



Letter to Editor

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Women in sport: Challenges and solutions in India

Main LC, Rowe K, Schoenberg G, Gastin P, Walsh J

Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood 3125, Australia

Dear Editor,

The Women in Sport Movement is becoming a global phenomenon; and rightly so as women comprise half of the global population. Change has been slow, however, and many long-standing traditions remain. However we believe that there is great potential for the status quo to be challenged with disruption, and change at the systemic level. Given the known benefits of physical activity, exercise and sport on individual's health, and specifically the protective benefits against cardiovascular disease (CVD) [1], such interruption has the potential for profound influence on public health within India. A country where the burden of CVD within the Indian subcontinent itself has been underemphasized [2], and yet may be one of the regions with the highest burden of CVD in the world. As such we would like to present some key themes that emerged at a recent workshop on the topic of engaging women in sport in India with a view to pursue any collaboratively opportunities in this space moving forward.

The workshop was conducted by Deakin University Australia in association with the Australian High Commission, and the Federation of the Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) (9/10/17) to better understand some of the challenges that exist in engaging women in sport in India. This initiative was undertaken with a view to collaboratively explore short and long term solutions to energise the Women in Sport Movement in India. In partnership with industry practitioners, discipline experts from the Deakin Women in Sport and Exercise (WISE) Hub presented research and worked through examples from across the world. Some key themes that emerged:

1. Encouraging mass participation

The women's sport landscape is evolving at a rapid rate globally, evidenced by the number of professional women's leagues that have emerged in recent years and the growth in the number of female athletes competing internationally [3]. Supporting this agenda has been a push from government, sport and other stakeholders to encourage more women and girls participate in sport and active recreation [4, 5]. Studies show that women and girls face a specific range of participation barriers [6, 7], which may constrain their participation. Such barriers can be can be addressed through policy and programming intervention, where commitment from government and other relevant stakeholders exists. The Indian Government and commercial stakeholders have indicated interest in the women's sport agenda, from both a commercial and mass participation standpoint [4]. Yet, mass sport participation amongst Indian women and girls remains constrained and opportunities exist for growth and change [8]. In order for change to occur in the female sport participation landscape, in India, participation barriers and opportunities for growth, require attention and action. While some nations have made progress in advancing the women's sport agenda, substantial work remains globally [3], and in India specifically [8].

During the workshop, examples were presented of female sport and recreation promotional campaigns, programs and strategies that had been implemented in Australian and English contexts. These included Sport England's "This Girl Can" campaign, British Cycling's "Breeze program" (women's cycling), VicHealth's suite of female focused grants and programs and Sport and Recreation Victoria's "Change Our Game" campaign. These are in addition to the pathways and programs that have been established at grassroots level, in the Australian context, to support professional women's sport leagues established in sports such as cricket, soccer and Australian Rules football. Workshop participants were encouraged to

***Corresponding author:**

Main LC

Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood 3125, Australia

Email:

luana.main@deakin.edu.au

consider ideas and lessons from these examples and how such lessons might hold relevance in the Indian sport participation landscape. Thus, stimulating a conversation around female sport participation in India and the way forward.

2. Women and sport leadership

Women do lead, they are competitive, and they have much to offer the changing face of sport [9]. Yet globally women remain under represented as coaches, administrators, and officials at all levels of competition [10]. The patriarchal culture of sport and the marginalisation of women in the sport workplace leave women feeling unsupported and isolated. Women represent 49.5% of the global population yet are treated as a minority group in sport; however, this minority group refuse to remain or be silenced and are making themselves more visible. The status quo needs to be challenged with disruption and change at the systemic level required.

3. Organisational leadership and governance

The issues regarding the lack of women in leadership positions are even more predominant at the executive and boardroom levels. In India, less than 10% of board members of national sport federations are women [11]. As with all areas of women in sport, women are kept out of the executive level due to an ingrained patriarchy accompanied by inaccurate myths. Current board members often recruit future board members from within their network, which are usually mostly men, perpetuating the lack of gender equality in governance. Furthermore, a series of myths exist surrounding women in governance such as women aren't capable, interested, or available for governance positions. More likely, women haven't been asked! Increasing the number of women in leadership and governance positions can improve the leadership of sport organisations through the integration of diverse perspectives and experiences into decision-making processes as well as a potentially more collaborative approach to governance [12]. Additionally, the inclusion of women in governance positions sends the powerful signal that an organisation values women in sport. Effective strategies for increasing the number of women in governance include the use of quotas, funding incentives, and nominations committees.

4. Challenges and solutions in India

Over the past 10 years, sport as an industry in India has changed fundamentally. The promotion of sport across all spectrums of society not only encourages inclusivity, it also creates employment opportunities [4]. However, even with a number of developments in this space, the rare successes have often occurred in spite of the system rather than because of the system. Moreover, there is still a lack of a sports culture which will present its own challenges for those wanting to make advances in this space. The women's sport workshop focused on a range of barriers commonly reported as limiting female participation, framed somewhat by socio-ecological concepts. In particular, the group discussed issues including fear of judgement, intimidation, lack of skills, poor self-confidence or self-efficacy, limited participation options and safety considerations. Workshop participants, who represented national and state sport bodies, government and other related areas, discussed some of the specific barriers that exist in the Indian context. In particular, they identified the absence of a cultural norm around participation for women and girls, family priorities which focus on studies and supporting the household, lack of infrastructure and programming targeting females, in addition to the broader influence of male dominated in sport and societal cultures. Participants indicated that these challenges were more problematic in rural areas than in cities. These observations echo some of the findings presented [8], and highlight relevant areas requiring government intervention, in the context of encouraging female participation in sport.

We know that sport and education have the power to transform lives and to unite communities. We are committed to ensuring that we provide opportunities for women to excel in whatever field they chose and we know that sport provides women with opportunities to lead. Together there are four broad areas where we can work together collaboratively in this space, using sport as a vehicle for development, promoting health, improving academic achievement and increasing community safety. Deakin WISE hopes to influence cultural change and promote positive role models with the goal of supporting all levels of female participation and engagement in sport. We welcome expressions of interest to pursue this work collaboratively moving forward.

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