

SPORTS FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION AMONG PRESENTLY EMPLOYED SPORTS WOMEN IN KERALA

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Abstract: The paper attempts to investigate the impacts of women empowerment through sports in the lower middle class in the State of Kerala. A descriptive survey of fifty presently employed women who were active in sports in their younger ages, i.e. 12 to 18 years, are personally interviewed to gather the needed information. It was hypothesized that women empowerment through active participation in sports assisted lower-middle-class women to attain social exposure and better career opportunities in the long run. The paper attempts to understand the psychological, physical, economic, social, cultural and political effects on women after participating in sports at their younger ages. The findings show that sports played a vital and supporting role in the rising social and economic status of women in Kerala.

Keywords: Gender Discrimination, Gender Inequality, Women Empowerment, Sports, Descriptive Survey.

Introduction: Gender discrimination exists in all fields of human action in all societies, even in the 21st century (OECD, 2011). Even though constituting around half of the population, women command only a marginal portion of any resources and power, particularly in developing countries (Miranda, 2011). Such a historically rooted mechanism has led to the underutilization of available human potential on one side and gross human rights violations on the opposite. This discrimination intensified by institutional weaknesses and cultural reasons results in gender inequalities. The resulting economic and social costs affect not only individual welfare but also the multifaceted progress of society. Hence, to address this lacuna, diverse strategies for bettering the condition of women is adopted by all governments in varying degrees. These strategies are called empowerment of women in general, which can be defined as all those collective efforts to strengthen women's decision-making skills in personal and public life to create an equal and ever-expanding society.

Among all those, sports is considered as one of the best tools of women empowerment, like making them literate (Huggins & Randell, 2007). As almost all people at one time or other in their life played in different sports on professional or recreation level, it can easily use as an effective method of women empowerment. As sports activities are common in every society, it will not take massive efforts to familiarize and getting involved actively with the same for women. Hence sports is used as the most potent tool for inspiring women to become independent.

Background of the Study: Active involvement in sports will inculcate health consciousness and togetherness among participants (Bates & Eccles, 2008). This makes self-confidence in them (Bowker, 2006). Simultaneously, new social networks will be formed, and the existing ones will get strengthened

(Huggins & Randell, 2007). When people from different and distant spaces get connected, a feeling of community will gradually evolve, which can positively address the existing socio-economic norms of the society (Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012). When such an effort is carried to engage with the weaker sections, sports can assist them in developing an adequate mechanism to manage conflicts in the long run.

Participation in sports guarantees access to public spaces; hence it brings women, especially those from communities that restrict their mobility due to cultural factors, out of their homes. So that it helps in breaking several cultural taboos that restrict women's mobility (Spaij, 2009). As any sport involves roles like captain, referee and others, the images attached give self-confidence to women. Through achievements in sports, they earn respect and recognition among family and community members. When they earn respect, they develop a sense of belongingness (Wilson, 2009), ownership, decision-making skills, and identity consciousness (Weiss, 2001) beyond family too. As no kind of discrimination is possible in a team while playing, sports enable a feeling of unity beyond caste, religion, gender and others. Hence sports can use effectively to address the socio-economic problems faced by women throughout the world.

Statement of the Problem: As one or other kind of gender discrimination exists in every society, discovering the best tool of women empowerment relevant to each society has vital significance nowadays. Along with removing barriers of egalitarianism, empowering women is equally important for achieving a gender-just society. Identifying the easiest and effective method of one or a group of sports in a particular society to strengthen the morale of women and up-bring them for sharpening their skills will help in the overall development of that people. Hence, a study on the

diverse impacts of sports among women from challenging backgrounds will enrich both sports and women studies literature.

As explained above, sports have the potential of a positive impact on the conditions of women in general. The comparatively better status that women enjoy in Kerala compared to other states of India exposes the positive relationship between participation in sports and the enhanced status of women in society. In this context, this paper investigates whether participating in sports at a younger age leads to all over improvement in the conditions of the lower middle-class women in later years.

Objectives: The paper attempts to investigate whether empowerment through active participation in individual and team sports activities in younger ages helped lower-middle-class women to attain better living environments later in their lives. The research questions are,

1. Whether women feel psychologically and physically better off after regularly participating in sports activities during their younger ages?
2. Whether exposure to sports at younger ages helped women to acquire better social status later?
3. Whether exposure to sports at younger ages helped women to acquire better economic opportunities later?
4. How active involvement in sports redefined the cultural attitudes of the concerned women?
5. Whether engagement in sports helped the participants to enhance their political engagements and decision-making skills?

The present study hypothesized that women empowerment through active participation in sports at younger age assisted lower-middle-class women to attain better living environments later in their lives.

Literature Review: Even though women started to participate in sports for a long period, different institutions (like state governments) started to use the potential of sports for women empowerment only in the last quarter of the last century. Several scholars from Europe and America actively studied the diverse impacts of sports in women's lives since the eighties. They realized that sports have immense potential to address women's issues and enhance their welfare (United Nations, 2007; Bodiang, 2005; Riordan, 2000). Sports is capable of creating social capital for the upliftment of women (Brady, 2005). However still, gender inequality exists in all levels of sports of every society in varying degrees (Brown & Light, 2012; Kental, 2012; Murray, 2002). As an extension of any society, gender stereotypes were created and reproduced in sports (Eastman & Billings, 2000). So that there were many studies about the issues, perceptions and theories on gender in sports

(Flintoff, 2002; Scraton, 1990). As a continuation of that, the barriers faced by women players in Indian sports is studied by many scholars (Wells, 1991).

Doing sports makes the person more energetic and confident. The impact of sports on women's self-esteem was explained based on the type of sports they participate (Gadbois & Cornock, 2003). There were studies on the relationship between the nature of sport and the physical capacity of players (Kjonniksen, Anderssen, & Wold, 2009), the mental and physical impacts of sports on individuals and women (Bogdanis, 2012; Booth, Roberts, & Laye, 2012; Khan, et al., 2012; The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1997). The economic benefits of doing sports are linked with their career placements and opportunities open to players; so that the literature deals from the economics of the sports industry to economic benefits available to individuals (Radlinski, 2003; Howard & Mahony, 2001). The relationship between participating in sports and political decision-making tasks is hardly studied.

The cultural taboos concerning sports are influential throughout the world. Traditionally sports is considered as a masculine activity (Pfister, 2000). The cultural studies on sports, particularly in Europe and America, differentiated the gender aspects of sports and asserted many traditional and popular sports as masculine and others as feminine (Sherlock, 1987). Increasing women participation in masculine sports like Football, cricket, hockey, boxing and others does not feminize them. On the other side, sports like yoga and cheerleading are not technically considered as sports at all (Klomsten, Marsh, & Skaalvik, 2005). The masculine and feminine nature of sports is defined based on the general gender stereotypes in society (Gill, 2002). The cultural attack on women for participating in publicly displaying sports was a universal reality (Jackson & Marsh, 1986) which is gradually changing over time.

Methodology: The researcher used personnel interviews to gather respondents' opinions, views, perceptions, or attitudes about the topic in hand. The study's sample population consists of employed women in the age group of 26 and 40 with a mean age of 34.2 years who are residing in Thiruvananthapuram city limits. The sample size is fifty only. All these respondents were active sportspersons in their younger ages, defined here as in the age limit of 12 to 18 years. Considering the objective in mind, special care is taken in selecting the respondents. All of them were belonging to the lower middle class. The term lower middle class is defined here as those belonging to families where there was no permanent income, and the available income was hardly sufficient to meet the minimum recurring requirements of members of the family. Purposive sampling is followed in order to identify

each sample. Personnel relationships and professional networks were helped in locating these potential samples. In order to collect data, an open-ended questionnaire was prepared, and responses were audio-recorded for detailed scrutiny later. The respondents were informed in advance about the purpose of particular interactions. Simple arithmetic calculations were conducted to organise and make the general nature of the data. The collected data was analysed using narrative analysis method in order to describe the responses given by respondents.

Analysis and Findings: The researcher calculated the details of samples using the basic arithmetic tools. The following table shows the details.

Table 1: Background Details of Samples

Details about respondents	Number of Respondents	%
1. Single child	14	28
2. Religious minority	29	58
3. Lower caste	50	100
4. Parental support	17	34
5. Rural background	32	64
6. Still practicing	8	16
7. Employment in sports quota	17	34
8. Girls only schools	31	62
9. Graduated	50	100
10. Masters	33	66
11. Physical Education Degree	12	24
12. Any diploma in sports related fields	19	38

Source: Calculated Figures

Among the respondents, fourteen of them belong to the age bar of twenty-six to thirty, seventeen of them to thirty-one and thirty-five, and nineteen to thirty-six and forty. According to their job profile, eleven of them are in teaching, including physical education, five in banking, eight in police, and the rest are in different government and private jobs. During their younger ages, they were regular in practice and reached minimum up to state-level competitions. It is noteworthy that most of the women players were engaged in swimming, athletics, handball, kabaddi, basketball, volleyball and kho-kho as they were not expensive to practise like badminton and tennis. Seventeen of them got employment in the sports quota, and twenty-one got additional weightage in employment due to sports certificates. All of them are presently married, and forty-seven of them have children. Even though not explained elaborately, those without children guaranteed that the absence of children has nothing to do with their earlier involvement in sports, particular. The details of data

collected from them are explained under different titles in detail below.

1. Sports and Psychological Boosting: Most of the respondents decisively agreed that regular participation in sports psychologically motivated them both in their practising days and even later. Out of the total, forty-two respondents positively responded to whether participation in sports helped in their psychological enhancement or not? While the rest were not sure about it. Considering their deprived backgrounds, participating in regular practices and competitions were their only way for entertainment. The tough training helped the players to address any adverse situations with confidence later in life. Physical stamina always energized their minds. Their usual experiences like travelling in general compartments, tasteless food and poor and pathetic accommodation facilities made them accommodative to rough living facilities later in life. They were respected among peers for doing masculine works like climbing trees, wall and water tanks, loading and unloading, and even riding bikes. Even boys in the same age were amazed about their physical power to an extend; hence other girls recognized them as their 'body guards'. Even in their homes, others were aware of their extra-power and courage. Especially in the single child families, mothers treated them as 'half male' by taking them for going out during nights and carrying rice and other groceries. All these gave substantial self-confidence to them.

The travels to participate in different competitions helped them acquire more sense about the outside world beyond immediate surroundings. Exposure to different people, cultures, places, food habits, slangs, and languages encouraged them to gather more knowledge. They were able to adjust to any conditions of living. Continuous and consistent participation in sports helped them to drive out their tensions, stress and frustrations and to express their emotions positively which aided them to keep an energetic mind. Such factors, too, boosted their motivation to fight and win in life. Simultaneously, the regular practice also enhanced their physical health, which helped them prevent common diseases and keep regular menstrual circles. Due to diet control and exercise, the fatless body helped them to always in pace with 'beauty trends' even later in life. The creation of a positive mind helped them to address several challenges that arise later in life. They were able to motivate others, especially their children and students. With a thrilling mind and attitude, they performed comparatively better in job interviews, organizing events, running family and enjoying life.

2. Sports and Healthy Physique: Participating in sports activities and regular exercise undoubtedly enhances physical strength, immunity, energy and

motivation. All those who responded to participation in sports helped in physical improvement or not positively agreed on the above except four. They had severe injuries as part of participation but did not disagree entirely with the physical impacts of sports. Compared to general women participation, those who did regular exercises and continuing even now had very few health issues. However, they agreed that they were never able to surpass the physical capacities of their male counterparts.

Even though not received perfect diet requirements, they managed protein requirements by breeding hens and cows for egg and milk, respectively. In return, they had to look after these animals and sell extra eggs and milk in the neighbourhoods. Even though they consume all kinds of oily, sweet and other junk foods, the tough training ensure absence of any diseases like dysentery in the short term and major issues like coronary heart diseases in the latter.

Regular exercises helped them to keep regular menstrual cycles which is a nightmare for many of their colleagues, but it is not that they never had any health issues. Skin problems, ear and eye infection affected swimmers through unhygienic water. All types of athletes had the risk of shinbone pain, ankle twist, back pain, and muscle tearing. Kho-Kho and kabaddi players suffered knee injuries and back pain. Most of them suffered from urinary infections due to less water consumption and poor hygiene in toilets of stadiums, trains, and bus stands. They could not make immediate and elite treatments for their major health issues due to financial constraints. But all of them utilized the cheap treatments provided at the public dispensaries, which were working with better efficiency in Kerala. Most of them used ayurvedic oil bath using hot water (sometimes along with massage) to treat occasional body pain than allopathic treatments.

The absence of common diseases helped them to manage time more productively. The attainment of mental health was the additional bonus they received from participating in sports which helped them to fight with their internal emotional issues, particularly those arising around the menstrual cycles. The confidence had helped them in interviews and later career promotions. Others appreciated their positive vibrations well. Hence, they motivated their colleagues too. The confidence gathered from sports assisted them in addressing many organizational and personnel challenges too.

3. Sports and Rising Social Status: Sports had an escalating up effect on the social conditions and status of all these women. As the survey was conducted only on women who came from deprived socio-economic conditions, all of them agreed on the positive social impacts of sports on their personnel lives. Hence all respondents have agreed to 'Whether

participation in sports helped to boost your social status or not?'. To those who belong to backward communities, along with caste reservation, their achievements in competitions helped them to get placements. Permanent employment changed their approach to society. On the other side, other's perception of them too had a drastic change. They were accepted to the inner circles of many upper-caste families which were absent before. Permanent jobs assisted many of them to make marital relationships with high caste or other religious men. On the other side, to those who belong to socially forward communities but with poor economic conditions, sports helped them to get additional weightage in interviews. Employment helped them to come out of financial crisis and repair the social disadvantages they had before. Economic prosperity ensured their access towards the front stage of family among relatives. In addition, they had a special privilege in any gatherings of women due to their physical and psychological advantages. They were the invisible health consultants among women colleagues.

Social status within the concerned community is vital in deciding positions in the community itself. As economically better off were preferred to the positions of community leaders, which will further boost their social status, the employed sportswomen were not reluctant to accept any such opportunities. Most of the women whom the researcher interviewed were either leaders or committee members in their residence associations, regional libraries, trade unions, festival committees and others. Even the spouses, children, and close relatives were recognized in various levels due to the respondents' socio-economic status. Similarly, most of them were invited to provide lectures, present papers or guide freshers on sports, physical training, diet control, and others, adding their social relevance.

As education is the best strategy to guarantee a permanent rise in the social hierarchy, all the respondents are attempting to ensure it in one way or another. They are either providing or wish to provide the best education possible for their children along with physical training.

4. Sports and Career Opportunities: All the respondents agreed that sports played a vital part in their career achievements. They all responded positively to the question that 'Whether participation in sports helped to widen your career opportunities or not?'. Among them, seventeen were selected for jobs through sports quota, while thirty-seven of them used their sports certificates for getting additional weightage in job selection. All of them used their certificates of achievements in sports in their career. Even before joining their present permanent jobs, they were able to do temporary jobs with their

experience. Many of them worked as a physical trainer in gymnasiums mainly located in urban regions. Some of them learned yoga and became yoga instructors. Private schools made contracts with some of them in developing school teams. Even local youth clubs and informal gathering used the talent of experienced women in making their teams for competing in local tournaments, which were very common in these days. Resident associations also used their expertise. Most of these women became physical education teachers. They were preferred by their respective institutions while organizing women sports teams, even though very rare. They were invited to become a referee in several local matches.

5. Sports and Cultural Exposure: All respondents could not address the question 'Whether participation in sports helped in further advancement of your cultural exposure or not?' as the researcher expected initially. As the relationship between sports and culture was not well exposed, such a difficulty was expected too. Even in the second half of the last century, participation of women in sports is not well accepted completely in progressive Kerala. They were treated as those using body financial or recreational requirements. Even though those who learned dance too had similar accusations, only public performances were attacked by cultural traditionalists. But later expansion of public exposure through youth festivals and others altered that perception.

Similarly, sports competitions in schools and colleges helped to change the perception of women players even though they were ridiculed by society for tight dressing and public body display during practices. Even though such comments stopped many potential women from continuing in sports, over time, such issues were reduced in large margins. Those women doing regular exercises were considered to become masculine in nature and shape, but it also was proved as another myth.

All respondents believed that television and sports-based films had a significant impact on the cultural space of sports in our society. Films like 'Chak de India' (2007) helped women to beat much strong opposition in society. Live telecast and highlights on television helped in gathering more support for doing sports. Successful sports stars like P.T.Usha, Shiny Wilson, Mary Kom, Anjali Bhagwat, Sania Mirza, Koneru Humpi, Anju Baby George and others motivated many parents to encourage their daughters to do sports. The constitutional support through sports quota and weightage for sports certificates also helped women to participate in sports. But it was the courage provided by the sports itself that made women ignore society's social policing on their dressing, physical structure, and public practising.

6. Sports and Political Vibrancy: As political space has a vital role in boosting personnel positions in

Kerala, the interconnectivity of sports on the political achievements of individual persons is important to investigate. As a highly exposed political state, there are political positions in every space of community participation here. Hence the respondents were eager to answer 'Whether participation in sports helped in strengthen your political decision-making power or not?' positively. Almost all of them were political beneficiaries of participating in sports at one time or the other. Most of them were elected representatives in their colleges as they had wide networks across departments and students. They had enjoyed leadership positions in national service scheme, scout and other clubs in their educational institutions as a reward for their energising nature. Some of them actively associated with political parties. After getting employment, some of them continued their association with parties. They actively worked with trade unions and even held key positions in them. Some of them contested in local body elections too. They were elected to the various associations which organise all tournaments from local to the state level. The confidence earned through sports helped them to vigorously go after political issues and address the various challenges that arise in pursuing them. The experience gathered and confidence earned through sports sharpened their political decision-making skills. But what alarming is their realisation that the sports administration in Kerala is continuing to be a men's world despite the presence of many proved women sports stars as political activists, leaders, coaches and administrators in the state.

Discussion: The degree of participation of women in sports is determined by several socio-economic, political and cultural factors specific to each society. These factors equally influence the kind of sports activities that women involved too. The existing value system, class nature of the society, degree of urbanisation, degree of gender discrimination, parental attitude, availability of infrastructure, and general attitude towards sports is among the numerous factors that determine and influence the participation and involvement of women in sports activities. As the data is collected only from those who competed for minimum at state-level competitions, the study also agrees with the observation with Marsh that the psychological benefits of participating in sports are noticeable only when the player is competing where superior skills are required (Marsh, 1998). The psychological benefits of doing regular physical exercise are visible among the respondents too. Numerous studies showed that sports and regular physical exercises would provide self-confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and a positive attitude to women (Levy & Ebbeck, 2005; Alfermann & Stoll, 2000).

The study agrees with the earlier observation that gender inequality exists in all sports fields except participation in competitions (Brown & Light, 2012; Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). The paper asks for more women presence in higher levels of the administrative ladder and as coaches. Their ground-level presence is more required in villages where the majority of the population resides. The observation that women had less physical capacity than males of the same age, even after rigorous practice, is in tune with several studies (Knisel, Opitz, Wossmann, & Keteihuf, 2009). The health benefits of sports, too, are in tune with many other studies. The economic gains of sports career for women are in tune with Parker-Pope (Parker-Pope, 2010). The future opportunities of sports administration and coaching are more favourable to women than men. Considering the high potential of sports as an empowerment tool of marginalised communities, women can become a model of hope here. The cultural taboos mentioned by the respondents were the same as those existing in other cultures (Amusa, Toriola, & Onyewadume, 1999).

The data collected showed that those women who participated in sports regularly in their younger ages were able to break the barriers that existed due to social and economic backwardness can lead a successful professional and personnel life in the present days. So that the hypothesis stated that women empowerment through active participation in sports at younger age assisted lower-middle-class women to attain better living environments later in their lives is accepted. It is noteworthy that respondents hardly mentioned childcare, lack of transportation, and personnel safety as barriers to continuing practices. This may be due to the locational advantages. The state achieved family planning by the 1980s itself, which reduced the burden of childcare on elders. The social overhead capital of the state ensures systematic transportation to everyone in most of the villages. Even though

harassment of women is reporting, as the redressal mechanism in the state is working with minimum quality, it does not hesitate women to continue in sports.

Limitations of the Study: As the data was collected only from well-settled permanent employees, the samples do not reflect the complete picture of the objectives at hand, even though they reaffirm the potential of sports in the general empowerment of women. While collecting data, many respondents mentioned the different kinds of sexual abuses from sports administrators, trainers and male counterparts. Similarly, they faced several discriminations like a delayed and reduced dress and diet allowances and inferior accommodation, transportation, and training facilities. They often excluded from away-home competitions citing lack of finances. Even though all these are important barriers for women to continuously and consistently participate in sports, this is not dealt with in detail here as it is not coming under the purview of the paper.

Conclusion: Even though it presents itself as a miniature society in which power relations, marginalization and social exclusion take place (Wickman, 2008; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Whannel, 2002; Creedon, 1994), sports has the potential to create favourable conditions for rising above the margins of gender, race, religion, nationality and all other such segregations. Along with endorsing fitness (Verbrugge, 2002), perseverance, self-esteem (Bowker, Gadbois, & Cornock, 2003) and inculcates leadership qualities and team skills (Brown & Light, 2012), women in sports defy gender stereotypes, make inspiring role models, and show men and women as equals (Engel, 1994). The present study fully justifies the above general statements about the impact of sports on society. As women engagement with sports is very common and widespread in Kerala, it had a positive role in making women empowered than any other state in India.

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