

Gender and Disability: A Study of Gendered Experiences of Female Para-Athletes in Punjab

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Abstract

In many societies, including India, women are often expected to fulfill traditional roles within the home, while sports are seen as a space meant mostly for men. At the same time, people with disabilities are often excluded or overlooked in public life, including in the sphere of sports. For individuals who live at the intersection of gender and disability, the world of sports can be especially challenging. This article explores the lived experiences of female para-athletes in Punjab, India, by examining the intersections of gender, disability, and sports participation.

The present article is based upon a study conducted on the basis of semi structured interviews conducted with 30 female para athletes from diverse sporting disciplines and disability categories. The study aims to examine not only the nature and extent of their sports participation but also the study looks at how social norms, family roles, accessibility, and personal identity as both women and individuals with disabilities intersect in their sporting journeys. The narratives of these women are also included for better understanding of the key issues such as gender, disability, identity, and sports participation. The paper argues that sports serve not only as a medium for empowerment but also as a contested site where gendered and ableist hierarchies are both reproduced and challenged.

Introduction

Susan Wendell (1989) posits that disabled women experience compounded oppression—marginalized by both gender and ability. Sports, often viewed as a male domain, traditionally celebrate physical strength and aggression, reinforcing masculine ideals (Eitzen & Sage, 1978). Within this context, women—particularly those with disabilities—must navigate dual exclusions. Historically, their participation has been trivialized or ignored, with female athletes frequently labeled as unfeminine (Malumphy, 1971) and disabled bodies deemed deviant (Brooks & Deegan, 1981). The fusion of gender and disability, therefore, complicates their access to and acceptance in the sporting world.

Despite these constraints, women with disabilities have challenged stereotypes and achieved notable milestones. Yet, gender disparities persist. For instance, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) reports that male athletes vastly outnumber female participants, and policy implementation remains inconsistent (Sherrill, 1998; Olenik, 1998). In India, this imbalance is evident in the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, where only 25% of the Indian contingent were women (Thandurai et al., 2024).

The present study is grounded in feminist sociology and critical disability studies. Feminist theory interrogates the patriarchal structures that govern women's lives, emphasizing how gender is socially constructed and enforced (Hargreaves, 2000). Meanwhile, critical disability studies challenge medicalized understandings of disability and promote a social model that attributes disablement to societal barriers rather than individual impairments. Together, these frameworks facilitate an intersectional analysis of how gender and disability co-produce marginalization, particularly within institutional spaces like sports.

Women in Sports

Women all over the world are working hard to break the glass ceiling in the face of numerous barriers based on gender discrimination. Just like other social factors, sports

are also intertwined and linked with the social structure and values. Sports are generally seen as male dominated arenas. Sports and femininity are considered as almost opposite identities. Historically, sports have been associated with masculine ideals such as strength, aggression, and competitiveness.

Women's involvement in sports has often been viewed as a disruption of traditional gender roles. Female athletes are frequently perceived as "unfeminine," especially when they participate in strength-based or competitive sports (Eitzen & Sage, 1978; Malumphy, 1971).

Many times the hindrances for women to succeed in in male dominated field of sports, are considerably higher due to some other impediment such as disability. Because society perceives the disabled body as deviant on one hand, whereas on the other hand the sporting body is seen as accomplished. In sports competitions, Women with disabilities often face the "double handicap" of being a woman and having a disability. (Brooks & Deegan , 1981).

Though not without facing discrimination and division, Female athletes with disabilities have made significant contributions in history of able-bodied sports as well as disability sport. Liz Hartel was the first woman to win a silver medal at the 1952 Olympics. In 1957, women were included to participate in US national wheelchair games for the first time.

The general history of disability of sports has been non-specific in terms of gender, race, type of disability etc. Therefore, it is not easy to trace back the history of sports for women with disabilities. Whatever historical accounts of women in disability sports are present, they too have been written through the experiences of male athletes, more specifically white male athletes with disabilities. (DePauw & Gavron, 2005).

Women are struggling to ensure equal representation, acceptance and appreciation as male athletes. The gender bias in sports is clearly evident in the participation rate of women. In competitive sports significantly, fewer women are involved than men. (Thierfeld and Gibbons,1986). The participation ratio in Paralympics is skewed, in that two to three times more men compete at Paralympics level than women. (Sherrill 1998). The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has identified the issue of

representation of women in the Paralympic movement as one of the highest priorities. (Olenik 1998). In the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games, India sent a contingent of 54 athletes, out of which only 14 were women, which makes it a mere 25%. Thus, it is clear that lack of numbers in participation by female para athletes acts as a barrier to disabled women athletes. (Thandurai, P. et al. 2024)

. Hargreaves (2000) highlights the historical gender inequality in disability sports, noting that men have had greater access to elite-level events, while women have struggled to include new events in their competition programs. A clear example is that male powerlifting had long been part of para sports, but the female powerlifting event was only introduced at the Sydney 2000 Paralympics.

Olenik et. al. (1998) revealed that female para athletes faced limited opportunities and were often forced to choose between pursuing sport and securing a livelihood. Caudwell (2017) and Khetan (2020) reported that female players often receive discrimination compared to their male counterparts.

Various studies indicate that there is wide discrepancy between the media coverage of male and female players. The women players are underrepresented in the media. Huggins and Randell (2007) analyzed news articles from the *New Times* during March 2007 and found that female athletes were significantly underrepresented compared to male athletes. The media often used language that reinforced the perception of women's inferiority in sports.

Ayvazoglu (2015) in their content analysis of 486 articles from a popular Turkish sports newspaper found that female athletes with disabilities received significantly less coverage than their male counterparts. Female athletes were often portrayed as passive participants, while male athletes were shown in active, dynamic role

Objectives of the study

To discover the reality of sports for disabled women, it is important to understand the context in which women participate in sports. We will explore the lived experiences of women. We will focus on gendered aspects of sports participation for women with disabilities. Participation. We will explore how disability and gender intersect to shape

the social identity of female para-athletes and analyse the social, cultural, and institutional challenges faced by female para-athletes in Punjab. We will try to understand the role of family and to analyze the impact of sports participation on the self-perception of female para-athletes. This study aims to explore unique struggles of female para athletes in Punjab. Punjab has a rich history in sports but also patriarchal social structure.

Methodology

To address the research objectives, this research adopts a qualitative approach rooted in feminist sociology and disability studies. The methodology was designed to capture rich, in-depth insights into the personal, social, and cultural dynamics influencing female para-athletes in Punjab. To meet the study objectives, an interview schedule was prepared and on that basis data was collected 30 female para-athletes selected on the basis of a purposive sample belonging to the from different regions of Punjab. In addition to the quantitative data Narrative inquiry was central to this methodology. By focusing on personal stories and everyday lived experiences, the study sought to understand how women negotiate their identities as para athletes. All interviews were conducted in person or via phone/video call, depending on the availability and preference of participants.

Background of the Participants

The study involved 30 female para-athletes from Punjab who had a minimum of five years of national-level sports participation. Respondents were selected across different sports disciplines and represented a range of educational, marital, and socio-economic backgrounds. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 40 years.

Among the 30 respondents, 3 had completed matriculation (Class 10), while 5 of the respondents had passed their higher secondary education (Class 12). Most i.e. 13 of the respondents were enrolled in undergraduate courses at the time of the study. Additionally, 8 of the respondents had completed a bachelor's degree, and 1 respondent had attained a master's degree. This data indicates that many of these women, despite living with

disabilities and engaging in competitive sports, have managed to pursue academic qualifications,

In terms of marital status, 21 of the 30 female para-athletes were unmarried, while 9 were married, and 6 of them had children. The socio-economic diversity of the sample was reflected in their places of residence, with 12 respondents coming from rural villages and 18 of the respondents residing in towns or cities.

The range of physical disabilities included limb deficiency ($n= 10$), vision impairment ($n =4$), Impaired Passive Range of movement ($n= 7$), impaired muscle power ($n= 6$), hypertonia ($n =1$), intellectual impairment ($n=2$) Of these disabilities, 13 were congenital, and 17 were acquired after birth.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents on the Basis of Type of Disability

Type of disability	Number of respondents	percentage
Limb deficiency	10	33%
Visual impairment	04	13%
Impaired Passive Range of movement	07	23%
impaired muscle power	06	20%
hypertonia	01	3%
Intellectual impairment	02	7%
Total	30	

Type and level of participation:

The women were asked to describe the level and type of sport they have participated in since the onset of their disability.

The respondents in the study were actively engaged in a variety of para sports disciplines, indicating a diverse range of athletic interests. Out of the 30 female para-athletes interviewed, 20 had competed at the national level, and among them, 10 had progressed to represent India at the international level.

All 30 respondents named various types of sports activities. Out of 30 women para-athletes, 13 (43%) participated in para-athletics 08 (27%) respondents were para powerlifters. 05 respondents were playing Boccia. Among 30, 03 of the respondents were playing para badminton and 01 were participants of para cycling. Para athletics was the most commonly practiced sport among the respondents, likely due to its broader classification and relative accessibility

Table 2 : Distribution of Respondents on the Basis of Type of Para sports

Sports type	number	percentage
Para athletics	13	43%
Powerlifting	08	27%%
Boccia	05	17%
Para badminton	03	10%
Para cycling	01	3%
Total	30	100

Reasons for participation

When asked why these women chose to participate in sports, three primary motivations emerged from the interview data: health and rehabilitation, social engagement, and incentive-based participation. To maintain and improve their health was cited as the most frequent reason to participate in sports. Approximately 12 women cited that the prime reason for participation in sports was to improve their physical health.

A participant aged 24 mentions that she lost partial mobility in her right leg due to a bone infection. The accident left her physically weak. Later she joined para powerlifting. She recalls “At first, I would feel sore for days. But then my core became stronger, and I noticed I could stand longer, walk more steadily, and even manage daily chores without help. I am able to carry my own bag, take care of myself, and feel strong in my body again”

Out of the 30 respondents, 11 participants highlighted the importance of social connection through sports. These women saw sports participation as an opportunity “to socialise” and meet new people.

A participant aged 28, she survived a serious road accident at the age of 20 which resulted in a spinal cord injury, leaving her permanently on a wheelchair. She mentions that after her accident, she lost a major part of her life i.e. her friends. But when she joined para badminton, she found herself surrounded by others dealing with disability in their own way. She recalls “Through Sports practice, Now I have many friends both para athletes and able-bodied athletes. I have found a place where I wasn’t judged or pitied. I was accepted.”

Out of 30, 07 respondents expressed that their entry into sports was influenced by the possibility of earning various monetary and non monetary incentives given by the government for winning medals. These women saw sports not only as a passion or health outlet but also as a practical path toward socio-economic mobility.

Challenges in their sports participation

The respondents (female para players) listed the following as major challenges in sports participation.

a) **Inadequate Sports Infrastructure:** Sports infrastructure for persons with disabilities requires adapted environments, specialized equipment, and inclusive coaching practices, which are often absent in mainstream sports facilities. In our study, 13 (43%) out of 30

respondents noted this as a primary challenge. Many respondents shared that they were forced to train in spaces designed for able-bodied athletes, with no modifications for their specific physical needs.

A 32-year-old, International Level Para Powerlifter mentions that “Initially I used to train alongside able bodied powerlifters. Even basic equipment for para powerlifting wasn't available. We had to adjust with what’s there.”

b) Accessibility issues: The convenient and accessible transportation is very important for para-athletes to reach at training venues, competition places, transportation for daily uses, etc. similarly the venues should also be accessible for para-athletes. 12 (40%) out of 30 respondents, expressed a common concern for the lack of accessible facilities, including ramps, disabled-friendly toilets, and transportation. In the absence of ramps or lifts, it is very difficult for disabled people to access the place. Despite policies promoting inclusive spaces, the practical reality for many female para-athletes in Punjab remains deeply challenging.

During the discussions, one of the Boccia players aged 27 years, who is a wheelchair user, mentioned that “often Getting into the facilities is itself a challenge. There are no ramps or elevators. The doorways are too narrow for her wheelchair to pass and the front desks are too high for them.” Another respondent mentioned that “Even though the full gym isn’t accessible to me, I still have to pay the full membership fee. They say the price is fixed for everyone, but not everyone is getting the same facility.”

c) Financial constraints: Sports participation requires considerable financial investment in areas such as training, travel, competition registration fees, dietary needs, adaptive equipment, physiotherapy, and coaching. For many female para-athletes in Punjab, these costs pose a significant obstacle. Another concern expressed by the 10 (33%) out of the 30 respondents was the economic burden of pursuing a career in sports..

A national para-athlete mentions that “We don’t get enough financial support even at the national level. I had to borrow money to travel for competitions.”

d) Policies and institutional gaps: the government policies and procedures are very crucial for development of sports for persons with disability. In our study, 08 of the female para-athletes reported that existing government policies are either poorly implemented or inaccessible. The respondents mention that for them the policies of the government were a challenge. While India has adopted progressive legal frameworks, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and schemes under the Paralympic Committee of India (PCI), the respondents described a stark disconnect between policy and practice. Many participants expressed confusion regarding procedures and inconsistent implementation of policies. One of the para-athletes with intellectual impairment said that “Government guidelines keep changing. The classification criteria for events is unclear and not transparent.”

The Role of Family in the Lives of Female Para-Athletes in Punjab:

The family plays a central role in shaping the experiences of female para-athletes, especially within the socio-cultural context of Punjab where traditional gender roles and perceptions of disability are deeply rooted. Interviews with the 30 female para-athletes revealed that family involvement operated along a spectrum — from being a strong pillar of support to acting as a barrier to participation in sports.

Supportive Family Roles: Out of 30 respondents, 18 (60%) described their families as their primary source of encouragement, emotional strength, and logistical assistance. These families not only accepted their daughters’ disabilities but also actively motivated them to pursue sports as a means of empowerment and self-expression. The female para-athletes mentioned common supportive ways such as Emotional encouragement to start playing, providing assistance with mobility and daily tasks, financial support for training, equipment, and travel etc.

“My parents never treated me differently. They supported me right from my first race. My father takes me to every tournament.”

— *International Level Para Athlete with Intellectual disability.*

Unsupportive and Restrictive Family Attitudes in the study, 12 (40%) of the respondents encountered resistance, neglect, or discouragement from their families, especially in the initial stages of their sports journey. These attitudes were often rooted in patriarchal beliefs, overprotectiveness, and stigma around disability. The para-athletes mentioned that their parents had fear of social judgment, especially from neighbors and relatives. For some their parents discouraged them from stepping out in public or wearing sports attire.

“My mother said, ‘Who will marry you if you keep running around in shorts?’ She didn’t understand that this was not about shame, but survival.”

— *Para Athlete, State Level*

Changing Dynamics Over Time: Interestingly, 6 (20%) of the respondents mentioned that initial resistance from family members shifted over time once the athlete achieved recognition or demonstrated success. This shift was most common among athletes who reached national or international levels, as public validation and media coverage helped counter internalized stigma within families.

“At first, they didn’t even want me to leave the house. But after I won a medal, they started telling relatives with pride.”

— *Para Cyclist*

Impact of Sports Participation on the Self-Perception of Female Para-Athletes

Participation in sports had a transformative impact on the self-perception of the female para-athletes interviewed in this study. The respondents described how engaging in sports altered how they viewed themselves as women, as individuals with disabilities, and as contributors to society.

- **From Dependency to Independence:** Out of 30 respondents, 16 (53%) respondents expressed that sports helped shift their self-image from being “dependent” or “helpless” to becoming more self-reliant and autonomous. Sports participation provides a new lifestyle for women para athletes. Through sports performances women para athletes are able to prove their physical strength to the outside world. This newfound independence extended beyond physical mobility to emotional and financial dimensions, especially for those who secured government jobs or stipends through sports achievements.

“Before I joined athletics, I thought I had to always depend on someone. Now I travel, compete, and even help other girls like me.” — *Para Athlete, National Level*

- **Enhancement of Self-Esteem and Confidence:** Engaging in competitive sports provided a sense of achievement and public recognition, which directly contributed to higher self-esteem. In the study, 15 (50%) of the women para-athletes mentioned that due to their sports participation, their social circle has become wider. Once limited to the walls of their house, now they have the opportunity to socialize with like-minded people.

“I had no friends in my school. As I was the only disabled girl in my class. Other girls hesitated to talk or play with me. But after I started playing Boccia, I have made friends from all over India. I have developed strong bonds with their teammates and coaches. People praise and appreciate their sports performance.”

“Now when people ask me what I do for a living, I proudly answer that I am a cycling athlete. It feels nice. previously i had no answer for this question. Because all i did was watch tv all day. I was not sure of my body’s capability to do anything independently. However, now I can train in the gym for 2 hours daily. I am capable of lifting weights. I feel I am able to make decisions for my life. It makes me happy.

- **Gender-Related Aspects of Participation:**

In every society, men and women have different social positions. The ascribed roles of men and women are also different from each other. A question was asked to women about the gender related factors, if any, which made their participation in sports difficult.

The data collected from 30 female para-athletes in Punjab shows how patriarchal social norms, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations inhibit sports participation of all (100%) of the female para-athletes.

Gendered Socialization and Early Exclusion from Sports: In regions like India, women are expected to be caregivers and men are expected to go outside home and make a living. From a young age, boys are encouraged to engage in physically active and competitive games, while girls are steered toward passive, domestic role-play, reinforcing the caregiving and homebound identity. Girls from a young age are encouraged to play feminine games with dolls and kitchen sets. The respondents believe that their gender has more to do with their sports participation than their disability. They believe that their position as females is more challenging for them than their position as a person with a disability.

“I have two younger sisters and one brother. My sisters also have very little sports opportunities as compared to my brother. So it's not about my disability, it's because sports for girls is an absent concept in our family. Women are supposed to stay home”

- Resistance from the community and stigma of masculinity: The orthodox mindset of society towards sports for girls is a major barrier for all women para-athletes. The physical competency of women to participate in sports is often stigmatized. Women who participate in sports are often seen as ‘masculine’(Eitzen & Sage, 1978). Malumphy (1971) describes that female athletes have a stereotype of being aggressive, frustrated, and unfeminine.

- Participation contingent on others: The respondents described their sports as contingent on others. Female Sports participation is not possible without logistical help and encouragement from their family and friends. If the family is not supportive of sports, it can severely limit the participation of women in sports.

- Safety, Abuse, and Gendered Vulnerability: Respondents shared significant concerns regarding safety, harassment, and abuse, which add another layer of restriction to their mobility and freedom in sports. Women, especially women with disabilities, are more

prone to assault than men. In India, several cases of molestation of female players by male officials, coaches and senior athletes have been highlighted by the media. Fear of abuse is a major deterrent for both athletes and their families. Due to safety concerns, parents hesitate to send their girls to participate in sports.

“Being a girl, I was never allowed to go out and play in the playground in our village. Before going to a new place, I have to think about a hundred things first. If I cannot find a safe option to travel, I have to skip the event.”

- **Traditional Gender role:** women face normative barriers i.e. what is and isn't appropriate for women. There are traditional expectations of marriage, motherhood, and domestic labor from women. The domestic duties of women require them to stay home most of the time. They are expected to get married and embrace motherhood. This limits the ambitions and opportunities for women athletes.

A para-athlete from Mohali reveals that my father approved my sports when I was in college. However, after college, my father does not want me to continue sports. He persuaded me to look for a promising job. Because he believes that if i have stable career, it will be easy to find a suitable match for marriage

“Women are expected to stay home. Even if I win medals, relatives say it’s time to get married and stop playing.”

Discussion:

The study reveals that sports for female para-athletes in Punjab function within a matrix of gendered, ableist, and class-based constraints. Patriarchal norms shape early socialization, restrict mobility, and stigmatize athletic pursuits for women. Disability exacerbates these constraints, creating a unique form of intersectional marginalization. However, the athletes' narratives also reflect agency, resilience, and the transformative potential of sports. These women reconfigure their identities and challenge dominant discourses through their participation.

The sports participation of the female para-athletes in this study shows a mix of personal motivation and the support or barriers they face in society. While some enter sport for rehabilitation or social inclusion, others do so with strategic goals related to livelihood and recognition. The challenges faced by female para-athletes in Punjab are multi-dimensional. These challenges, particularly infrastructure, policy neglect and financial strain hinder their full participation and recognition. The findings reflect the urgent need for inclusive sports policies, better funding, and inclusive institutional practices. The role of the family is both pivotal and complex in the athletic journeys of female para-athletes in Punjab. Supportive families enable these women to challenge dual marginalization of gender and disability, while unsupportive ones often reinforce societal barriers. Overall, participation in sports has had a profound impact on the self-perception of female para-athletes in Punjab. It has enabled them to reconstruct their identity in positive and multidimensional ways.

The participation of female para-athletes in Punjab is deeply shaped by patriarchal gender norms and traditional expectations of femininity. The study reveals that for many respondents, gender was a greater barrier than disability in accessing and continuing sports.

From a young age, women are socialized into domestic and caregiving roles, while boys are encouraged to engage in physically active games. This gendered socialization results in early exclusion of girls from sports, creating a mindset where athletic participation is seen as inappropriate or unnecessary for women.

Many respondents faced resistance from family and community, with sports being viewed as a masculine domain. Access to sports for women is often contingent on support from others, especially family members. Without logistical help, encouragement, or financial backing, continued participation becomes nearly impossible. Safety concerns and fear of harassment were also major issues. Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse. This fear restricts mobility and discourages participation, especially in rural areas. Finally, traditional gender roles and expectations, such as marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities also act as major normative barriers. Overall,

the intersection of gender and disability compounds the social challenges faced by female para-athletes, limiting both their access and opportunities in the world of sports.

Conclusion:

This study highlights the complex realities faced by female para-athletes in Punjab, where gender and disability intersect to create layered barriers to sports participation. Their journey is often shaped by deep-rooted gender norms, lack of infrastructure, unclear policies, and limited financial support. Despite these challenges, sports have played a transformative role in helping these women redefine their identity, gain confidence, and challenge societal limitations. The results of the study show that there is a clear need for gender-sensitive and disability-inclusive sports policies, accessible infrastructure, and stronger institutional support systems for women para-athletes.

Conclusion The sporting experiences of female para-athletes in Punjab underscore the need for an intersectional approach to policy and practice. To foster inclusive sporting environments, there must be structural reforms in infrastructure, funding, and representation. Equally, interventions must challenge cultural norms that inhibit women's full participation. By centering the voices of marginalized athletes, this study calls for a reimagining of sports as a truly inclusive domain

The study demonstrates that sports can function as both a site of oppression and liberation for female para-athletes. While structural and cultural barriers persist, the participants' stories underscore their resilience and agency. Recognizing and addressing the specific needs and experiences of women with disabilities in the sporting domain is essential for creating inclusive and equitable sports policies. A sociological understanding of their experiences reveals that empowering female para-athletes requires systemic change—not only in infrastructure but also in societal attitudes toward gender and disability.

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