

Women Empowerment through Decision-Making in Sport: An Analysis of the Indian Scenario

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Abstract: *As long ago as 396 BC, Kyniska's victory at the Olympic Games came as nothing short of a revelation in a world marked by gender inequality and misogyny. It announced to the world that sporting events and competitions are not strictly male domains. Nonetheless, the 1900 Paris Olympics had only 2 per cent female participants. Coincidentally, the same city of Paris became host to the first modern Olympic Games in 2024, fulfilling the much-awaited goal of 'gender parity'. But, is it enough? Is gender parity in terms of representation sufficient? Almost all major international declarations and conferences have emphasised increasing women's representation in international sporting events. Consequently, the number of female participants and sporting icons has increased in recent times. However, due to patriarchal norms that still form the basis of our social structure, gender equality in sports is far from being achieved. One reason for this could be our predilection for inequality. Hence, beginning with a literature review relating current social norms on sports with the ancient world, the study analyses data on gender parity for sports federations in India. A statistical comparison of the strength of executive members classified by gender in India's sports federations reveals that decision-making within India's sporting world is skewed in favour of men. Thus, the study recommends that more women be included in decision-making positions in India's sports federations to transform society as a whole. Efforts should be made at two levels: (i) the public with a positive use of the media ensuring increased awareness in this regard, and (ii) the policy level guaranteeing the change.*

Keywords: Women, Gender, Sports, Inequality, Representation, Decision-making

INTRODUCTION

Kings of Sparta were my fathers and brothers, and I, Kyniska, winning the race with my chariot of swift-footed horses and erected this statue. I assert that I am the only woman in all Greece who won this crown. (Kyle, 2003, p. 183).

These are the words inscribed on the victory epigram of Kyniska, the first woman in the history of the Olympics to have won against an all-male starting lineup in the much-hyped event of chariot racing. Nevertheless, that was 396 BC, and very few success stories such as Kyniska's in the ancient world were recorded in history (just one woman named Euryleonis has been mentioned by Pausanias). With regard to modern times, one cannot avoid being moved by the fact that the second edition of the modern Olympics, held in Paris in 1900, had barely 2% participation by women athletes. This shows an ironic contrast between potential and reality. While Kyniska's case does not leave us with an iota of doubt regarding the ability of women to compete in any sporting event and register victory, history shows evidence to the contrary. Few women have been recognised as athletes. While patriarchy and misogyny have loomed large over all human history as dominant and defining ideologies, one must not forget that even when the feminist movement in recent times has looked to narrow the gap, we have largely chosen to remain content with representation for women.

In 2016 (Minutes dated 8 December), the IOC Executive Board recommended that the members of the Olympic Movement take steps to achieve a minimum target of 30 per cent for women's representation in their governing bodies by 2020. Consequently, in 2023, the number of female IOC Members rose to 41 per cent, 100 per cent more than in 2013, adding more diversity in terms of age and regional representation. Female representation on IOC commissions in 2023 rose to 50 per cent, a historic high that once again shows a 100 per cent increase since 2013. Since then, it has been maintained at 50 per cent (even in 2026).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Notions of gender and sports in ancient times

The ancient city of Sparta presents a bright example of how sports (mainly athletics) are intertwined with social structure, especially regarding gender norms. The choice of Sparta at this point seems relevant as Simone de Beauvoir (2011) in her painstaking review of women's status through the ages of history, seems to appreciate the level of freedom enjoyed by Spartan women which, in her estimation, is a clear sign of their high status. In a rather satisfying tone, she claims that Spartan women "underwent the burdens of maternity as men did war: but except for this civic duty, no restraints were put on their freedom." (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 96). However, this view seems to be

far from reality, as established by more recent research on the status of women in ancient Sparta. Xenophon claims that Lysistrata in ancient Sparta believed that “the most important task for freeborn women was to bear children” (*Lakedaimonion Politeiai* 1.4). Elsewhere in the same book, it is also highlighted that Spartan women participated in athletics and exercised their bodies to produce stronger offspring (Christesen, 2012). It is also remarked “the primary emphasis in the upbringing of [Spartan] girls was on preparing them for their future subordinate roles as wives and mothers of warriors.” (Cartledge 2001, p. 115). Thus, participation in sporting activities would end for Spartan women as soon as they married (Christesen, 2012). At the cultural plane, gender ideology in the ancient world centring upon the beauty of Spartan girls seems to be nicely described by Aristophanes (5th century BC in his comedy *Lysistrata*), more easily understood today using the concept of “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975). It is now clearer why it is claimed that sports for women in ancient Sparta were nothing more than an instrument in the process of socialisation to shape them in a manner that would make them more attractive and pleasant-looking to the male gaze (Christesen, 2012).

Women and decision-making

The underrepresentation of women in management and leadership positions is a global issue. According to UN Women (2023), at the global level, women hold only 28.2% of management positions in the workplace. There are various reasons for this gender gap, including historical, cultural, educational, political, and administrative issues. At a historical-cultural plane, one still finds considerable place for a societal mindset which suggests that the primary role of women is to take care of the domestic needs of the family, a fact that was introduced as a point of debate decades ago with the publication of the book *The Second Shift* by Hochschild and Machung (1989). Others have shown that historically, the family, based on a homemaker-breadwinner model, an invention of the nineteenth century (Hernandez, 1993), assigned men the provider role, while women were entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing and caring (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Heilman, 2001). However, not much has changed regarding these notions. Women are compelled to work for a second shift while their male counterparts are exempted from any such responsibility (Ferrant, Pesando, & Nowacka, 2014; Kiamba, 2008). Gender stereotypes and theories on ‘sex roles’ have emerged as some of the chief barriers to women’s upward progression in the workplace (Eagly et al., 2012; Joshi et al., 2015).

The Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO highlights a more welfare-based and inclusive environment created within countries and organisations with a higher representation of women in leadership positions (Chen, 2010). In line with the findings of ILO (2019), at the level of business organizations, it was also found that women’s representation in management and leadership positions in business firms leads to better performance (Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Triana & Asri, 2017; Faizan et al., 2019). Other studies argue on similar lines indicating that women leaders tend to produce a more collaborative, inclusive, positive, and productive

environment (Cook & Glass, 2011; 2014). Female leaders tend to enhance ‘employee innovation’ and consequently their performance by introducing new female leadership traits (Jing, Hou, Zhang, & Zhao, 2022). Studies also support the hypothesis that female political leaders serve as role models, leading to more egalitarian gender attitudes among women (Chen et al., 2025).

Women and decision-making in sports

Having reviewed the findings that present a positive correlation between women and leadership outcomes in liberal democracies, one might find a contrasting picture regarding leadership positions and women in the field of sports. Concerns have been raised in research studies in this regard. Adriaanse (2015) reported the underrepresentation of women in sports federations at the global level. Less than 20% of board of directors’ positions are held by women. Furthermore, only 10% of board chairs and 16% of chief executive positions are held by women (Adriaanse, 2015). Although the situation has seen marked improvement since 2015, in a report published by the Step-Up Equality project entitled *Women’s leadership and decision making within sport* (2020), it was remarked that “Leadership and decision making are the biggest challenges facing sport in its progress towards gender equality”. Commenting on the European scenario, the report highlights the issue of how sports are “done”, pointing to cultural and attitudinal barriers hindering women’s path to becoming “effective leaders”. Partly psychological and partly historical, gender bias in the field of sports has persisted significantly to this day. The very idea of sporting excellence is often portrayed as the “defining feature of masculine identity” (Theberge, 2000, p. 323). Even if female athletes are celebrated, it is only a parallel occurrence to the otherwise dominant set of values attached to the idea of womanhood in a patriarchal society. Women athletes are usually accepted as “unnatural athletes” to differentiate them from the frailty and domesticity attached to womanhood, not to mention the notions of beauty (Borish, 1996; Birrell, 2000). Thus, the hallmark of women athletes in today’s scenario is less about achievement in sports; rather, it is often their attractiveness, largely determined by the male standards of female beauty. Does this not remind us of ancient Sparta, where women had to learn the art of becoming beautiful objects for the male gaze?

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on secondary data collected from the official websites of all sports federations recognised by the Government of India, the data of which were available online. To delve deeper into the current situation, data for all 62 sports federations were analysed to determine whether women have entered the domain of *decision-making* in sports. The data obtained were suitable for the analysis of 52 sports organisations. The vital statistics chosen to argue in this context was the strength of women in the executive committees of sports federations. Sometimes the terminology differs, as some of these bodies call them office-bearers. Nonetheless, most of these could be analysed according to their distribution based on gender.

RESULTS

A comparison of the number of women and men in terms of raw strength is represented by the bar diagram below.

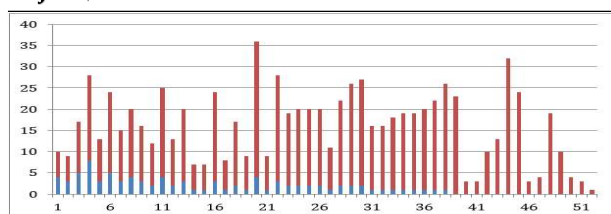


Figure 1: Women vis-à-vis Men (strength)

The bars (in blue and orange) seem to present a decisively lopsided distribution based on gender in these committees. The blue bars (representing women, completely absent in some cases) seem to be negligible compared to the orange bars (representing men). A clearer picture would emerge if one looked at the ratios of the distribution. The ratio of the number of women in these committees to the total number of members is presented below:

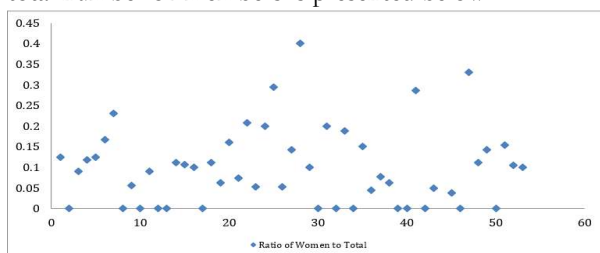


Figure 2: Number of women to total strength

It is quite an appalling fact worthy of catching our attention that one can very easily locate those 14 dots right on the X-axis representing the value zero. The practical significance of the observation lies in the fact that as many as 14 out of 52 federations have no women members on their executive committees or the list of office-bearers. Furthermore, the maximum value in this chart is 0.4, that is, 40% women in decision-making positions, and that too, for just one out of 52 federations. The sport that was singled out was Bridge. It is also no surprise to find netball as one of the top performers in this regard, as it is known that netball originated in the nineteenth century as a women's version of the male-dominated basketball, assigning it a gendered identity (Howe, 2023; Treagus, 2005). Thus, a relatively higher number of women were found to be associated with the sport. However, attention must also be paid to the fact that none of the 52 national federations seem to cross the 43.1% mark which is the ratio of female members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2025.

A better comparison may be had if one calculates the ratio of women to men in all sports federations. The chart below shows the calculated values.

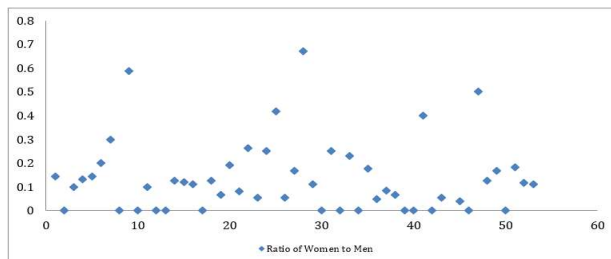


Figure 3: Ratio of women to men

The maximum value turned out to be 0.67 (for just one of the sports federations) which means that at best

in any of these decision-making bodies of sports federations in India, the number of women equals two-thirds the number of men when ideally speaking the number should be equal, that is to say, the above ratio should be one. Moreover, there are only five sports federations where the ratio of women to men is above 0.33, that is, greater than one-third. Thus, almost nine out of ten sports federations in India have a ratio of less than one-third. In a country where the 106th Amendment Act (also known as the Women's Reservation Act, 2023) was passed by the parliament in 2023, guaranteeing one-third reservation for women in terms of seats in the Lok Sabha, the state legislative assemblies, and the legislative assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, the record of the sports federations on the issue of gender parity does not seem too impressive.

Extending the analysis, it seems worthwhile to find out how women in India have fared when it comes to occupying key positions in sports federations. Thus, we decided to compare the number of federations that have women as either president or vice president. Quite expectedly, the total number of women on these executive committees seems to be shrinking as one tries to review top positions. Of course, there are more women vice-presidents than presidents owing to the obvious difference in the status and power of these two positions in any committee. All 52 federations were surveyed for a woman as the president, and the results suggest that we need to go a long way as far as gender equality in decision-making in Indian sports is concerned. The chart below is a graphical representation of the current scenario.

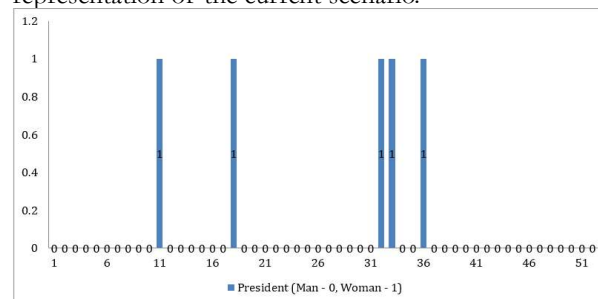


Figure 4: Number of Presidents classified by gender

Only 5 out of 52 (approximately 10 percent; comparable with 3/31 in the case of international federations) sport federations in India have a female president.

Nonetheless, in decreasing order of importance comes the post of vice president, and on this front, in alignment with the global trend, there is bound to be a somewhat greater presence of women. The chart below shows the comparison.

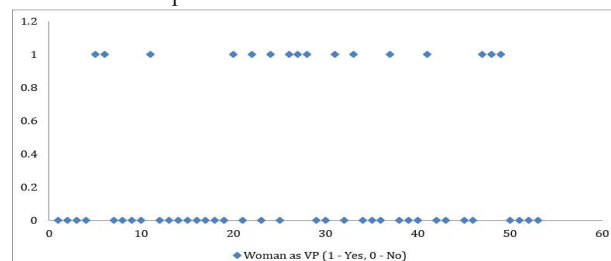


Figure 5: Sport federations with women Vice Presidents (at least one)

Counting the dots with value 1 shows that only 16 out of 52 federations, that is, 31%, have at least one woman as vice president. The ratio is close to the 30 percent mark which is well below the somewhat more respectable 50 percent mark.

To visualise the real scenario, one might consider the chart below:

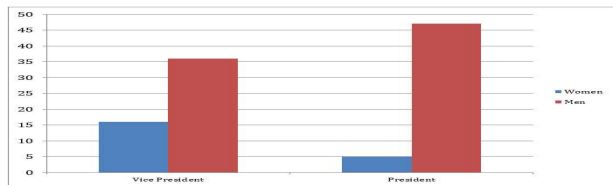


Figure 6: Women vs Men in executive positions

Clearly, Indian sports federations have a low proportion (not too different from the global average) of women in decision-making ranks. This removes all doubt and ambiguity regarding the relative standing of women in Indian sports.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Trend-setters such as Suzanne Lenglen are widely hailed for their courage to stand against the social order that was considered immutable in the 1920s. Nonetheless, it took a long time to integrate the issue of gender with sports. Writing from a Sociology of Sport perspective, Hargreaves (1990) declared that “gender [was] on the sports agenda”. Hence, a discussion on gender and sports has stayed with us since then, marked by a shift in approach from ‘women in sport’ to ‘gender relations’ (Birrell, 1988). It was widely celebrated that the Paris 2024 Olympics would be the first modern Olympic Games to have half the number of all athletes as women. Tokyo 2020 was quite close at 48 percent. But, as a matter of fact, the dominant ideologies attached to sport in general, and gender in particular, present no signs of giving way to a more egalitarian set up any time soon. Women’s empowerment is not merely indicated by equal representation in terms of participation. Rather, one must close the gap between men and women in the decision-making domain. This aspect of gender equality in sports has caught the attention of policymakers. From the Brighton Declaration (1994) to the recent resolutions passed by the IOC, this point is mentioned in official policy documents. There has been an emphasis on increasing the number of women in the governing bodies of sports federations.

Unfortunately, the resolution has been limited to papers only. Not much has been achieved in reality, at least according to the Indian example. One reason for this could be the indifference of public opinion. The image portrayed by the media hardly lets people get a feel of the grimness of the situation. Greater participation by female athletes in Western societies has been portrayed as a mark of the rise in the status of women in society (Kyle, 2007). Public opinion is often satisfied if this can be shown. However, owing to the historical problems connected to the ideological dimensions of patriarchy, one may hardly find any gender equality in sports if we do not shift our paradigm from participation to decision-making by women. This is essential as the whole philosophy of what sport is has been shaped by men’s understanding of it, and sport is still considered a largely masculine activity (Anderson, 2009;

Clement-Guillotin, Chalabaev, & Fontayne, 2012; Dunning, 1986), often with institutional practices reinforcing male hegemony (Cunningham, 2010; Fink, 2016; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Some have even argued that women exist between two conflicting cultures: sports culture and the larger social culture (Krane et al., 2004). At the structural plane, sport seems to be one of the last bastions of masculinity which could well be because “ruling groups attempt to use sport as an instrument of control” (Hargreaves, 1986, p. 43). Thus, the study recommends that to bring about a change, efforts ought to be made at two levels: (i) the public with a positive use of the media ensuring increased awareness in this regard, and (ii) the policy level guaranteeing change through the democratic process.

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