

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# In the Shadow of Double Disadvantage: Turkish Women Athletes' Participation and Representation in Paralympic Games

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The Paralympic Games provide a significant platform for the representation of women with disabilities in sports and for overcoming societal prejudices. This study aims to analyze the level of participation of Turkish female Paralympic athletes in the Paralympic Games, the diversity of the sports they participated in, and the number and types of medals they won from a historical perspective. **Method:** A qualitative research method has been adopted, and document analysis was used for data collection. The data were obtained from the official website of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). The data were categorized into six categories: number of participants, number of medals, type of medals, sports, Turkey's world ranking, and gender-based world ranking. These data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, with frequency and percentage analyses applied, and all data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel. **Result:** The findings reveal that, a total of 155 female athletes participated in the Paralympic Games between 2004 and 2024 and won 40 medals during that time (7 gold, 13 silver, 20 bronze), with weightlifting being the sport with the most medals. In terms of female athlete representation, Turkey ranked 104th in 2004, and by 2020, it had risen to 11th place. Regarding the success ranking in the Paralympic Games, Turkey ranked 53rd in 2004 and improved to 23rd in 2024. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, the promotion of gender equality has contributed significantly to increasing the participation of Turkish female Paralympic athletes in sports, thereby making important contributions to the country's success in the Paralympic Games.

## Keywords

Paralympic Games, Gender Equality in Sports, Women with Disabilities, Double Disadvantage

## INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that around one billion people worldwide experience some form of disability, equivalent to 15% of the world's population (WHO, 2011). Women with disabilities make up a significant proportion of people living with disabilities and have to deal with various inequalities arising from both their gender and their disability (Olenik et al., 1995; Clark & Mesch, 2016; Güven et al., 2019). The intersectional approach explains how individuals' identities interact with each other in such situations and focuses on how the intersection of gender and disability deepens the oppression and discrimination experienced by women (Crenshaw,

1989; Hanlon & Taylor, 2022). Research shows that women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence than men with disabilities and women without disabilities (Ballan & Freyer, 2017; García-Cuéllara et al., 2023), have higher rates of unemployment (UN Women Turkey & Association of Women with Disabilities, 2024), experience inadequate access to health services (Wisdom et al., 2010; Matin et al., 2021; Naghdi-Dorabati et al., 2024) and face significant gaps in access to educational opportunities (Kumari, 2020). As active members of the society to which they belong, women with disabilities have the right to live as independently as possible, with the highest possible quality of life. A society that does not recognize the

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value of functionally diverse people faces the possibility of losing the full potential that these individuals can offer (Ibargoien et al., 2023).

In order not to lose the talents, skills and opportunities to contribute to society that women with disabilities have, legal arrangements have been made at national and international level (Limoochi & Clair, 2011). These include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2016), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UN, 1995) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). These policies constitute the basic frameworks at the international level to secure the rights of women with disabilities, ensure gender equality and combat various forms of discrimination against women (Un Women, 2018). One of the organizations that emerged as a result of these international policies is the Women's Sports Committee (WiSC). This committee was established to advise on gender equality issues to ensure the full participation of women and girls at all levels of sport. WiSC develops strategies, proposes policies and monitors the implementation of these policies and strategies to empower women and increase participation in Paralympic sport. In this way, it aims to ensure that women with disabilities have more active and equal opportunities in sport (IPC, 2024).

Considering the inequalities at the intersection of disability and gender, the participation of women athletes with disabilities in sports and their achievements have the potential to transform social norms. Although issues regarding gender and disability awareness has increased in the last three decades, the literature on whether female athletes with disabilities participate in sports on an equal level with male athletes or to what extent they are represented in winning medals at national and international level compared to men is quite limited (Remi et al., 2017; Kirakosyan, 2021; Santos et al., 2024). This study aims to analyze the historical level of participation of Turkish female Paralympic athletes in the Paralympic Games, the diversity of the branches in which they participated, and the number and types of medals they won. Within the scope of the study, it is aimed to obtain data on gender distribution and balance by comparing the participation rates and achievements of female and

male athletes. Thus, it is aimed to provide a basis for understanding the representation levels of female Paralympic athletes in a quantitative and historical context and to evaluate the possible effects of their success on gender equality.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Research Model*

Qualitative research allows researchers to directly access the data source. A detailed description of the research context and the examined phenomena enables the synthesis and interpretation of the obtained information, as well as the formulation of generalizations in this regard (Büyükoztürk, 2011). In this context, the qualitative research method was preferred to provide a detailed description of the situation of Turkish female Paralympic athletes in the Paralympic Games between 2004 and 2024, analyze their development in the historical process, and interpret the obtained data within an objective framework.

### *Collection of Data*

In this study, the document analysis method was used for data collection and evaluation. Document analysis is a data collection method based on the systematic examination of written or visual materials produced in the past and is used to understand historical events, evaluate current processes, or analyze a specific phenomenon in depth (Bowen, 2009). In accordance with the purpose of the research, the data were obtained from the official website (<https://www.paralympic.org/>) of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). The use of only official records, rather than newspapers, third-party sources, or non-academic publications, ensured the authenticity and reliability of the documents. The accuracy of the data was confirmed by cross-checking with the reports published by the Turkish Paralympic Committee.

### *Data Analysis*

All data examined in the study were categorized and analyzed using the "Evaluation Form" developed by the researchers. To ensure the content validity of the form, the opinions of two academicians who are experts in the field of sports sciences were consulted, and consistency between their evaluations was observed. The evaluation form consists of six categories: number of participants, number of medals, branch of participation, medal type, Turkey's world ranking, and gender-based country ranking. In the number of

participants category, the number of female and male athletes participating in the Paralympic Games between 1992 and 2024 was calculated separately, and trends of change over the years were identified. In the number of medals category, the medals won by male and female athletes during the same period were analyzed in detail. In the branch of participation and medal type categories, the branches in which female athletes participated between 2004 and 2024 were evaluated, and the distribution of medals across these branches was analyzed to determine in which sports greater

success was achieved. In the world ranking category, Turkey's level of success between 2004 and 2024 was identified. In the gender-based country ranking category, Turkey's global position in terms of female athlete representation in the Paralympic Games between 2008 and 2020 was evaluated. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, with frequency and percentage analyses applied. All data were tabulated using Microsoft Excel, and the findings were visualized for presentation.

## RESULTS

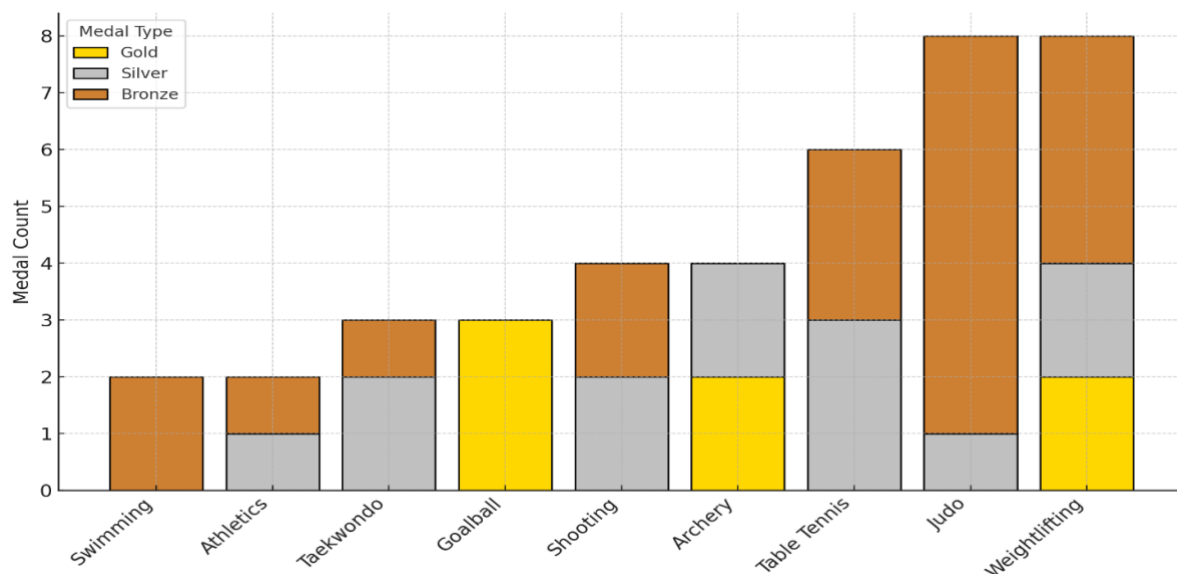
**Table 1.** Paralympic Games participation, branch distribution and medal wins of Turkish women Paralympic athletes between 1960-2024

Year	Number of female athletes	Branches	Number of medals	Medal types
2004	1	Table Tennis	0	-
2008	8	Shooting, Weightlifting, Judo, Table Tennis, Archery	2 (1 gold, 1 bronze)	Archery (Gold), Table Tennis (Bronze)
2012	21	Athletics, Shooting, Weightlifting, Table Tennis, Swimming, Archery, Judo	7 (1 gold, 4 silver, 2 bronze)	Weightlifting (Gold, Silver), Table Tennis (Silver), Table Tennis Team (Silver), Judo (Bronze)
2016	33	Wheelchair Tennis, Goalball, Shooting, Athletics, Weightlifting, Judo, Table Tennis, Swimming, Archery	6 (2 gold, 1 silver, 3 bronze)	Goalball (Gold), Weightlifting (Gold), Table Tennis (Silver), Judo (Bronze), Shooting (Bronze)
2020	44	Swimming, Goalball, Table Tennis, Weightlifting, Judo, Archery, Shooting, Athletics, Badminton, Taekwondo	8 (1 gold, 2 silver, 5 bronze)	Goalball (Gold), Archery (Silver), Taekwondo (Silver), Weightlifting (Bronze), Swimming (Bronze), Judo (Bronze), Shooting (Bronze) Table Tennis (Bronze)
2024	48	Swimming, Goalball, Table Tennis, Weightlifting, Judo, Archery, Shooting, Athletics, Badminton, Taekwondo, Rowing	17 (2 gold, 6 silver, 9 bronze)	Goalball (Gold), Archery (Gold, Silver), Taekwondo (Silver, Bronze), Weightlifting (Silver, Bronze), Table Tennis (Silver), Shooting (Silver), Athletics (Silver, Bronze), Swimming (Bronze), Judo (Bronze)

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that female athletes participated in the 2004 Paralympic Games for the first time and a total of 155 female athletes took part in these games including the 2024 Paralympic Games. In this period, a total of 40 medals were won, 7 of which were gold, 13 silver and 20 bronze. In 2004, women athletes were represented only in table tennis, but by 2024, they were represented in a wide range of sports such as

swimming, goalball, table tennis, weightlifting, judo, archery, shooting, athletics, badminton, taekwondo and rowing.

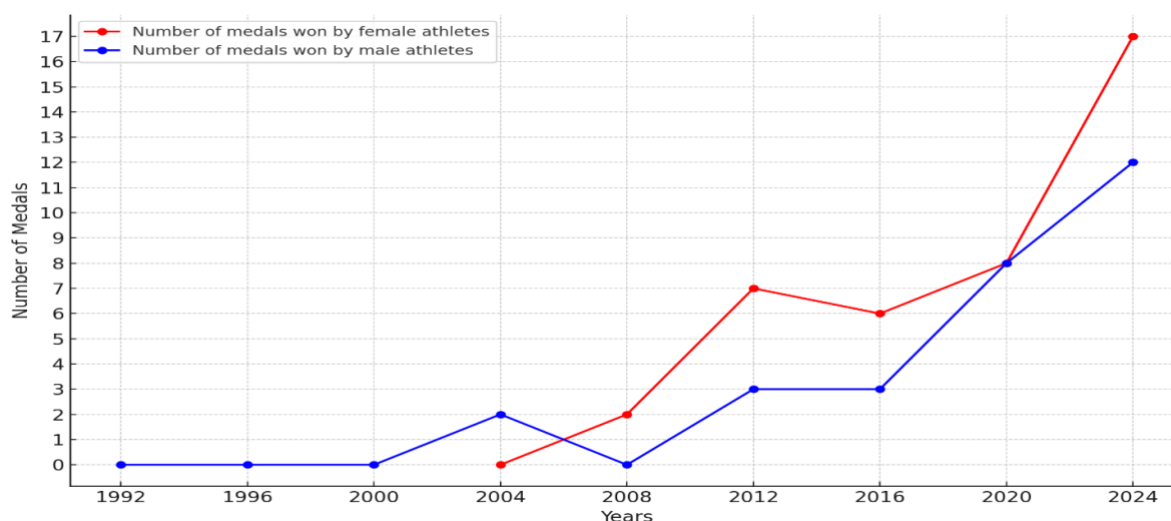
Figure 1 shows that 90% of the medals were won in individual sports and 10% in team sports (3 gold/goalball and 1 silver/table tennis). The branches with the most medals are weightlifting, judo, table tennis, shooting, archery, goalball, taekwondo, athletics and swimming (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Medal distribution of female Paralympic athletes by branch

Figure 2 shows a trend in the number of medals won by male and female athletes between 2004 and 2024. Female athletes surpassed male athletes in the number of medals since 2008 and maintained this momentum until the 2024

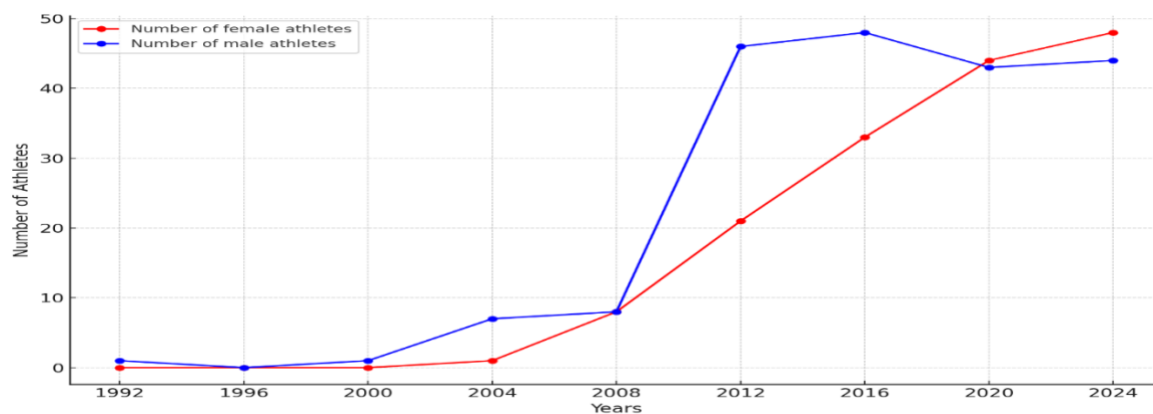
Paralympic Games. Although the total number of medals won by male athletes increased until 2024, it did not show as significant an acceleration as the rise of female athletes.



**Figure 2.** Number of medals of male and female athletes by years

Figure 3 shows the number of female and male athletes participating in the Turkish national Paralympic team between 2004 and 2024. The findings reveal that the number of female athletes has shown a significant increase over the years and has equaled that of male athletes. Especially in 2020 and 2024, the number of female athletes

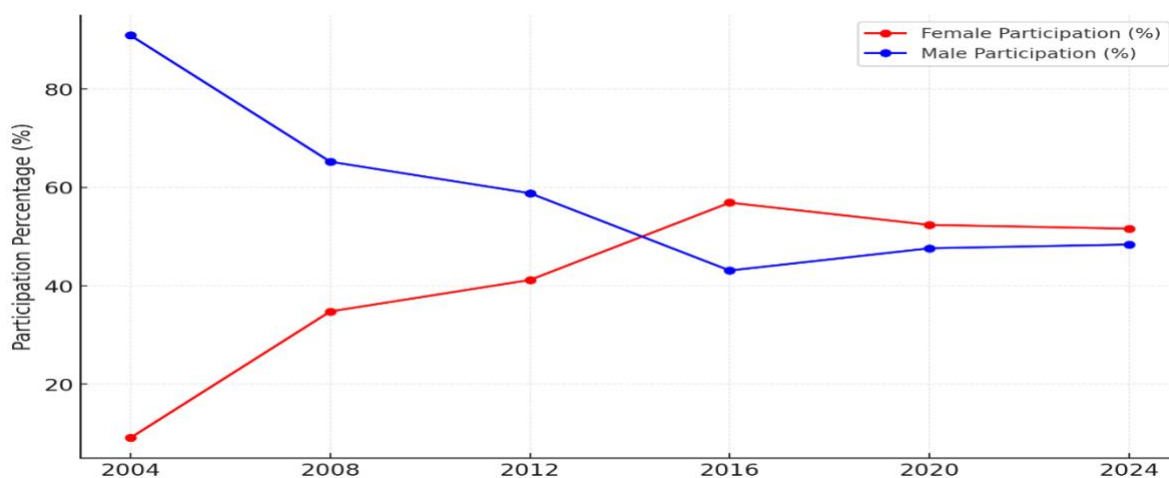
exceeded the number of male athletes. The number of male athletes fluctuated over the years, reaching the highest levels in 2012 and 2016, followed by a slight decline. This visualization reveals that a significant improvement has been achieved in terms of gender balance in the Turkish Paralympic national team.



**Figure 3.** Number of male and female athletes participating in Paralympic Games by years

Figure 4 shows the annual trends in the participation percentages of male and female athletes in the Paralympic Games between 2004 and 2024. The findings reveal a reversal in the

participation percentages of male and female athletes during this period. While the percentage of female athletes increased steadily, the percentage of male athletes changed at a slower rate.

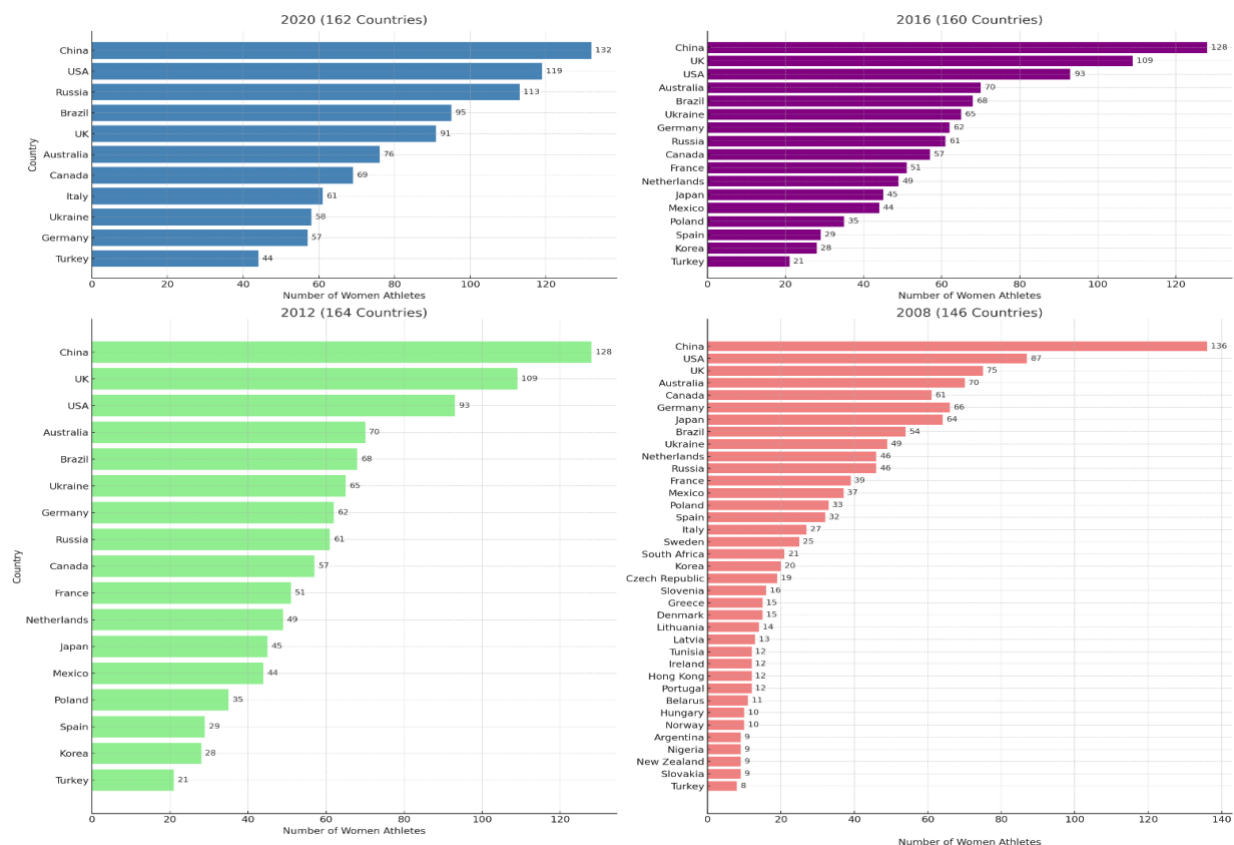


**Figure 4.** Yearly trends in gender participation percentages

Figure 5 shows the in 2008, a total of 146 countries participated in the Paralympic Games and Turkey ranked 38th in terms of female athlete participation. This period shows that Turkey's representation of women athletes in Paralympic sports at the international level is still in its infancy. By 2012, the number of countries participating in the Paralympic Games increased to 164. In this period, Turkey made a significant leap in the participation of female athletes and rose to 17th place. In 2016, with a total of 160 countries participating in the Paralympic Games, Turkey ranked 14th in female athlete participation. This development reflects that the increase in the participation of female Paralympic athletes continues in a sustainable manner. In 2020, the

number of countries participating in the Paralympic Games was recorded as 162. In this period, Turkey ranked as high as 11th in female athlete participation and managed to be among the top 15 countries. In 2004, a total of 135 countries participated in the Paralympic Games. Turkey ranked 104th among the countries with female athlete delegations. However, it was not deemed appropriate to include the results of this year in the graphs due to the fact that Turkey was behind many countries in the ranking. On the other hand, a country-by-country breakdown of female athlete participation data for the 2024 Paralympic Games is not available on the official website of the Paralympic Games. This restricts a comprehensive analysis for the relevant period.

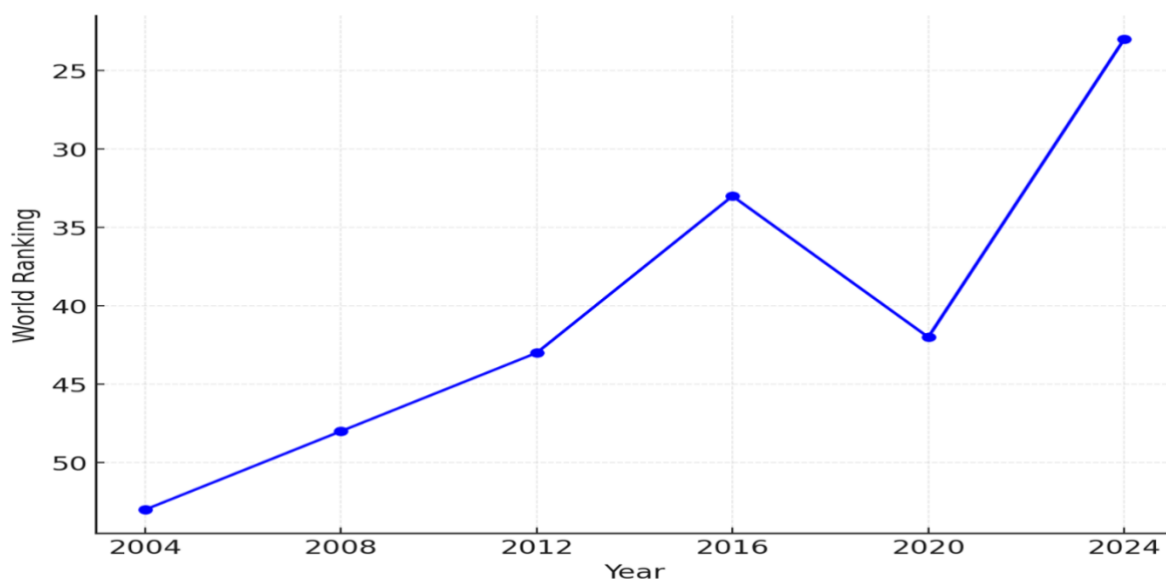




**Figure 5.** Country Rankings in Women Athlete Participation at Paralympic Games: 2008-2020

Figure 6 shows the change in Turkey's world ranking in the Paralympics between 2004 and 2024. It can be seen that there is significant progress in the ranking over the years. From 53rd place in 2004, Turkey rose to 23rd place in 2024. This graph

clearly shows how the success of Turkey's Paralympic athletes in the international arena has increased over time. Especially the performance of female athletes has contributed significantly to this rise.



**Figure 6.** Turkey's world ranking in Paralympic Games (2004-2024)

## DISCUSSION

The Paralympic Games were first organized in Rome in 1960 and started with limited branches and participants in order to make people with disabilities more visible in society through sports and turned into an international movement with an expanding range over time (Bailey, 2008). It is thought that the reason for the limited number of branches and participants at the beginning of the Paralympic Games was the lack of communication between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International Paralympic Committee (IPC). This situation negatively affected the participation of both male and female athletes in the Paralympic Games. However, with the Paralympic Games being organized in the same city as the Olympics in 1988 (Thompson, 2016) and the development of a stronger cooperation between the IOC and the IPC, a significant increase in the participation of female athletes was achieved. Within the framework of this cooperation, the IPC Sports Council launched the Women's Initiative and emphasized women's right to equal participation in sport through important international initiatives such as the 1994 Brighton Declaration and the 1998 Windhoek Call to Action (De Pauw and Gavron, 2005; Santos et al., 2024). The Paralympics were directly affected by these policies and increased the participation of female athletes in the games. As a result of these developments, the proportion of female athletes in the Paralympics has reached almost equal levels with male athletes. For example, 1,983 of the 4,461 athletes competing in the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games were women (Olympic, 2024). While these international developments have made significant progress towards gender equality by increasing the participation of female athletes in the Paralympic Games, differences have been observed between countries' involvement in this global movement (Santos et al., 2024). Turkey was represented in this global organization for the first time in 1992 with only one male athlete (Alpdoğan, 2022). In 2000, with the dissolution of the Turkish Disabled Sports Federation and the establishment of federations suitable for disability groups (TİESF, 2024), an important development process started regarding Turkey's participation in the Paralympic Games. These developments were followed by the establishment of the Turkish National Paralympic Committee (TMPK) in 2002. With the establishment of TMPK, the organizational structure was strengthened and a sustainable

foundation was established in Paralympic sports (TMPK, 2024). As a result of these transformations, women athletes participated in the Paralympics for the first time in 2004 (Alpdoğan, 2022). As of 2024, it is seen that the Turkish women's Paralympic team has reached the highest participation rate ever and gender equality has been at its highest level. This clearly demonstrates that small changes in the organizational structure create big and positive impacts.

In their early days, the Paralympic Games were insufficient in terms of the number of branches as well as the number of participants. In the 1960s, there were only a limited number of sports branches for individuals with physical disabilities (wheelchair basketball, wheelchair fencing, etc.), while in the following years, the number and diversity of these branches (cycling, rowing, wheelchair tennis, boccia, para-taekwondo, etc.) have increased significantly, and a wide variety of sports branches has emerged in which both female and male athletes can participate (Thompson, 2016; Paralympics, 2024). In the context of Turkey, female Paralympic athletes, who were initially represented only in table tennis, now participate in many different branches such as rowing, taekwondo, badminton, athletics (TMPK, 2024). In particular, branches such as judo and weightlifting, which require physical endurance and are generally considered to be “male-dominated”, are among the fields where Turkish female Paralympic athletes have won the most medals. In addition, taekwondo has become a regular medal-earning discipline for Turkish female athletes since its addition to the Paralympic Games (TMPK, 2024). Internationally, female athletes continue to struggle with gender bias in male-dominated sports. Women are subjected to constant pressure to demonstrate their competence in disciplines such as judo and shooting and face negative attitudes, including being underestimated (Kirakosyan, 2021). Turkey's difference in this context is that its female athletes have largely overcome these prejudices by achieving significant international success in disciplines that require physical endurance. A more comprehensive analysis of the individual experiences of athletes and societal perceptions is needed. It is important to understand the dynamics behind their successes in order to better evaluate the effects of prejudices and the social reflections of these successes on female athletes.

Another finding of the study reveals that Turkish female Paralympic athletes revealed a significant increase in medal wins in recent years. The 2024 Paralympic Games stand out as a period in which Turkish female Paralympic athletes won more medals both historically and in comparison, to male athletes. In fact, the total of 17 medals won by Turkish women athletes at the 2024 Paralympic Games exceeded the total number of medals won by Turkish athletes (men and women) at the Olympic Games organized in the same year (8 medals), a significant achievement (TMOK, 2024; TMPK, 2024). In addition to this general picture of success, it is also observed that Turkish female Paralympic athletes have achieved remarkable successes in the international arena at the individual level. Gizem Girişmen made history as the first female athlete to win a gold medal for Turkey at the 2008 Paralympics. Nazmiye Muratlı's world record gold medal in 2012, becoming the first Turkish athlete to win back-to-back champions in 2016, and Sevilay Öztürk becoming the youngest Turkish athlete to win a medal at the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics show

**Conclusion**

When evaluated from an intersectional theory perspective, the success of Turkish female Paralympic athletes, especially in male-dominated sports, clearly reveals their struggle to overcome inequalities experienced on two different axes of discrimination. As a result, this increase in the participation and success of female athletes can be explained by factors such as gender equality policies, increased support programs and projects that encourage participation in sports. While there has been a general stabilization in the participation and medal count of male athletes, the rising performance of female athletes is an important indicator of the changing dynamics in this field. At the international level, in addition to individual achievements, it is anticipated that this progress will be carried further thanks to various regulations and policies put in place.

### **Recommendations**

Women athletes with disabilities still face numerous barriers in the world of competitive sport and these challenges have not been fully overcome. Five focus areas, aligned with UN Women's Sport for Generational Equality initiative, provide recommendations to address these challenges. These focus areas are:

To ensure equal participation and representation of women and men athletes. Promote

that Turkish women athletes are gaining momentum in the international arena. Their achievements have reinforced not only their individual stories, but also their role as an inspiration for the next generation of athletes. However, despite these individual achievements, Turkey lags behind many countries in the overall medal tally, suggesting the need for stronger support mechanisms at the national level. Although the main goal of the Paralympic Games is inclusion, medal winners are often limited to a select few countries such as the USA, Canada, Germany, China and Australia. These countries win between 9% and 29% of the total medals, while many other countries lag behind, highlighting inequalities in access to Paralympic sport. Social deficiencies, administrative inadequacies and economic deficiencies are among the main reasons for these inequalities (Mauerberg-deCastro et al., 2016). This clearly shows that despite the remarkable individual achievements of Turkish female Paralympians, Turkey needs stronger infrastructure, economic support and strategic planning to improve its overall medal performance. a balanced and fair reflection of all genders in the media. Provide equal incentives and financial support to male and female athletes. Increase women's representation in decision-making and leadership positions, Creating an inclusive organizational culture. These five focus areas are closely interlinked and should be addressed in a holistic approach to increase the representation and success of women athletes with disabilities in sport. Supporting and strengthening the representation of women athletes with disabilities will contribute to both achieving gender equality and increasing opportunities for people with disabilities in sport (Olympics, 2024).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study provides data on the participation and representation of female Paralympic athletes. However, one of its limitations is the lack of in-depth exploration of individual experiences due to the absence of qualitative interviews. Additionally, the research focuses solely on the Paralympic Games and does not provide information on the representation of female athletes with disabilities in other international organizations, such as Deaflympics and Special Olympics. This limitation restricts a comprehensive assessment of the representation of different disability groups in the field of sports.



## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. No financial support was received.

## Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Atatürk University, Faculty of Sport Sciences (E-70400699-050.02.04-2500069051).

## Author Contributions

Study Design: SSD, ELİ; Data Collection: SSD; Statistical Analysis: SSD; Data Interpretation: ELİ; Manuscript Preparation: SSD, ELİ; Literature Search: SSD, ELİ. All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript.

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