

***The Role of Physical Activity and Sport in Leadership and Empowerment
for Women in India***

Discussion Brief

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**Sports and Society
Accelerator**
Building India's Sports Stack



Background – Physical Activity and Sport for Women in India

It is universally acknowledged that participation rates in sports and active recreational activities are lower for women than for men. Women have historically been excluded from accessing and participating in sports and Physical Activity (PA), and, as a result, from realizing the significant sporting, social, cultural, and economic returns that this engenders. Women and young girls are prevented access to and participation in sport and PA by a set of complex, interconnected, and mutually reinforcing challenges that require interventions at multiple levels including substantive ecosystem-level improvements and coordination across many stakeholders including communities, district, state, and national policy actors, companies and social enterprises, civil society actors, researchers, funders, and media.

According to a 2021 study, 20% and 37% of the adult population in India were estimated to be inactive or mildly active, respectively, and 57% of the surveyed population did not meet the PA regimen recommended by the WHO (150 minutes of moderate-vigorous PA per week). According to a 2017 survey conducted by the India Yoga Association, a greater share of women (61%) did not meet the WHO standard than men (53%). It is likely that the situation has worsened because of COVID-19 due to increased sedentary lifestyles and the added burden of domestic care work for women in addition to curtailed movement owing to a variety of reasons.

Studies have shown that, in India among other countries, the female gender is perceived by adolescent boys and girls to be associated with lower interest and/or engagement in PA. Constraining social attitudes and practices in India make it especially difficult for women to access PA avenues. Girls and women are often prevented from participating in a sport if the sporting environment is perceived to be unsafe. This reinforces the existing inequality and patriarchy which is deeply ingrained in Indian society. In some communities, women are expected to prioritize household duties over sports and PA.

Even though India has seen a rise in the number of elite female athletes at the international level, sport at the grassroots remains highly inaccessible to girls. Access to quality sports infrastructure and facilities remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas. Several other barriers limit participation in sport at the grassroots and school level, including the availability of appropriate sanitation, funding for education and employment opportunities, etc.

Positive Impact of PA and Sport Participation

Increasing PA and sport participation are widely recognised as key social impact interventions. Through recent research, a greater understanding of the wide-ranging benefits of PA and sport has emerged across jurisdictions and demographics. In fact, a growing literature has shown that participation in sport and PA can have personal health benefits beyond the physical and can significantly improve mental and social health. Regular PA has been shown to reduce the risk of several non-communicable diseases including coronary heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers, obesity, to delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia, to increase lifespan, enhance a sense of well-being and community, and increase productivity.

The potential socio-economic gains from increased PA are significant. The positive impact of increased PA in the population is particularly important for health systems. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) cause 71 per cent of worldwide deaths each year – including more than 15 million premature deaths for those aged 30 to 69 years – and are projected to result in an estimated \$47 trillion loss to the global economy between 2010–2030. The gains of consistent PA have been shown to be available to all age groups, genders and socio-economic classes, and its cumulative economic impact is globally estimated at \$1.2-1.7 trillion between 2020-2030.

Exercise is believed to impact mental health through multiple pathways, and with short and long-term effects. It also has psychological benefits, such as increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment, all of which are beneficial for people struggling with depression. In a study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, it was found that doing 150 minutes each week of various types of PA (such as brisk walking, lifting weights and yoga) significantly reduces depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, compared to usual care (such as medications). Regular exercise can lead to improved sleep, which also plays a critical role in depression and anxiety.

Global institutions have launched specific initiatives aimed at enhancing PA levels of populations. In 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a new Global Action Plan on PA (GAPPA) 2018-2030. The plan outlines four policy action areas and twenty specific policy recommendations for its member states and international partners to increase PA worldwide. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a revised International Charter of Physical Education, PA and Sport in 2015, which introduces universal principles such as gender equality, non-discrimination and social inclusion in and through sport.

Importance of PA and Sport in Optimizing Leadership for Women

Today, rapid urbanisation, economic development, and inactive lifestyles have contributed to an increasing number of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Many NCDs, such as coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes, breast, and colon cancer, can be prevented and treated by regular PA. Besides good health, the benefits of sport and regular PA include social, emotional and moral competencies, as well as resilience, a sense of teamwork and the ability to connect with a community. The issue lies in the fact that PA levels have been generally shown to decrease in women during the transition from the school and college level to the workplace. Further, changes in family such as marriage and having children are also associated with a decrease in intensity and structure of PA in women. The priorities, pressures and motivations of women to engage in sport or PA vary over their lifetimes.

The United Nations acknowledged the importance of sport in global development and in empowering women and girls when it adopted its Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015. The new agenda for 2030 specifically acknowledges *“the growing contribution of sport ... to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.”*

The relationship between sport and gender carries with it the transformative potential of sport to challenge or alter traditional gender norms – the privileges and roles assigned to men and women by social convention. Research conducted by EY showed the role sport can play at every stage of professional women’s lives, with a survey finding that 94% of women in the C-suite played sport, 52% at a university level.

Women who have played sport are uniquely positioned to lead in the corporate world through their problem-solving skills and team-building experiences gained from the sport. Sport brings out the leadership skills inherent in adolescent girls and young women, cultivates an enabling environment in which they can practice leadership skills, and allows them to use their knowledge and skills to drive change in their own lives and within their community. By participating in PA and sports, women can develop skills such as teamwork, communication, and goal-setting, which are essential for leadership positions.

As per a United Nations report, “the participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women’s capabilities as leaders and decision-makers, especially in traditional male domains.”

The Opportunities Ahead

While PA can empower women, it is also essential to recognize that women come from diverse backgrounds and face different challenges based on their intersecting identities, such as caste, class, social status, and religion. Therefore, efforts to promote PA for women must be inclusive and mindful of these intersecting identities and work towards promoting diversity and inclusion. Families, communities, and policymakers must be educated about the benefits of PA for women's physical and mental health, as well as their impact on leadership and empowerment. The need of the hour is to increase girls' confidence and empower them to become women leaders so that they can inspire other girls in their quest for independence and a brighter future. Sports and PA initiatives in general need to increase focus on safeguarding and protecting women so that they can freely pursue a sport.

Yoga and aerobics classes have become increasingly popular, with women constituting a significant percentage of the attendees, in particular new participants. Such activities must continue to be encouraged in order to increase participation. There is also a growing cultural acceptance and enthusiasm towards women's participation in various sports such as cricket, boxing, and wrestling, driven in part by the success stories of sportswomen across multiple sports and at domestic and international arenas. Women's participation in PA and sports in India can further be encouraged through the promotion of role models. Female athletes who have achieved success in such sporting disciplines can inspire and motivate other women to take up PA and sports, breaking down the gender stereotypes and biases that prevent women from participating in these activities.

Technology can also be harnessed to address critical structural barriers preventing access and participation for women and girls, and India is well placed to adapt its inclusion programmes to use technology as the primary driver. There needs to be a parallel focus on broader enabling infrastructure such as road networks, safe and affordable transportation to enhance and improve access and promote greater usage for women.

Reducing Barriers and Deploying an Active Lifestyle for Indian Women – Areas for Discussion and Context

Some of the key issues preventing women from participating in PA and sport in India are highlighted below:

- 1. Lack of awareness and recognition about PA** - In general, there is a lack of awareness, recognition, and education about the importance of PA for overall physical and mental health and wellbeing. It is prevalent across individuals and communities, public and private institutions, and the media. It should also be noted

that there is a serious lack of robust gender-disaggregated data in this sector in India. This is an area that needs attention and effort from all participants.

2. **Safety concerns** - Women face significant safety concerns when attempting to participate in PA or sport. This is attributable to various factors such as lack of safe transportation, risk of harassment or assault, or a lack of female-only sports facilities or female-only sports teams. Addressing these concerns is a priority, and will require both a policy and implementable action plan framework. It will be helpful to identify and prioritize areas of intervention.
3. **Time constraints and traditional gender roles** - Many people in India may not know how to easily access and participate in sports activities and programs. A significant barrier to PA among working women is usually cited as being the time constraints associated with fulfilling multiple roles (eg, employee, caregiver, spouse, parent) and responsibilities.
4. **Limited access and lack of affordable avenues** - Most Indian women are unable to afford the costs that are often associated with participating in sports and fitness activities, e.g., memberships, equipment, coaching, travel, and enrolment in sports competitions. With many sport facilities located in rich urban areas, women in rural and low-income communities who want to pursue sports or access PA avenues are at a disadvantage.
5. **Gender disparities throughout the life span** - Studies have shown that the gender disparities when it comes to accessing PA start at a young age and only get exacerbated over time. A study by EduSports indicated that over 75% of school children in the country stop participating in any organized sport or PA by the time they enter middle-school or adolescent years, with higher attrition for pre-teen and adolescent girls, even though global participation of young women in sports is increasing. Due to social pressures and gender stereotypes, more than half of the girls who begin to practice a sport quit as they reach puberty, a rate six times higher than the number of boys who quit. This is due to the fact many girls lose their self-esteem as they reach adolescence.

We as a nation are also uniquely positioned, globally, to lead a universal PA agenda. In a G20 Presidency year, the effort should also be to attain some of the stated objectives around women empowerment and leadership, including making women entrepreneurs a key focus area for growth. There is no better time than now to have a systematic and holistic focus on ensuring that PA and sports become an integral part of Indian society and are accessible to women. With an eye on optimizing health,

economic growth, productivity, livelihoods and life skills, and capitalizing on the favorable demographic dividend, prioritizing PA and sport for women at all levels is a clear policy and research imperative.

This discussion brief is intended to set the context for the roundtable, and build upon this movement to enable it. Basis the key inputs and takeaways, we will continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure universalization of PA for all the benefits it entails, including leadership.

About SSA



The Sports and Society Accelerator is an independent not-for-profit organisation (Section 8) focused on building the Indian sports ecosystem. Its goal as an ecosystem builder is to achieve social outcomes at population scale, using the universality of the sports experience, with an eventual target of universal participation in physical activity for India by 2047. Established as a policy-to-action initiative, the Accelerator has a dual-engine approach. It uses independent research and policy interventions to drive institutional and systemic reform, and programmes and projects to enhance inclusion, empowerment and equality using sport. The Accelerator works with government, civil society, and social enterprises. The Accelerator's theory of change is that 'sports for all' can be achieved when solutions are in the hands of participants. Its Sports Stack approach advocates a whole-of-system and open-source model to achieve universal access to sporting opportunities and universal physical literacy, working with government and civil society. The Accelerator's board of advisors includes noted sports journalist Sharda Ugra, CEO of Pratham Rukmini Banerji, and veteran sports administrator Joy Bhattacharjya.

About WEP



The Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) is a first of its kind, unified access portal which brings together women from different parts of India to build a nurturing ecosystem that enables them to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations. WEP achieves this by facilitating relevant information and services through key partnerships. As an aggregator platform, WEP hosts information and services relevant to women entrepreneurs. WEP enables key partnerships to bring crucial content, workshops, campaigns and other avenues of learning and growth to its users from trailblazers in the industry.