

GENDER DIVERSITY AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES IN INDIAN OLYMPIC SPORT: A MULTI-CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Gender diversity in elite sporting settings is an important structural aspect of social equity, especially in the Olympic Games where national representation is linked to social and cultural systems of inequality. Despite notable advances in women's participation on international sporting platforms, inequalities continue to exist in sporting communities, necessitating a need for in-depth investigation into the mechanisms through which gender inequalities are created and maintained and the ways that they can be overturned. Based on the qualitative multi-case analysis methodology and drawing on Critical Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory, the paper investigates the complexity of the issue of gender equality in the context of five selected Indian Olympians - Geeta Phogat (Wrestling), P.V. Sindhu (Badminton), Dutee Chand (Athletics), Rani Rampal (Field Hockey), and Sania Mirza (Tennis). Despite the success on the sports arena of these sports heroes, discoveries indicate that the excellent results achieved on the pitch are not reflected in success off the field, as structural shortcomings can be observed in all four categories of the defined issues, namely the systematic undervaluation of women's performances in evaluation processes, discriminatory processes of funding and sponsoring production, media representations of women in sports that trivializes their worth, and governing bodies' policies that define their absence and restrict their capacity to participate in decision-making. Therefore, the authors identify three mechanisms of systematic reproduction of exclusion. This is accomplished through the use of gendered institutional logic, cultural nationalism that derives women's sports achievements while limiting their power, and intersectional problems based on caste, class, regional and religious identification, which make women face discrimination according to the gender criteria. Finally, the authors present the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM), which is a new concept that explains how institutional actors, cultural practitioners, and institutionalities function.

KEYWORDS: Gender diversity, Olympic sport, Critical Feminist Theory, Indian sport policy, athletic equity, intersectionality, women's empowerment

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualizing Gender Equity in Contemporary Sport Governance

The quest for gender equity in sport institutions has emerged as a major challenge in modern sport management. It reflects the struggles of society in the quest for social justice and democratic representation. In the past thirty years, there have been major steps made to achieve gender equity in sport participation because of governmental policies, international campaigning, and changes in cultural norms where women's potential as athletes is recognized and they fight for equal opportunities (Burton, 2015; Cunningham, 2019). All the achievements in the field of sport participation and visibility are turned down by the reality of administration and governance in sport where the majority of organizations still belong to men.

1.2 The Persistence of Gender Disparities in Sport Leadership

Modern empirical data shows the large extent of gender inequality in sports management systems. Female representation at leadership positions in international sports federations is close to 10% while national governing agencies show slightly better but still insufficient performance as the number of women in top administrative jobs is nearly 20% (Smith & Wrynn, 2013; Burton, 2015). These figures are representative of something bigger than numerical misbalance, as they point at the systemic exclusion from decision-making processes which forms the basis for making strategic, resource allocation, policy, and cultural decisions concerning sports organizations in the world.

The effects of male dominance are not limited only to the issue of representation justice. These inequalities violate the basic principles of organizational justice while inhibiting sports organizations from gaining valuable viewpoints, knowledge, and skills needed for making qualitative decisions, showing innovation, and preserving organizational legitimacy in the complicated and globalized sports environment (Cunningham, 2019). Female exclusion from higher posts leads to the cultures of those organizations that put female interests at risk (whether intentionally or due to the ignorance).

1.3 The Paradox of Athletic Achievement and Administrative Exclusion

The current sports arena is full of contradictions. On the one hand, women's participation in sports has never been so high; women are finally recognized for their sporting achievements and visibility; however, the realm of leadership and policy-making still suffers from serious discriminatory practices directed against being appointed to key positions in the area. The unbalanced ratio speaks about the incapacity of sports women to overcome customary obstacles. The persistence in this inequality proves that female representation in the area of sports requires careful examination of specific mechanisms of sustaining the system.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to shed light on two important research questions relating to the problem of gender equity in sports leadership due to the severe nature and durability of gender inequality in sports governance:

RQ1: What milestones have been attained in the domain of women's representation within sports organization, and how do these accomplishments differ at different organizational levels, in different cultures, and different kinds of sports?

RQ2: What are the structural, cultural, and institutional issues that hinder women in reaching high positions in sports governance, and how do these issues persist?

1.5 Methodology and Context of Research

The study takes up the advanced multiple case study approach in the context of Indian Olympic Games, which provides an extraordinary opportunity to study closely the interaction of gender, sport, nationalism, and institutional development processes in the rapidly changing world of sport. India's position as the country that transforms into a more and more ambitious Olympic nation creates a rich empirical study for exploring the intersection of global gender equity trends and local institutional practices concerning gender and society.

The framework of the research comprises extensive analysis of policies, cultural narratives, and structural obstacles by employing five selected cases from different sporting areas, career paths, and types of relationships between institutional units. The multi-case methodology allows both in-depth within-case analysis and comparative between-case study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Multi-Theoretical Integration and Conceptual Foundations

This analysis is firmly established in a blend of Critical Feminist Theory (CFT) and Social Role Theory (SRT) that forms a solid analytical basis from which to examine the intricacies of gender equity in the sporting world. The convergence of CFT and SRT makes it possible to systematically explore the existence of gendered inequalities in different organizational forms and their reproduction in social interactions among the individuals.

Importantly, the choice of these particular theories is justified by their ability to dissect numerous aspects of gender-related organizational phenomena while focusing on the issues of power relations, structural inequalities, and resistance. This multi-theoretical approach addresses the need for more robust theories in modern sport management scholarship which can help explain various aspects of gender dynamics within organizations (Cunningham, 2019; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Burton, 2015).

2.2 Critical Feminist Theory: Deconstructing Gendered Organizational Architectures

Critical Feminist Theory is the core theory behind this research, which introduces useful conceptual tools for analysing sports organizations as gendered entities rather than simply spaces that hold gendered people. The theory builds largely on contributions made by Joan Acker (1990, 1992, and 2006) and later women organizations theorists (Martin, 2003, Britton, 2000, Ely & Meyerson, 2000, and Ridgeway, 2011), and asserts that organizations' structures, processes, cultures, and evaluative mechanisms are gendered due to the institutionalized usage of masculine features, behaviours, and practices. The theory builds on Acker's (1990) notion of a "gendered organization", which plays a crucial role in explaining how what appears to be the neutral organizational processes (job assessment systems, performance criteria, career elaboration paths, and allocation of resources) actually favours masculinity and disadvantages femininity.

2.3 Social Role Theory: Mapping Gendered Expectations and Leadership Incongruence

Social Role Theory enhances the understanding of Critical Feminist Theory by elucidating the theoretical frameworks of psychological, cognitive, and social structures that are responsible for the internalization, continuity, and challenging of gendered social structure at both the personal and social levels. Basing on the principles developed by Alice Eagly and her co-authors (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Steffan, 1984), Social Role Theory explains how traditional expectations of society form systematic biases in cognitive processing which influence the interpretation of the effectiveness of a person's leadership qualities.

According to the idea of Social Role Theory, the persistent beliefs of society regarding gender behaviours lead to a serious incongruence between the ideas of femininity and those of effective leadership. Effective leadership is believed to encompass mostly the agentic features such as assertiveness, dominance, decisiveness, willingness to take risks, competitiveness, desire to achieve desired goals, emotional control, rational detachment, and autonomy (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Koenig et al., 2011). Such qualities are considered to be masculine; as a result, women experience serious barriers when their management skills are assessed against the masculine standards of leadership effectiveness.

2.4 The Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM)

Following the assumption that these notions have been accepted, this study offers the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM), an integrated theory based on the idea of gender equality being created as a result of interaction of three categories: (1) structures, such as regulations, financial distribution models and organizational hierarchy; (2) cultures, including stories, values, expectations and practices; and (3) agency, taken to include actions taken by people (individuals and groups), resistance and activism. Overall, this approach allows one to better understand connections between macro institutions and micro practices leading to certain gender equality results, thus providing analytical means for those concerned about achieving organizational equality.

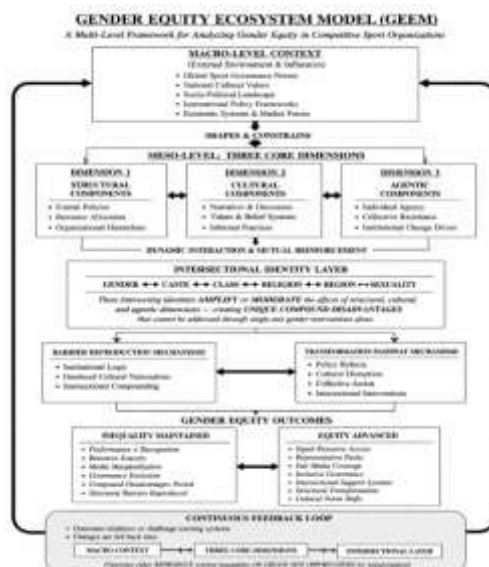


Fig. 1 Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Epistemological Foundations and Research Design

This study adopts an approach of research based on qualitative, inductive methodology and grounded upon the epistemological tenets of interpretivism in order to clearly elucidate complexities of lived experiences, contextual peculiarities, and the socio-political factors determining gender equity results in sports organizations. Qualitative inquiry aims to discover hidden patterns, power relations, and resistance strategies which escape detection in quantitative statistical analyses or deductive hypotheses testing, which guarantees the understanding of the complex and multifaceted processes in which gender inequality was produced and sustained.

Within this study, the design of the research is clearly defined and focused on exploring complex patterns of power relations and institutional mechanisms of exclusion and systemic inequalities acting on a variety of organizational and social levels. One should understand that gender equity processes cannot be viewed as undergoing simple cause-and-effect relationships but should rather be analysed in terms of indirect connections between structural limitations, cultural messages, and actions of individuals in order to make an accurate conclusion concerning the results achieved.

3.2 Case Selection and Purposive Sampling

To ensure a diversity of cases, the authors used purposive sampling while selecting five individuals who represented different sporting disciplines, different paths and experiences in their careers, and different kinds of institutions participating in the Indian Olympic movement. The selected athletes include Geeta Phogat, P. V. Sindhu, Dutee Chand, Rani Rampal, and Sania Mirza. These cases were chosen for the purposes of providing an analytical diversity of cases while still ensuring enough depth of information. The criteria for selection included diversity of representation across cases, diversity of economic and cultural backgrounds, diversity of types of relationships with institutions, and cases' relevance to shedding light on the issues of gender equity in sports in India.

Using multiple cases allows for both depth in analysis of each case selected, as well as cross-case comparisons, which will grant the researcher the opportunity to discover patterns and differences and to get a greater insight into the phenomenon of gender equity. While individual cases allow for conducting a single-case analysis, the comparative aspect of the research makes it possible to explore the influence of the different conditions on the gender equity experience.

3.3 Data Collection and Multi-Source Triangulation

The research utilizes a thorough data gathering technique from multiple sources to allow rigorous triangulation of data from institutional, media, and personal records, while ensuring that the research is analytically wise and valid empirically. The triangulation method has multiple roles in the research: it enhances credibility due to verification of claims and interpretations from independent resources; increases the comprehensiveness of the data collected because it takes different aspects and opinions about the cases being analysed; and provides strength to the analysis by exposing contradictions or points that need the further elucidation or theoretical explanation.

The primary methods of data collection include:

National and regional media analysis: Comprehensive analysis of the major national media outlets, regional media, and specific sports journalism sources from 2008 to 2023 that analyses how media covered the issue and how linguistic framing influenced the coverage of the sporting events and athletes.

Biography and interviewed material: Systematic collection and analysis of athlete biographies, autobiographies, newspaper interviews, and biographies in order to understand the experience of the person being analysed.

• **Policy and Institutional Documentation:** Significant collection of a variety of documents, including regulations, legal precedents, governance policies, and institutional documents offering various insights about formal structure and governance of the system, including policies of the Sports Authority of India, rules of the Olympic Committee, and legal precedents from the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

• **Cultural and Media Representation:** A thorough research of movies, documentaries, and other forms of art that reflect and build the perception of women's participation in sports, including *Dangal* (2016).

• **Public Discourse and Social Media Analysis:** A systematic research involving the collection of speeches, interviews, and social media posts aimed at tracing individual agency and resistance to the existing order.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The information gathered is evaluated through the application of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The stage one involved informal reading of all documents, including reports on policies and statements, media articles, biographical books, and official documents to get accustomed to the collected data. The first stage involved open coding through defining frequent ideas referring to the notions of gender discrimination, institutional barriers, media representation, gender insatiability, exclusion from leadership positions, and athlete empowerment. Then similar codes are classified into wider subjects that are related to the various aspects of gender inequality. At the final stage, the analysis compares the cases of five athletes in terms of their similarities and differences with the aim of identifying the general patterns and context-based differences. Data from various sources ensures the reliability of the outcome.

4. Case Studies

4.1 Case Study 1: Geeta Phogat – Deconstructing Rural Patriarchy and Challenging Masculine-Coded Athletic Domains

4.1.1 Contextual Background and Theoretical Significance Geeta Phogat's journey in wrestling is an illuminating study of several layers of obstacles ingrained in the patriarchal rural socio-cultural setup of the Indian society, wherein women's involvement in sports like wrestling poses a challenge to some key cultural beliefs regarding the feminine nature, physical abilities, and social obligations. Her evolution from a rural village in Haryana, where gender ratio is poor, violence against women is frequent, and gender norms are quite traditional to prominence on a global wrestling stage brings about necessary insights into how individual abilities can successfully contest patriarchal boundaries while exposing the obstacles that remain in the way of women's involvement in sports today. The story of Phogat's life is a significant symbol when it comes to understanding its broader cultural implications, especially due to the influence of the film *Dangal* (2016), which has made this story quite popular. In this particular case, the life story of Phogat is used effectively, becoming a salient cultural exemplar of success while positioning itself as a critical cultural transformation at the same time. Despite the great achievements of Phogat, which can easily be interpreted as the proof of the capabilities of women to succeed in the area characterized by masculinity, this success story is, at the same time, paradoxically reinforcing the already obtained stereotypes that state that such achievement is a result of exceptional family situations and unique individual qualities of the person rather than structural alteration of the society.

4.1.2 Multi-Dimensional Barrier Analysis

The beginning of Phogat's wrestling journey was characterized by long opposition from within the community utilizing various forms of control, policing, and culture to ensure upholding of gender norms. Community members, traditionalists, and networks ostracized Phogat's family and made them a target of social ridicule and moral disapproval for what was seen as a breach of gender roles through allowing an opportunity for daughters to try wrestling – a sport characterized culturally and symbolically by masculinity, competitiveness and male bonding (Prashar, 2017; Queeny, 2021).

Aside from community rejection, Phogat's career path faced obstacles caused by complete lack of specialized means designed to support female wrestlers. Existing wrestling centers, coaches, training techniques and fight competitions developed strictly for men, which resulted in using improvised training means that, however, did not always consider gender peculiarities.

4.1.3 Intersectional Analysis and Theoretical Implications

Understanding Phogat's experience requires us to place that experience in a wider intersectional context that can account for how gender-based discrimination interacts with rural marginalization, class-based constraints, and regional cultural conservatism to produce cumulative forms of disadvantage beyond the question of gender. A woman from rural Haryana—where gender norms are rather conservative, economic opportunities limited, and women's movement is heavily restricted—was subjected to additional layers of marginalization that urban, middle-class women athletes might not experience in the same dimension.

From the perspective of Critical Feminism, the extraordinary story of Phogat's success can be seen as a "regulatory fiction" (Butler, 1990) that recognizes female potential while at the same time preserving the essential gender beliefs that define such potential as something exceptional rather than as a natural occurrence.

4.2 Case Study 2: Dutee Chand – Biomedical Governance and the Regulation of Athletic Bodies

4.2.1 Institutional Biopolitics and Gender Verification

Dutee Chand's journey in sports is a classic example of how medicine has been institutionalized and how women's bodies have been categorized and regulated through what seems to be science, but which are essentially tools of gender policing and social control. In 2014, Chand underwent compulsory gender verification tests and was disqualified from participating in any competitions according to the IAAF's (International Association of Athletics Federations) hyperandrogenism rules that had laid out testosterone levels as a criterion for competing in women's category (Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018; Harper et al., 2018).

The hyperandrogenism regulations give cues to Chand's constant medical surveillance and her body undergoing invasive physiological testing as a result of which her biology was seen both as a deformity and an advantage. The hyperandrogenism regulations constitute an example of what Foucault (1978) studied as 'biopower', which refers to the process of controlling bodies through medicine and science, which seems impartial, but keeps in place existing social hierarchies.

4.2.2 Critical Analysis of Biomedical Rationales

The rules created by the IAAF applied biology principles so as to uphold strict gender classifications that go against the biological nature of gender and sex deviations. The regulations for eligibility based on testosterone provided standardized regulations that viewed natural biological variations as unfair differential, thus resulting in diagnosing normal human physiology (Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018; Sailors, 2020).

Viewed from the standpoint of Critical Feminism Theory theory, the regulations testify to how formally non-biased criteria can serve as a means of controlling people's gender identities by supporting existing gender distinctions. The focus on testosterone levels indicates cultural stereotypes regarding the connection between some hormones and physical capabilities of sporting achievements, while also oversimplifying the notion of gender via use of biological indicators.

4.2.3 Legal Challenge and Institutional Response

Chand's quest to invalidate this regulation through the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS 2014/A/3759) can be considered a breakthrough instance of resistance against biomedical governance in sport. Chand's legal actions and the support from various international advocates and feminist legal experts made a strong case for the proving of discrimination of the hyperandrogenism regulations as well as lack of conclusive scientific evidence for testosterone-based eligibility criteria (CAS, 2015). The CAS ruling to stop the regulations until other studies would be held became a landmark success for the athletes' rights activists and indicated the complexity of gender verification issues in sport. Nevertheless, the temporary suspension of the rules and in attempts of applying the same like rules with adjusted frames can be viewed as the example of the entrenched institutional desire to utilize surveillance technologies to ensure the drive of binary gender systems. The mention of this case witnesses the ability of individuals to challenge biopower when their actions are correctly constructed and utilized together with strong advocacy movements.

4.3 Case Study 3: Rani Rampal – Intersectional Marginalization and the Compounding Effects of Caste, Class, and Gender

4.3.1 Theoretical Context and Analytical Significance

Rani Rampal's journey from the edge of society to the captain of India's national women's hockey team exemplifies a classic example of how several systems of social stratification work together to create multiple kinds of social disadvantage exceeding conventional discussions that revolve around the topic of gender inequality. Her journey is remarkable as it helps explain how caste discrimination, class limitations in terms of economic status, and gender issues are linked to create multidimensional barriers to engaging in sports, competing, and working professionally.

This shows a concept developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) called "intersectionality," which refers to the idea that people experiencing marginalization occupy several divergent social categories and are affected by prejudices differently involved and operating simultaneously. Rampal's story reveals how the intersection of being Dalit, poor, a female, and living in a rural area creates a so-called "matrix of domination" as formulated by Patricia Hill Collins (2000).

4.3.2 Socio-Economic Context and Multi-Dimensional Marginalization

Rampal, hailing from a disadvantaged background, overcame a multitude of issues that resulted in social and economic hardships, thus facing difficulties in sporting involvement and competitive improvement. Coming from a low-income Dalit family and dwelling in rural Haryana, Rampal was unable to fulfil fundamental needs in material terms like food intake for proper athletic development, sporting equipment for practice and utilizing transport facilities for training, and lacked access to any financial help from the family to pursue competitive involvement in athletics (Gupta, 2020; Singh & Kumar, 2019). These financial limitations were greatly aggravated by the existence of complicated caste-related social injustice manifested through formal obstacles as well as casual exclusion. In local sports ecosystems, caste systems restricted players' access to coaches, tutors, and competition/connection pathways, with the most dominant castes forming respective networks based on social belonging and economic ties. Economic deprivation combined with the impact of caste oppression have produced what Gopal Guru (2009) defined as "degradation," referring to the profound social exclusion taking place through denial of dignity, respect, and fair treatment.

4.3.3 Persistent Recognition Disparities Despite Achievement

Rampal's accomplishments in leading women's hockey in India to unprecedented levels of international success (like Olympian wins and World Championships) have translated into lesser media roles and sponsorship possibilities than those achieved by women from more privileged backgrounds, and particularly much less than that enjoyed by male sportspeople in the same sector (Cooky, Messner, Musto, 2015; Bruce, 2016). The recognition gap has implications for media practice and market rationality that constantly devalue women's achievements in sports in general, particularly for women athletes

from marginalized communities, for whom stories of success or failure do not conform to favorable cultural accounts of femininity, moving up the social ladder, and representing the nation.

Media channels reporting on the successes of Rampal's career tend to highlight her remarkable commitment while downplaying structural barriers and support structures, thus contributing to the proliferation of the idea of pursuing sole achievements that prevent recognition of the need for structural reforms that can enable all women coming from similar backgrounds to replicate such accomplishments.

4.4 Case Study 4: P.V. Sindhu – Commercial Success, Media Visibility, and Persistent Gendered Recognition

4.4.1 Contextual Background and Theoretical Significance

P.V. Sindhu is regarded as one of the most successful Olympic athletes of India and serves as a valuable case of a conflict between exceptional achievements in sports and persistent structural discrimination. As the first Indian woman to win two individual medals at the Olympic Games and as the World Champion in badminton, Sindhu has done a great deal in changing public perceptions regarding women's participation in sports. The wins achieved by her has brought the popularity to badminton while proving women abilities to perform well at the international levels of competitions.

Critical Feminist Theory would argue that Sindhu's career proves that although one may perform well in athletics, this does not eliminate structures that are based on gender. While she has become one of the most prominent athletes in India, her accomplishments are often narrated in terms that establish the narrative on the basis of gender, for example, the successful messages might highlight personal sacrifice and family support instead of constructive excellence and professionalism in sports. Also, Social Role Theory explains that female athletes who exhibit typical masculine characteristics, such as competitiveness, confidence and leadership skills, will still be judged on the basis of social norms regarding femininity and acceptable gender behavior.

4.4.2 Commercial Recognition and Structural Contradictions

The successes of Sindhu in the commercial sphere illustrate the break from previous tendencies of underinvesting in women's sports. After winning medals at the Olympics and the World Championships she managed to secure major sponsorship contracts with some of the largest companies in the country and became one of the more marketable athletes in India. However, this popularity was mainly a result of her exceptional performance on the international arena rather than the effect of regular institutional investments in athlete development. This example shows a higher structural contradiction in Indian sports- financial and institutional support comes only after the success of athletes, while male athletes in commercially successful sports receive sponsorships throughout their careers. The media portrayals of Sindhu also illustrate how narratives can be gendered. The focus of some of the reports was on her looks, personality, discipline, and family background in addition to her athletics. Most of the time the reports are favorable but they highlight the general tendency in the culture to treat women's sports performance in a manner of personal events. According to the analysis of Critical Feminist Theory, such narratives contribute to the reproduction of gender hierarchy through stressing the points of individual success and downplaying the issue of transformations on a systematic level.

4.4.3 Theoretical Interpretation

Sindhu's case shows that being commercially successful doesn't mean that structural gender equality is also achieved. Her accomplishments allow us to see the limitations of market-driven recognitions as a means of achieving gender equity. The GEEM model gives an explanation for this paradox as it shows the complex interactions amongst structural institutions, commercial stakeholders' interests, and cultural narratives. Basically, due to the success of Sindhu, she gained publicity, but the governing institutions relevant to finance, leadership positions, and media messages remained unchanged from the gender-limited approach.

4.5 Case Study 5: Sania Mirza – Gender Norms, Public Identity, and Negotiating Nationalism

4.5.1 Contextual Background and Theoretical Significance

Sania Mirza holds a unique status in Indian sports as one of the most visible women athletes in the international arena. She made history in professional tennis by breaking long-held beliefs about women's participation in global individual sports and bringing to the fore the complex links between gender, religion, media scrutiny, and national identity. While many Olympic athletes are recognized only in sports, Mirza became a much-publicized persona, where her sports career was connected to many cultural and political issues.

Critical Feminist Theory acts as a useful framework in understanding Mirza's public persona, turning it into an arena where various tensions between femininity, nationalism, religion, and athletic professionalism occur. Social Role Theory explains the phenomena of public criticism related to deviation from conventional forms of femininity that extends beyond sports and touches upon Mirza's personal clothing, lifestyle, family relations.

4.5.2 Gendered Media Representation and National Identity

Throughout her life, Mirza received media coverage that often went beyond her sporting success. Media stories focused more on her outfits, femininity, marriage, and identity. Through the example of Mirza we can see what effect the media have on sporting women which male athletes do not experience.

After her marriage to cricketer Shoaib Malik, some media people questioned her loyalty to India though she continued to represent the country in sports. These episodes serve as a testament to the point that quite often female athletes are perceived as national symbols where their personal choices are interpreted in a broader contexts.

Analysing Mirza's experiences through an intersectional lens shows how gender functions together with religious identity and nationalism in an interesting way. She is seen not only as a prominent sportswoman but also as obliged to fulfill the stereotypes of gender norms, religious identity, and national symbols at the same time. Such multifaceted scrutiny goes

far beyond the assessment of her achievements and exposes institutional and cultural inequalities related to women in public life.

4.5.3 Theoretical Interpretation

Mirza's career illustrates that gender issues reach the level of culture and the formation of identity. The Gender Equity Ecosystem Model provides the means for understanding the workings of institutional framework, media depiction, political discourse, and cultural assumptions at work in shaping of experiences of female athletes. Even being successful at the international sports arena, Mirza became the object of scrutiny stemming from traditional gender notions of femininity, patriotism, and behaviour.

Thus, Mirza's case confirms the thesis regarding the fact that success in international sports does not save female athletes from being affected by gendered forces

Table 1. Comparative Summary of the Five Athlete Case Studies

Athlete	Primary Barrier	Structural Issue	Theory Applied	Key Insight
Geeta Phogat	Rural patriarchy	Lack of infrastructure	Critical Feminist Theory + Social Role Theory	Challenged masculine sporting norms
P.V. Sindhu	Commercial inequality	Unequal sponsorship pathways	CFT + SRT	Exceptional success did not eliminate structural inequality
Dutee Chand	Gender verification	Biomedical governance	CFT + Biopower	Challenged institutional regulation of female bodies
Rani Rampal	Caste, class and gender	Intersectional exclusion	Intersectionality + CFT	Multiple social disadvantages compounded inequality
Sania Mirza	Media and nationalism	Gendered public scrutiny	CFT + SRT	Negotiated gender, religion, and national identity

5. Cross-Case Analysis: Structural Patterns and Systemic Mechanisms

5.1 Systematic Patterns Across Cases

Analysis across the five different cases shows that there are common patterns in the ways that women's accomplishments have been devalued. In other words, the findings indicate that the achievements of women are systematically undervalued, regardless of the men's accomplishments being compared to them. Throughout their professional careers, women athletes accrued significant achievements, including international medals and World Championships' titles, but their accomplishments have been disregarded and overlooked by the institutions.

Inequalities in Resource Allocation: An examination of the patterns of funding, sponsorship and the allocation of resources from institutions across all cases shows evidence of systematic inequalities facing women's sports and inhibits their ability to train and compete effectively. The prevailing forms of resource inequity are manifested in the mechanisms of formal resource allocation, which reflect certain beliefs about the relative importance of competition based on gender, and also the informal channels of resource distribution, which involve the preference given to male athletes because of the special institutional arrangement and business relationships with male athletes.

Failures in media representation: A review of media representation across various cases indicates that women in sports are often the subject of trivialization, sexualization, and misrepresentation, which diminishes the acceptance of women's achievements in sports by the society and allows the society to maintain its stereotypical view of women as less capable athletes. In addition, media coverage often tends to focus on the personal stuff, family relations, or appearance rather than athletic achievements, reinforcing societal attitudes towards women's participation in sports as inferior to their social role.

Inclusive Governance: All examples show how the lack of women athletes' participation and involvement in governance and leadership roles leads to the formation of institutional cultures not influenced by women concerns and viewpoints throughout strategic decision-making. In this regard, the exclusion leads to self-reinforcing cycles whereby the existing government structures prioritizing male programs are constantly allocating resources in favor of male athletics without contributing to the emergence of institutional cultures where women are marginalized.

5.2 The Gender Equity Ecosystem Model: Empirical Validation

The cross-case analysis offers empirical support for the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM) as proposed in the theoretical framework of this study. The three dimensions of the model are structural, cultural, and agentic and have been proven to work well in the context of all five cases that the study includes.

The structural dimension refers to policies, mechanisms of resource allocation, and the hierarchical structure of an organization. The structural dimension demonstrates how official policies and other means contribute to the discrimination

of women athletes and managers. The cultural dimension shows how some narratives, beliefs, and traditions contribute to the image of the woman in society which leads to limiting her role. The agentic dimension indicates how certain resistance methods work against the standards of the modern society.

The data obtained from the five cases showed that the three elements of the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model interact rather than work independently from one another. Structural factors, such as funding from institutions, governance types, and policies affect the opportunities available to athletes. Cultural factors, for example, media representation, patriarchal notions, and nationalist rhetoric play a huge role in creating the public perception of legitimacy. Lastly, the actions of individuals in the form of legal battles, personal revolt, activism, and continued success of sportswomen in athletics are strong enough to question the legitimacy of existing institutions. The interaction of these three dimensions shows that isolated policy reforms or singular achievements are not enough to bring about true gender equity in Indian Olympic sports.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The cross-case analysis is evidence for the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM), which is developed in the theoretical framework of this research. The model has three dimensions: namely structural, cultural, and agentic, the three of which all work well with each of the five cases taken into account in this research.

The structural dimension implies such things as policies, the organization of resource allocation, and the structural hierarchy used in the organization. At the same time, the structural dimension shows in what way all these official documents and mechanisms serve to discriminate women athletes or managers. The cultural dimension demonstrates in what way various narratives, beliefs, and traditions impact the existing image of a woman in society thus limiting her case. Finally, the agentic level demonstrates how peculiar forms of resistance function in the context of the contemporary society.

In addition, Dutee Chand's example presents significant theoretical insights into the functioning of biomedical governance as a tool for gender regulation providing an extension of Foucault's notions of biopower in regard to the field of governance in sports. This study adds to the growing literature on the issue of regulating female bodies in sports while providing evidence of the multifaceted interaction between scientific authority, institutional power and the resistance put up by individuals.

6.2 The Cultural Nationalism Paradox

One crucial result of cross-case analysis is the paradoxical relationship between cultural nationalism and gender equality in Indian sports. The analysis brings out a recurrent pattern in which women's sporting accomplishments are both regarded as the pride of the nation and used as a cultural means to mark progress, while sportswomen continue to suffer from institutional problems and cultural constraints.

This phenomenon—named as gendered cultural nationalism in the present study—works through a unique double twist: it praises women's athletic success when it fulfills nationalistic goals while paradoxically putting limitations on women's ability to act, express their identity and be influential in the institution in order to maintain traditional gender hierarchy. A film "Dangal" and its social reception are perhaps the best examples of such phenomenon as the film celebrates the success of Geeta Phogat, but the context is that her success is attributed to the vision of her father and family determination rather than to the potential of women as sportsmen or the necessity of reform of institutional processes.

6.3 Limitations and Reflexive Considerations

This research study comes with one limitation and one noteworthy consideration. Although it is helpful in allowing for in-depth analysis and a complete theoretical framework, it leaves out cases that are maybe less public and well-known. Cases are examined from the perspective of female athletic professionals poorly represented in the media out of the elite category determining their involvement in the research. Apart from that, this study relied solely on publicly available information, which might mean that some aspects of an organization might not have been studied well enough, especially in terms of informal relations, private communication, or lived experience that remained unknown to anyone but the participants.

6.4 Contributions of the Study

There are four major ways in which this research enhances the current knowledge. To begin with, the research performs comparative qualitative researches of five celebrated Indian female Olympic sportswomen encompassing various sporting disciplines, which provides greater knowledge of the issue as compared with studies based on single cases. The second contribution of this study is that it combines Feminist Theory and Social Role Theory in its analytical framework to show how structural, cultural, and institutional obstacles contribute to the experience of women in sports. The third contribution of the research is that it presents Gender Equity Ecosystem Model (GEEM), which enables us to see gender equity through the lenses of all three aspects: structural, cultural, and agentic, and the last contribution is that the study shows that having great athletic achievements is not enough to overcome strong institutional inequalities.

7. Policy Implications and Recommendations

7.1 Media Discourse Transformation

The results require a complete revamping of the media dialogue about women in sports both by structural initiatives and cultural change efforts. In this context, the two kinds of organizations should cooperate in creating gender-sensitive norms

for reporting on women's accomplishments by defining both the amount and quality of coverage; designing training programs for journalists committed to addressing such topics as the possible bias, gender-responsive approaches to reporting, or the intersectionality issues; and creating mechanisms for monitoring compliance and creating incentives for broader representation.

7.2 Institutional Safeguards and Governance Reform

To reform governance systems and to remove barriers preventing women from participating in governance, the institutional system has to be restructured. Specifically, this means establishing minimum requirements for women's participation in sport governance organizations at both national and international levels; creating independent monitoring and accountability systems to assess organizational efforts to achieve gender equity; developing training and leadership programmes specifically for women; and implementing an anti-discrimination policy that works and has measures for enforcement and effective mobilization of reports.

7.3 Intersectionality-Informed Funding Frameworks

The research results show that financial aid specifically designed for women in various sports and financial aid do not provide the needed solutions for women athletes belonging to various groups facing disadvantages or people who belong to lower-income classes. The effective strategy requires considering the intersectional nature in decisions about the distribution of funds, so the aid is paid to rural women and those who come from low social classes and niches.

7.4 Comprehensive Governance Models

It is important to develop and implement complete governance models that guarantee adequate representation of women in all levels of institutions for sustainable institutional changes. Such models must be based on evidence-based knowledge about the performance of gender-related organizational logics in certain institutional and cultural contexts and the examples of best practices in gender-sensitive sports governance.

8. CONCLUSION

The results of this study have revealed that gender discrimination in Indian Olympic sport is ingrained in the structural characteristics of institutional frameworks rather than being a product of coincidence or individual actions. By conducting rigorous multi-case analysis of five high-profile careers involved in Olympic sport, the study has highlighted the complicated mechanisms through which gender disparities are produced and reproduced in various aspects of people's experience related to sporting environments such as performance evaluation, resource distribution, media representation, and governance participation.

The introduction of the Gender Equity Ecosystem Model provides a new and effective analytical tool that takes into account structural, cultural, and agentic dimensions in producing a more complete understanding of how gender equity outcomes are achieved in complex institutional contexts. The empirical analysis of the model and application of it in different sports settings and among various individuals prove the viability of the tool in relation to the issues of gender equity not only within Indian sports but also in competitive sports around the globe.

Most importantly, the study corroborates that to promote gender equality in sport, there is a need for a shift in the entire system instead of basing changes just on individual success stories or gradual policy changes. While the incredible accomplishments documented in these cases provide compelling proof of the existence of women's athletic prowess and resilience, they also demonstrate the immense gap between on-field victories and off-field equity, which can be narrowed through comprehensive structural changes that take into account the complex nature of a range of institutional, cultural and material circumstances still preventing women from taking part in sport on the same level with men.

This study's contributions in respect of practicality and theory go beyond the Indian context, offering insights that are also applicable to gender equity challenges within sport governance in other parts of the world and attracting attention from decision makers, sport bodies, and pressure groups engaged in improving sport governance models to achieve real gender equality for the benefit of female sportspeople

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