

Prevalence of Mainstream Gender-Related Issues in Sports: Female Student Athletes' Perceptions

Awashes SUBBA

Department of Physical Education, Chandrapur College, University of Burdwan, West Bengal, INDIA

Email: awashes1919@gmail.com

Type: Research Article (Received: 12.04.2018 – Corrected: 14.05.2018 - Accepted: 16.05.2018)

Abstract

This study aims to examine female student athletes' perceptions on gender-related issues in sports through a quantitative survey. Three hundred and forty-two (N=342) female student athletes studying physical education in under graduate courses were selected from different colleges of Sikkim. Gender-related issues were assessed by using questionnaire based on Likert scale developed by Jafrey (1995). Out of forty-three items in the scale, ten items were selected as relevant for assessing perceptions of female student athletes regarding gender issues in sports. Percentage analysis of responses to each statement was calculated. Result showed that the perception of the female student athletes about the gender-related issue (see table-1) in sports is mostly positive; it means that the gender-related problems do exist in sports. Female student athletes opined that the gender-related problems restrict women's participation in sports. The study also revealed that female student athletes disagreed with the notion that vigorous participation in games and sports leads to loss of femininity among women. This finding suggests that it is necessary to make improvements in support system for female student athletes of colleges for their participation in sports.

Keywords: Female students, athletes, gender, sports

Introduction

Gender issues in sports are important topics in the sociology of sports. Gender is a central organizing principle of social life and gender ideology influences our identities and relationships as well as how we organize social world. It influences what we wear, how we walk, how we present ourselves to other and how we think about and plan for future (Coakley, 2009).

Theorists of gender oppression have described women's situation as the consequence of a direct power relationship between men and women in which men have fundamental and concrete interest in controlling, using, subjugating and oppressing women. This pattern of gender oppression is incorporated in the deepest and most pervasive ways into society's organization (Lengermann and Brantley, 2011). And the place of sport within such society's organization is needed to explore and understand.

Theorists have also advocated the existence of gender inequality in terms of opportunity, social status, power and distribution of material resources (Lengermann and Brantley, 2011). Due to gender inequality, women are often faced with stereotypes that are imposed on them by the society and, in the field of sports it is of no exception. For example, some girls avoid certain sports for fear of being perceived as unfeminine or lesbian; some parents discourage their daughters from taking up sport; some lesbian athletes avoid going public about their sexuality in case they experience prejudice from other athletes and coaches or lose public support/sponsorship (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, 2008).

Messner (1988) stated that the socially constructed meanings surrounding physiological differences between the sexes, the present male-dominated sports, and the media framing of the female athlete all threaten to subvert women's endeavor towards a successful position in sports. In short, Messner (1988) believes that the female athlete and her body has become a contested ideological domain.

In a recent influential analysis, Joanne Hill argued that modern society is socially stratified and this stratification underpins form of inequality that is evident in sports. Stratification ranges from social class, biological differences to those that stress the social and cultural construction of gender and the persistence of patriarchal power structures sustaining a male hegemony in society and within sports continues to significantly disadvantage women (Hill, 2016).

Eminent researcher in the field of sports, Jennifer Hargreaves (1994) [as cited in Hill, 2016] suggests ,women who play or work in men's sport have constantly to negotiate their status in traditional cultural context of men's power and privilege, and in a discourse of emphasized femininity, patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (Hill, 2016).

As athletes, women are often perceived as inferior to male athletes due to the gender-related sports images and stereotypes (Sage and Eitzen, 2013; Castle, 2013; Vadhera, 2012) [as cited in Rayburn et al., 2015]. For example, even after the relaxation in official rules warranting the exclusion of women, cultural ideology continues to affect women's participation in sports (Gupta, 2013).

In India, women are traditionally not encouraged to indulge in sports, with centuries women have been rated as less important than men. In fact, in some ways, women's responsibilities are to look after household and children (Singh and Singh, 2010). In fact, women's continued under-representation in sports is not just because of overt discrimination but also by more

subtle, insidious ideologically based oppressions (Scraton and Flintoff, 2013). And, sport as a subsystem of a society is mirroring all these oppressions in its own context.

Destined anatomical weakness never kept Indian women within the four-walled kitchen, rather invigorated towards achieving athletic success in tune with men, for example, Indian women athletes' performance in Common Wealth Games, 2018 in Australia was better than the male counterpart. But, there are still many social factors, for example, lower pay and fewer opportunities for women athletes that create a socially constructed discriminatory situation for women in sports (Kosofsky, 1993).

Studies of gender issues in sports are primarily depended on western thinkers and research, as those studies are scarce in India. Nevertheless, there is a common point of argument among sociologists and sports sociologists that gender differences, inequality and oppressions are socially constructed global phenomena. Therefore, to understand the gender issues in sports the present study was conducted to examine the perceptions of female student athletes regarding the socially constructed gender-related issues (see table 1) in sports.

Method

Data were collected from female student athletes studying physical education in under graduate courses in different colleges of Sikkim and have participated in intercollegiate sports competitions mainly popular sports like football, badminton, volleyball, karate, basketball, archery, table tennis and athletics and also marathon race. Three hundred and forty-two (N=342) subjects were selected for the present study. The age range of the subjects under study ranged from 17-23 years. The perception of female student athletes regarding gender issues in sports was collected through group administration of the questionnaire developed by H. A. Jafrey and Ajmer Singh (1995). Out of forty-three items in the scale ten items were selected as relevant to assess attitudes of female student athletes towards gender issues in sports. The descriptive technique of percentage was used for statistical analysis. Inter-item reliability of the scale i.e. Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.763. The present study is a part of Ph.D. work submitted in Kalyani University in December; 2015. This study is delimited within the state of Sikkim.

Result

Table 1. Percentage of responses in relation to the perceptions of gender-related issues in sports

Gender related issues in sports		Percentage of responses		
		Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Socio-cultural prejudices, superstition, and taboos restrict women's participation in games and sports.	51.5%	14.6%	33.9%
2	Women in our society are unable to participate in sports activities because of dual responsibilities of housewives and working women	66.4%	7.9%	25.7%
3	Educational level of parents is a determining factor for participation of their children in sports activities.	51.2%	12.0%	36.8%

4	Male dominating society undermines women's participation in sports	55.6%	12.6%	31.9%
5	Parents are worried about their daughters' participation in sports because they feel that the participation may affect their child bearing, interfere with menstrual cycle for similar physiological problems.	49.1%	12.9%	38.0%
6	Socio-economic background of parent disturbs girls' participation in sports	68.7%	7.6%	23.7%
7	Sport helps to eliminate all sorts of discrimination against any country or person on the ground of race, color or religion	63.1%	13.45%	23.39%
8	Vigorous participation in games and sports leads to loss of femininity among the women.	8.5%	15.5%	76.0%
9	Participation in sport releases pent up emotions and tensions.	65.8%	17.0%	17.3%
10.	Participation in sport helps to raise the status of women in the society.	87.1%	8.2%	4.7%

Discussion

The results revealed that the perceptions of the female student athletes about the gender-related issues (see table-1) are mostly positive. About (66.4%) agreed that women in society are unable to participate in sports activities because of dual responsibilities of house wives and working women. More than half of the respondents (51.5%) hold an opinion that socio-cultural prejudices, superstition, and taboos restrict women's participation in games and sports and about (55.6%) strongly believed that male dominating society undermines women's participation in sports. It seems that societal constraints like household responsibilities, socio-cultural prejudices, superstitions and male domination are major issues that need to be tackled for the improvement of women's participation and progress in sports.

Research Scholar, Suchitra Akoijam from the Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS) JNU, New Delhi, India, conducted a study, based on review of secondary literature, on participation level of women in sports in various states of India with respect to National Games and Commonwealth Games. She found that Overall participation level of women is comparatively less than the male counterparts and many states and Union territories have comparatively lesser average women participants. She further concluded that the reasons behind the fewer number of women's participation in sports are gender difference, various inequalities in different regions, social and economic barriers, lack of proper infrastructures and improper implementations of policies and programmes of Government. The present findings discussed in first paragraph of discussion part are also in tune with the observation and argument made by Akoijam.

Garg et al. conducted a study on women's contribution in sports in Haryana, a sample of 200 students (female) was selected from the campus of Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak and the data were collected with the help of a questionnaire. Although, Garg et al. found that the family of female students does not discourage participation in sports but they feel insecure

at playground. It shows that gender-related issues in sports do exist in other societies as well. It seems that the gender-related problem is ubiquitous.

Female student athletes (51.2%) emphasized that educational level of parents is a determining factor for participation of their children in sports activities and about (68.7%) opined that socio-economic back ground of parent disturbs girls' participation in sports. This shows that support from social institutions like education and economy play a significant role in women's participation in sports.

Majority of student athletes (49.1%) opined that parents are worried about their daughters' participation in sports because they feel that the participation may affect their child bearing, interfere with menstrual cycle for similar physiological problems. While many (76.0%) disagreed with the notion that vigorous participation in games and sports leads to loss of femininity among the women. This indicates a contrast between parents' and daughters' perceptions regarding gender issues (see table 1) and the participation in sports.

Binayak Kumar Dubey in his study on problems of female in sports participation, one hundred and fifty students were selected from two government aided colleges of Chandauli District, and the investigator found that females in rural villages need awareness programme to overcome the misconception regarding the sports participation (Dubey, 2003). Misconception here has some links to prejudices, superstition, and taboos regarding participation in sports mentioned in the result section (see table 1).

Result also reveals that sport helps to eliminate all sorts of discrimination against any country or person on the ground of race, color or religion and this was accepted by (63.1%) of athletes. This is in tune with the opinion of M.K. Singh (1990) [as cited in Ashitha, 2012] that religious perception like the dress code for women is the other important problem that restricts women to enter into sports. This type of religious practices argues that girls should be prohibited from participation in those games which require scanty clothing (Ashitha, 2012).

Moreover, student athletes (87.1%) strongly believed that participation in sport helps to raise the status of women in the society and they (65.8%) expressed that participation in sport releases pent-up emotions and tensions. This positive response proves the potential benefits of sports for women.

According to Pandey and Krishnaswamy (1997), [as cited in Singh and Singh (2010)] women in Indian sports have struggled to carve a niche for themselves. Some researchers have felt that there has been a difficult balancing act: for at one hand is a society, which by definition has assigned a role for them, and that role does not include sport.

In a study conducted by Rayburn and Chen (2015) on female college athletes' perceptions of gender stereotypes where 63 NCAA division-I female athletes' experience were examined through a qualitative survey. The results indicated that female athletes still experienced performance- and behavioral-related stereotypes and biases while participating in athletics. Since the gender issue is a ubiquitous problem, the finding of the present study is also identical with the findings of Brandi Rayburn and Steve Chen (2015) and several past studies cited above and finding of the present study confirms the existence of socially constructed gender-related problems in sports.

Conclusion

Based on the result of the study, it is concluded that the perception of the female student athletes about the gender-related issues (see table 1) in sports is mostly positive; it means that the gender-related problems do exist in sports. Female student athletes opined that the societal disbelieves restrict women's participation in sports. The study also revealed that female student athletes disagreed with the notion that vigorous participation in games and sports leads to loss of femininity. Moreover, student athletes under study have emphasized sport's potential benefits for women. This finding suggests that it is necessary to make improvements in the institutional support system for female student athletes of colleges for their participation in sports.

Conflict of Interest

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.

References

- Akoijam S (n.d.). Participation level of Indian women in sports in National and International Arena. *International Journal of English Language, Literature, and Humanities* , 199-211.
- Ashitha (2012). Women and Sports - Gender Politics in Contemporary Kerala. *2nd International Conference on Social Science and Humanity IPEDR vol.31 (2012) © (2012)* (pp. 159-162). Singapore: IACSIT Presse.
- Coakley J (2009). Gender and sports. In J. Coakley, *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* (pp. 232-272). New York: Mc Graw Hill.
- Dubey BK (2003). Problems of female in sports participation: exploring the capability approach. *Horizon Palaestra: International Journal of Health, Sports and Physical Education*, 38-42.
- Garg RP, Kumar N, Rani J (n.d.). A Study of Women Contribution Sports in Haryana. *Shiv Shakti, International Journal in Multidisciplinary and Academic Research (SSIJMAR)* , pp. 1-9, Vol. 2, No. 2.
- Gupta R (2013). Bowled Out of the Game: Nationalism and Gender Equality in Indian Cricket. *Berkeley Journal of Entertainment and Sports Law*, 89-120.
- Hill J (2016). Gender and Sports. In P. Craig, *Sports sociology* (pp. 115-129). California: SAGE.
- Kosofsky S (1993). Toward Gender Equality in Professional Sports . *Hastings Women's Law Journal*, 209-247.
- Lengermann PM, Brantley JN (2011). Contemporary Feminist Theory. In G. Ritzer, *Sociological Theory* (pp. 443-489). Jaipur: Rawat Bookseller.
- Messner MA (1988). Sports and Male Domination: The Female Athlete as Contested Ideological Terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 197-211.
- Rayburn B, Chen S, Phillips C (2015). Female College Athletes' Perceptions on Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination in Collegiate Athletics. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 28-36.

Sapaaij R (2012). The glue that hold the community together? sports and sustainability in rural Australia. In R. Sapaaij, *The social impact of sport* (pp. 24-28). London: Routledge.

Scraton S, Flintoff A (2013). Gender, Feminist Theory, and Sport. In D. L. Carrington., *A Companion to Spor* (pp. 96-111). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Singh SN, Singh V (2010). Scene and support: Indian women sports. *International Journal of Physical Education*, Vol. 3 No. 1and2, 76-80.

Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (2008, August). *Barriers to sports participation for women and girls*. Retrieved April 23, 2018, from www.lrsport.org: <https://www.lrsport.org/uploads/barriers-to-sports-participation-for-women-girls>