



## DESIGNED BIAS:

# A STUDY OF CHALLENGES IN WOMENS FOOTBALL IN DELHI-NCR

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## ABSTRACT

The research aims to study the challenges emerging from gender bias faced by sportswomen, focusing on women's football in Delhi-NCR. It uses a mixed methodology to collect data to study gender stereotyping and if sportswear encourages bias. It also examines how media communication defines the perception of the women's game. It addresses a research gap, as international studies on the subject are more readily available than studies conducted in India.

## Introduction

The history of women's football has been through tough times as it continues to battle gender bias and prejudice both on and off the field. As women gained greater freedom in Europe during the industrial revolution, friendly kickabouts became more formalized games, arousing controversy in England. The Dick-Kerr ladies' football team played with an audience of 53,000 at Goodison Park, Liverpool, in the 1920s, only to be strongly discouraged from playing a game "unsuitable" for ladies.

The English Football Association (FA) banned women's football from its club grounds, changing the women's game forever. After 50 years of regressive thinking, the ban was lifted in 1971 (BBC Sport, 2021).

Concurrently in the United States, a brief spurt of popularity in the 1920s was followed by a period of inactivity -- and the game resurfaced with the first US Women's Soccer League in 1951. The gates to the ground opened for US women's football on June 23, 1972, in the form of Title 9. This federal civil rights law was part of the Education Amendments, which provided men and women the right to play. The first women's soccer FIFA Women's World Cup was held in China in 1991 with 12 participating teams, and in 1996, women's football was finally introduced in the Olympics.

In India, football gained popularity in certain regions like Bengal, Manipur, Kerala, and Goa under the colonial influence of the English and the Portuguese. Despite being a game more suited to the subcontinent as it is for being lower in cost and requiring less prepared grounds, the success of cricket relegated other sports in India to a far second. However, with the recent success of Indian sportswomen like Sania Mirza, Mary Kom, Saina Nehwal, Mithali Raj, and PV Sindhu, women's football is beginning to gain ground in India. Without the pressure of a successful men's team, the women's team can flourish nationally, unlike other countries such as the US, where football is not popular.

Women in India and worldwide have faced sociocultural challenges to justify their desire to play: they have fought for fields, economic injustice, objectification, and sexism as players, referees, and sports journalists. Despite this, they continue to move the ball skillfully, dribbling through several obstacles.

They have also celebrated victories: the right to equal pay in the US just passed in 2022. The number of registered female players went up from 1.270m in 2016 to 1.365m in 2017, an increase of 7.5% in one year, as per UEFA Grassroots Charter data collected in June 2017.

FIFA seeks to double the number of female players by 2026 to 60 million. Though FIFA human rights assessments have made rules, conducted studies, and taken initiatives against discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual preference, and race, the situation on the ground remains vastly different.

## Research of Literature

Football is more commonly associated with the men's format of the game, just as it is in badminton, basketball, and other sports. A Google search of celebrity footballers will only display men in the results until a prefix is added -- i.e., "women's football" -- highlighting the inherent resistance to the organic extension of the game.

Women's football has evolved into its current form with several challenges. Data in the literature found can be categorized into four broad areas:

- Sociocultural barriers
- Economics and marketing
- Positive and negative roles of media and films
- Objectification and sexism

It also seemed appropriate to highlight some "personalities" or cases that stood out and made a difference in the game's evolution.

## **A Man's Game: Generations of Sociocultural Conditioning**

As women attempt to change the narrative in a patriarchal world, the challenge is amplified regarding male dominance in sports.

"It was difficult for me to convince everyone, especially my family. They were concerned, asked 'You're a girl; football is a contact sport; what will happen to you?'" said Afshan Ashiq, captain and goalkeeper of the Jammu and Kashmir Football Team. She eventually formed her own club, training 150 players in Jammu & Kashmir.

Physiotherapist Navneeta of PrishaPhysiocare worked with SAI, Sports Authority of India, for 11 years and has firsthand experience seeing the anxiety faced by women athletes and their parents. "During a training session, a mother came up to me and requested that her child not do too many bench presses because it might impede the growth of her breasts."

A 2019 New York Times piece highlighted the discrimination when United States national track champion Alycia Montañó became pregnant. Nike executives told her that her contract would be paused and they would stop sponsoring her. Following a public outcry, Nike decided to stop penalizing athletes for pregnancy. She was later celebrated and marketed as the "pregnant runner."

These are just a few examples of the sociocultural challenges faced by women. From safety concerns, restrictions to move freely, and responsibility for household chores to wearing sports uniforms and interacting with the opposite sex, women worldwide find impediments to simply wanting to play.

The resistance is not limited to Asian countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Iran, and Saudi Arabia but spans across the western hemisphere in countries like the UK and Sweden. Here too, women have restricted access to facilities like fields and coaches, limited funding, and resistance to the "feminization" of sports.

In Italy, the ultras (fans) handed out fliers stating that the Stadio Olimpico was a "sacred place" where women were not welcome and the first nine rows were "trenches" reserved for me only (Bacchi, 2018); in Zimbabwe, football songs expressed misogynistic messages, and in New Zealand football, there was not one woman represented at a senior level of the organization described as a "boys club" by the Muir report. These are examples of how sexism is rampant around the world. The excuses of "the women's game is not fast enough," "does not demand enough viewership," and more will be countered as we proceed along the research.

A study on the psychosocial constraints of Indian women's participation in games and sports concluded that a lack of support from parents and family is the primary difference, followed by a lack of sports orientation of the people living in the society or community were the primary deterrents for women joining sports. While taboos and social conventions were essential factors, religion did not prohibit women's participation. There is a significant difference between rural and urban localities.

The critical problem defining women's football in India and around the world is the lack of financial support, amplified by the attitude of sports officials towards the women's game. As women's football continues to get secondhand treatment compared to the men's game (from where officials and coaches hail), basics like playing under floodlights in India become hurdles. The reason given for not playing under floodlights at night might result in a law and order problem, as most spectators are women. However, it is acknowledged that more than 30 percent of the spectators in one-day (and night) international cricket matches played under floodlights in India are women.

Delhi schools (2017-2018) have an enrolment of 0.69 million boys and 0.79 million girls in government schools as per the Directorate of Education, GNCTD. However, Baichung Bhutia Football Club had 55 girls of 1250 total strength in NCR in 2018-2019, as per Mr. Ankit Arora (COO, BBFS). As per these figures, 4.4% of girls vs. total trainees register for football training beyond school.

Marginalization of women from sports starts at home, then school where boys are encouraged to play while girls are discouraged. It is reinforced by a community where women shy away from the field and are pushed towards more "feminine" pursuits and less physically challenging activities. Monika Bisht of Bhaichung Bhutia Football Schools feels that as a female coach, the burden of changing perceptions about women's athletic abilities has also fallen on her. As a result, the system lacks female representation at all levels: coaches, referees, fans, sports reporters, newscasters, and management creating a hostile male-dominated environment.

Figure 1A (Directorate of Education GNCTD 2023)

Figure 1B (Delhiplanning.nic.in 2023)

Figure 1C (Arora 2023)

Despite these challenges, Nielsen's World Football Report 2018 surveyed an urban Indian population to find 57% of men and 31% of women "interested" or "very interested" in football. Surprisingly the figure is higher in the low-income earners' category (52%) versus high-income earners (47%).

## **Money Makes the World Go Round: Is Economic Justification a Front for Cultural Bias?**

The trinity of sports, media, and business is a root cause for women's soccer's limitations in challenging hegemonic masculinity. Pseudo-liberal men use economic viability as an excuse to sideline women's football.

A vicious cycle of women's football quality suffering from a lack of funding and exposure, thereby receiving even less funding, has defined the story. It seems ironic that all sportswear brands can retail women's wear profitably, yet sports authorities claim that females lack sports interest. Women footballers are forced to have side jobs to sustain themselves, with the gender pay gap being large enough to spell exploitation.

The battle for equal pay wages on, even though the 2022 victory of the lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation alleging "institutionalized gender discrimination," proves the struggle is real. Despite the U.S. women's team winning the World Cup three times and the men's team never winning once, FIFA doubled the award money for the women's Cup from \$15 million to \$30 million in 2019; still, this figure remains at 7.5% of the men's world cup prize money (CNBC, 2019). Norwegian Ballon d'Or winning striker Ada Hegerberg has been on strike, refusing to play for her national team until the women's and men's teams receive equal pay.

A lack of women role models partially powers the vicious circle mentioned earlier, with a shortage of women consumers (fans) and women in key management positions. Inspirational female public figures like Megan Rapinoe, Bala Devi, Asha Lata Devi, and Sam Kerr will increase acceptability and promote the game, creating a new generation of sportswomen.

Fandom for men's sports is organic. On the other hand, sports have historically been considered inappropriate for women as an activity and an interest. Rather than create a divide, companies can easily double their market share by catering to both genders.

Nike invested heavily in FIFA Women's World Cup 2019 and marketed it to build a fan base. That fan base came through with an ROI: the jersey of the U.S. women's football team became the best-selling football jersey of all time and gender on Nike.com in a single season for the history of the company (CBS News, 2019). Umbro and Top Shop have successfully marketed the England team jersey for the women's market. Female sports merchandise can be a high-growth segment for companies.

Figure 4 [Insert source and year]

Similarly, women in key roles in national and international sports authorities will represent the female voice breaking the ceiling: the more sports becomes a viable and acceptable option for women, it will duly follow that there will be an increase in resources, infrastructure, and marketing for women's sports. This will then lead to better access to women's sports, making it more competitive and offering more commercial opportunities for revenue through ad buys and investments.

As per Nielsen's World football report 2018, football has a 31% women audience across 18 markets. Another study conducted across 24 market surveys showed that 70% of women find FIFA Men's World Cup and 54% find the Women's World Cup "very appealing." India is seen as a growth market, with the ISL being listed as an engine for growth.

At a national level, the economic benefits of using sports as a medium to promote women's empowerment are enormous. The cost involved in developing the women's game seems paltry compared to the payback of increasing the gender equity performance and quality of human capital, getting more women into the workforce, increasing education, and reducing domestic violence. Projects like slum rehabilitation with mixed football sessions have fostered pride, equality, and mutual respect.

Women's sport remains inferior in this chicken-and-egg game of infrastructure and quality, investment, and return. Men's sports are better funded, with structures to develop talent, while women emerge despite challenges of social acceptance, infrastructure, and financial backing into the elite ranks.

## **Media and Film: Amplifying Polarized Opinions**

Media has mirrored life as a mixed bag of resounding and muffling voices that have encouraged women's sports. Films like *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) helped raise public visibility of girls who play football, starring a British-Asian lead defying family pressure and societal expectation. ESPNcricInfo, a sporting website exclusively for cricket, is attempting to be more inclusive by replacing the words "batsman" and "man of the match" with the terms "batter" and "player of the match."

The 1st Ballon De Or Feminine, an iconic award in women's football, was first announced on December 3, 2018; men have received the equivalent since 1956. The first woman recipient, 23-year-old Ada Hegerberg, had already amassed 300 goals when she walked to the stage in a gold gown in Paris to receive the award. She was being compared to Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi when presenter Martin Solveig ruined the ambiance by asking her on stage -- in front of live and TV audiences -- if she could twerk. This event defines the challenge more than any other: a cocktail of token respect mixed with real sexism.

Both the quantity and quality of coverage of women's sports have reinforced the trivialization of sportswomen. In the US, ESPN's Sports Center dedicated 2% of airtime to women's sports in 2014. 40% of college athletes are women who received a mere 4% of media coverage (Ewinger, 2013). When analyzing the tweets of the four biggest sports news channels in Spain, the study showed that out of the total tweets with football as the subject line, women represent 20.88%, while 74.14% are about men.

Female sports reporters are treated as beautiful objects to arouse visual sensation rather than intelligent commentators. The media frame of the winning male athlete is that of a hero, whereas the image of the victorious female athlete is that of a friendly winner. Female athletes are also usually associated with their traditional roles as women, such as wives or mothers, referred to as "girls" and "young ladies" or hypersexualized. For example, out of the 716 regular Sports Illustrated magazines published between 2000 and 2011, only 35 of the covers featured female athletes, with most of them wearing bikinis.

Finally, the media discusses non-sport-related aspects of female athletes' lives rather than focusing on their athletic achievements. As per a study conducted by Cambridge University on Language, Gender, and Sports, evidence was found collocating women with "clad" as in "scantily clad," "dress," and the verb "wear" (Cambridge University Press, 2016 pp 8-12).

## **Objectification, Sexualization, Stereotyping, and Clothes**

"There is a saying in my village, 'Khana khao khud ke mann se, aur kapda pehno doosre ke mann se' (Eat what you like, wear what others like). No one can force you to eat, but if you don't want to feel bad about what others say, wear what they want you to wear," 22-year-old sprinter Dutee Chand said.

She was mired in controversy when Olympic medical tests found a high level of natural testosterone in her body, regulating her not to compete in the women's event. Several women athletes were faced with the same issues, labelled as "men" with deviant sexual identities before the rule was changed.

More and more female athletes today fight to be recognized for their feminine side while embracing attributes that are usually considered masculine. Nail polish and bold hairdos are not hidden under the tomboy look, but celebrated. Sportswomen are more than what they wear and more than how they look.

In women's sports, the price of professionalism is being stereotyped as butch or lesbian. Being classically attractive is a requirement for a sports media job but a disqualification for a sportswoman who must constantly prove she can be feminine and sporty at the same time. When the Williams sisters matched the service speeds of their male counterparts, satisfying the quality of play requirement in a men's match, they were showered with racist and sexist comments, including "so unbelievably dominant ... and manly."

The 2020 Olympics was full of stories that highlighted women's regulation uniforms being used to sexualize and unfairly dictate gender stereotypes. Germany's women's gymnastics team made a stand against the sexualization of their sport during the qualifications round by opting to wear full-body suits instead of the standard leotard (Aziz, 2021). The Norwegian women's beach handball team wore shorts instead of bikini bottoms, incurring a fine of 1500 euros. While male handball players were permitted to wear tank tops and shorts, female players were required to wear midriff tops and bikini bottoms. Paralympic athlete Olivia Breen was told her briefs were too revealing. Emerging from a long history of discrimination, English tennis player Charlotte Cooper became the first woman in history to win an Olympic gold medal at the games while wearing a full-length dress (Ilchi, 2021).

An encouraging study in the UK by Cleland, Jamie and Pope, Stacey and Williams, John (2020) found that in a male-dominated sample, 94% of all respondents said that they wanted to see more women fans at men's football; 91% supported more women board members; 80% wanted more women referees; 90% wanted to see more women journalists; and 81% wanted to see more female coaches. These views contrast starkly with the current reality. The same paper noted that sexism persisted in data from younger males aged 26-35. This is arguably a generational issue, and a source quoted in the paper claims that as the game evolves, the issue of sexism will reduce significantly. In this author's experience, most sexist or disparaging comments about women's sports come from the "older generation." In contrast, younger men, having been brought up in a different world, are less likely to share sexist views.

## **Corner Kick: India**

The history of football in India emanates from the colonial introduction of football and cricket as women from the English and Anglo-Indian communities participated in these sports. Even though football is a more cost-effective game better suited for conditions in the subcontinent, Gavaskar could be blamed for the Indian obsession with cricket, relegating all other sports to the background. Manipur, Bengal, Goa, Kerala, and Orissa have emerged as centers for women's football. Lackluster state football initiatives, unstructured development and scouting at grassroots levels, few female coaches, a lack of professional-level competition, and international exposure trips have outlined the scenario in India. Role models like Bala Devi and Aditi Chauhan have successfully paved the path for other youngsters to follow. Tata Football Academy (TFA) and the All India Football Federation (AIFF) are trying to take steps in the right direction.

## **Conclusion**

Despite living in the 21st century, the truth is that although the world may have taken two steps forward, society has remained rooted to the spot because the very idea that a woman can equal a man is an abomination to many. Women are made to face the barrels of buoyant sexism daily, monitored and judged by the way we dress, the way we speak, and the way we act. Subsequently, women do not receive as much respect or recognition on the professional front as their male counterparts.

This is the case in the sports industry, and gender inequality has proven to be an essential determinant for the participation and success of countries in international women's elite sports. Despite the improvements toward reaching gender equality, females face numerous obstacles. The media, for example, presents sports as if it is "a man's sport." As mentioned in the paper, if a woman dares to participate in a masculine sport, their sexuality is immediately questioned. The media tends to ignore and therefore devalue women's athletic accomplishments by focusing on their physical appearance, private lives, femininity, and sexuality, even if they achieve more impressive athletic feats than men.

Despite this, the critical problem defining women's football in India and worldwide is the lack of financial support, amplified by the attitude of sports officials toward the women's game. This is supported by a division created from a young age.

Marginalization of women from sports starts at home, then school, where boys are encouraged to play while girls are discouraged. It is reinforced by a community where women shy away from the field and are pushed towards more feminine pursuits and less physically-challenging activities. As a result, the system lacks female representation at all levels: coaches, referees, fans, sports reporters, newscasters, and management, creating a hostile male-dominated environment. The analysis has been able to throw light on the possible issues in women's sports, especially in India. It is unfortunate, but the problems persistent in women's football are of a sociological variety. It is not the parents not letting girls play but the Indian sports system that is to blame. The system is not working as it should, with apathy for women's sports development pervasive across the infrastructure.

We are not asking for more, but we are asking for the same: good facilities and equipment, fair and clean selection procedures, good medical support and advice on other health-related matters, job opportunities and job security, and overall support.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the main challenges for women in women's football in Delhi/NCR?
2. What subtle cues in communication define the perception of women's athletes in media, film, news, sports channels, and sports brands?
3. Does sportswear/uniforms encourage gender stereotyping of women in sports?

## Research Objectives

1. To list the gender-biased challenges for women in sports with a focus on women's football in Delhi-NCR
2. To examine the role of communication in media (film, TV, Internet, and news) defining the perception of the women's game.
3. To question the effect of sportswear in gender stereotyping of sportswomen.

## Research Hypothesis

The critical gender-related challenges women footballers face are family pressure, pay/sponsorship, infrastructure and quality of game, safety, and respectability. Media communication is designed to play a positive and negative role in the quality and quantity of coverage. It is crucial in fostering equality in the sports field. Women's sportswear encourages objectification in some instances and gender stereotyping in others, reinforcing notions of "butch," "manly," or "sexy."

## Research Methodology

A mixed methodology will be used to collect data, including questionnaires, interviews, and secondary research of media/publications, advertisements, et al.

A set of 30 questions will be designed to address the broad themes. The sample will consist of 20-40 girls aged 15 to 25 years from Delhi-NCR who are both currently playing and have stopped playing football. The questionnaire will be sent via email so that it is convenient for the respondent to answer. It will cover questions on the areas defined in the research literature.

Interviews from female and male coaches will be included along with some players to add new and parallel information to the data collected via the focused questionnaire. A few boys aged 15 to 25 who play football may be included in the interview to understand how they interact with and view women in a mixed game.

## Possible Consumers of this Research

Sports authorities may use the research while formulating plans at a national level or football schools to improve their training. It may also be viewed by girls who are interested in pursuing a career in football. Sportswear brands may use this information for marketing research and product design. Sports channels and newspapers may consider the data while creating content for female audiences. Studies conducted so far are limited to the sociocultural framework of the Western world. Little attention has been paid to the problems of women's participation in games and sports in the Indian context.

## Future Research Opportunities

1. Is economic viability a problem in the women's game, or is it an excuse to relegate the women's game to oblivion?
2. A comparative study of other states in India.
3. A rural and urban comparison of the status of women's sports.
4. A study of the career progress of girls who played youth sports and how it affected their life outcome, compared to girls who were not involved in any sports.
5. A study of sports uniforms in men and women to compare comfort, aesthetics, and sexualization.
6. A study of women's sports interest on the internet compared to in real life.
7. A study of Indian media and women's sports coverage, language, and gender bias.
8. Cricket and gender bias: Is there more equality if there is more significant funding?

TOPIC	TARGET RESPONSE	SAMPLE SIZE	METHOD	ADDITIONAL	LIMITATIONS
To list the gender biased challenges faced by women footballers in Delhi/NCR; Examine the role of media in the perception of the womens game	Female footballers aged 15-25 who are/ have playing/stopped playing at club/state level at Delhi NCR; Male/female coaches and management; Male teammates	30-40 girls; 2/3 coaches and management; 2/3 bs	Questionnaire via email; interview via phone	Coaches/ teammates will provide parallel and additional data on the subject	The study focuses on urban area and does not cover rural/grassroots experience. It would be colored by regional attitudes which may vary in different areas within the subcontinent

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