia Shabnam, a woman boxing coach in Kidderpore, West Bengal – all are stories of coaches who reach out to young women (and men) from marginal groups and nurture them for local and national competitions. And in hockey, cricket and boxing, India has women stars who match international standards.

The labours of care and perseverance remain invisible till they result in success. There is then recognition by the powerful and national glory is heaped on the stars. The joys and exhilarations of sporting moments and lives are unmatched—always to be treasured and celebrated. But the nation and society fall silent when the powerful are interrogated for violating the rights of both the successful and the invisible. Only silence greets the violated.

Meena Gopal teaches women's studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai and is a former Indian Universities record holder in heptathlon.

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