

Review Article

Strength Beyond Limits: The Role of Sports in Uplifting Disabled Women in Contemporary India

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Abstract—

Disabled women face unique challenges and barriers in society, often experiencing intersectional discrimination due to their gender and disability. Sports can play a transformative role in empowering these women by promoting inclusivity, enhancing physical and mental well-being, and fostering social integration. In the context of India, this paper delves into the initiatives, policies, and programs implemented to facilitate the empowerment of disabled women through sports. It analyzes the impact of these efforts on promoting gender equality, challenging stereotypes, and providing equal opportunities for disabled women to participate and excel in various sports disciplines. This paper examines the empowerment of disabled women through sports and evaluates India's progress in this contemporary scenario. Additionally, it investigates the existing infrastructure, facilities, and accessibility measures available for disabled women in sports across different regions of India. It examines the role of governmental organizations, non-profit entities, and grassroots initiatives in creating an enabling environment for disabled women's active engagement in sports. Furthermore, it also explores the social and cultural implications of disabled women's participation in sports in India. It examines the changing perceptions, societal attitudes, and the breaking down of stigmas surrounding disability and women's capabilities in the sporting arena.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Disability, Sports, Inclusivity

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Introduction

“Sports serve society by providing vivid examples of excellence.” —George F. Will

Women empowerment is a crucial movement that has gained significant momentum in recent years. It encompasses the collective efforts to provide women with equal opportunities, rights, and resources to thrive in every aspect of life. Through empowerment, women are breaking barriers, shattering glass ceilings, and rewriting the narrative of their own potential. It involves promoting gender equality, challenging societal norms, and eliminating discriminatory practices that hinder women's progress. Women empowerment recognizes the inherent value and abilities of women, empowering them to make choices, pursue education and career goals, and participate actively in decision-making processes. By empowering women, societies unleash a powerful force for positive change, as women's successes radiate to benefit families, communities, and entire nations. This ongoing movement is a testament to the remarkable resilience, strength, and potential of women, as they continue to inspire and transform the world around them.

The empowerment of disabled women holds immense significance in fostering a truly inclusive and equitable society. Disabled women face multiple

layers of marginalization due to their gender and disability, often leading to exclusion, limited opportunities, and societal barriers. Recognizing the importance of empowering disabled women is essential not only for their individual well-being but also for promoting social progress and realizing the principles of equality and human rights.

Empowering disabled women goes beyond addressing their specific needs and challenges; it involves creating an environment that respects their rights, recognizes their unique talents, and provides equal opportunities for their full participation in all aspects of life. By empowering disabled women, society can tap into their immense potential, promote their autonomy, and enable them to contribute meaningfully to various spheres such as education, employment, leadership, and cultural expression.

One crucial avenue for empowering disabled women is through sports and physical activities. Sports not only enhance physical fitness and overall well-being but also play a transformative role in promoting self-confidence, building resilience, and fostering social integration. Through sports, disabled women can challenge societal stereotypes, break down barriers, and redefine societal perceptions of disability.

Furthermore, empowering disabled women is a matter of social justice and human rights. It entails dismantling discriminatory practices, ensuring access to quality healthcare, education,

employment, and promoting inclusive policies and laws. By empowering disabled women, society can advance towards a more inclusive, diverse, and compassionate future, where every individual's rights and capabilities are recognized and celebrated.⁽³⁾

In this regard, this paper aims to explore the importance of empowering disabled women, highlighting the transformative impact it can have on individuals, communities, and society as a whole. It will delve into the various dimensions of empowerment, including access to education, healthcare, employment, and social participation. Additionally, it will examine the role of sports and physical activities in empowering disabled women and fostering their holistic development. By understanding and prioritizing the empowerment of disabled women, we can strive for a society that values and upholds the rights and dignity of every individual, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

Literature Review

1. Elisabet Apelmo *Sport and the Female Disabled Body* (2018)

In this book, the author discusses the paradox of gender. Disabled bodies are often seen as non-gendered, however, these young women's experiences are structured by both the gender regimes within sports and the larger gender order of the society.

2. *Women, disability, and identity* (Asha Hans & Annie Patri eds., 1st ed. 2003)

This volume consists of critical and theoretical articles about women with disabilities in both developed and developing countries. Disabled women and their place in these societies has been a subject that has been neglected in the past, therefore these essays will fill a gap in the evolving literature on disability studies. This volume, therefore, attempts to provide a space to women with disabilities in the global feminist literature and movement.

3. Dr. Balaji P. Jadhav *Women Empowerment Through Sports and Physical Education* (2015)

In this book author highlights that in coming years the prejudice faced by sports women will decline. The initial chapters reflect that the gaps between the male and female achievements in sports is reducing

4. James I. Charlton *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (2000)

A theoretical overview of disability oppression that shows its similarities to, and differences from, racism, sexism and colonialism. The analysis is supplemented by interviews conducted over a ten-year period with disability-rights activists throughout the Third World, Europe and the USA.

5. Joseph P. Shapiro *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994)

In this book author highlighted that disabled are not matter of pity. In order to gain common respect, disabled people should continue their struggle to break all the prejudices. Disabled should strive to attain equality until achieved.

6. *Disability, Gender, and the Trajectories of Power* (Asha Hans ed., 2015)

This book draws attention to the suppression of disabled women and seeks for "a non-discriminatory" approach that can safeguard the needs of disabled women as well as give them equal human rights within feminist movements. Giving a purview of the injustice and discrimination against disabled women across the globe and pointing some specific discriminatory actions followed in India that target disabled women.

7. Prem Kumar Agarwal and Shashi Nath Mandal *Empowerment of Women: Human Rights Perspectives* (2017)

This book is a compilation of papers touching different realms relating to human rights and women. It is an insightful and thought-provoking book that delves into the multifaceted issue of women's empowerment through the lens of human rights.

8. Mrs. Indumathi Rao *Equity to women with disability in India - A strategy paper prepared for the National Commission for Women* (2004)

This strategic paper delves into the circumstances faced by women with disabilities across India. The study examines the pervasive discrimination endured by these women, encompassing various aspects of their lives such as education, training, employment, and healthcare.

Research Methodology

The research paper on "Strength Beyond Limits: The Role of Sports in Uplifting Disabled Women in Contemporary India" adopts a doctrinal research methodology to examine the legal framework and relevant legal sources pertaining to disabled women's empowerment in sports in India. The following research methodology is employed like identification of legal sources including statutes, regulations, policies, case law, and international legal instruments relevant to disability rights, women's rights, and sports in India. This analysis also involves examining key statutes, court decisions, government policies, and legal precedents to understand the legal rights, obligations, and barriers faced by disabled women in sports. In addition to analyzing domestic legal sources, the researcher may conduct a comparative analysis

3. Dr. Vaibhav Goel Bhartiya, Rights of Disabled Persons: An Analysis of Indian Legal Framework. Jan Sanchar Vimersh: A Bi-Lingual Media Research Journal 134-137 (2017).

of international legal instruments and regional frameworks.

Disabled Women and Sports: Human Rights Perspective

The right of access to and participation in sport and play has been recognized in a number of international instruments, including Article 24 & 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 15 of the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 10 and 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Under article 5 of the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, States have to put all necessary measures with a view to achieving the elimination of all practices which are based on the idea of gendered stereotypes, including in the area of sport.

There is another side of the coin, which reflects that using sport to promote human rights for all and to strengthen universal respect for them. Sports may work as an avenue for the harmonious development of humankind, with more peaceful society duly considering the inherent dignity and personhood. Utilizing sports as a platform, we can empower disabled women, raise awareness about their rights, and work towards creating an inclusive society that respects and upholds their human rights. Navi Pillay, UN Human Rights chief at a panel discussion on sport and human rights conducted by UN Human Rights Council said that human rights and sports exhibit numerous objectives and fundamental values in common. The lack of interaction between the human rights movement, mechanisms, institutions, and the world of sport is astonishing said.⁽⁴⁾ This matter explores *the transformative potential of sports in strengthening respect for human rights specifically for disabled women*.

Breaking Barriers and Challenging Stereotypes:

Sports can challenge societal stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding disability, particularly in the context of women. Disabled women participating in sports can defy preconceived notions of limitations and inspire others by showcasing their strength, determination, and athletic prowess. By challenging these stereotypes, sports can play a pivotal role in fostering respect for disabled women's rights, promoting inclusivity, and encouraging a shift in attitudes towards disability. It will divert world attention from disability towards their abilities

Positive impact on Physical Rehabilitation Programme

It has been observed that when sport was integrated into physical rehabilitation programme it has shown progressive results. Integrating sports into physical rehabilitation programs can significantly enhance motivation and adherence to the rehabilitation process. It has also been shown to have psychological and social benefits for individuals with

disabilities particularly women. By leveraging the power of sports, these programs have enhanced physical rehabilitation, increased motivation, developed essential skills, fostered community integration, and empowered individuals with disabilities. In Cambodia, Afghanistan, India, Ethiopia, Gaza, and Bangladesh, the ICRC actively supports sports related physical rehabilitation activities. Additionally, partnerships have been established with paralympic committees to implement projects in Niger and Iraq.⁽⁵⁾

Promoting Physical and Emotional Well-being:

Participation in sports can have a profound impact on the physical and emotional well-being of disabled women. Regular engagement in physical activities not only promotes physical fitness but also contributes to improved mental health, self-esteem, and body image. By providing opportunities for disabled women to engage in sports, we can enhance their overall well-being, empowering them to lead fulfilling lives and assert their rights to health and well-being.

Access to Equal Opportunities:

Disabled women often face significant barriers to accessing opportunities in various spheres of life. Sports can serve as a catalyst for change by providing a level playing field where disabled women can showcase their abilities and talents. Ensuring equal access to sports facilities, training, and competitions for disabled women helps promote their right to participate in recreational activities, develop their skills, and pursue sporting careers. By creating an inclusive sports environment, we can address the systemic discrimination that often limits disabled women's opportunities.

Empowerment and Leadership Development:

Sports can serve as a vehicle for empowerment and leadership development among disabled women. Engaging in sports fosters self-confidence, resilience, and teamwork, empowering disabled women to assert their rights and challenge the barriers they face. Sports-based programs that

⁴ Harnessing the potential of sports for human rights, UN Human Rights (2012) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2012/02/harnessing-potential-sports-human-rights> (last visited on Dec 15, 2024)

⁵ <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sport-helping-rehabilitate-victims-war-and-armed-violence> (last visited on Dec 15, 2024)

incorporate mentorship, coaching, and leadership training can further enhance disabled women's self-advocacy skills and equip them with the tools to become leaders in their communities and advocates for disability rights.

Visibility and Advocacy:

Sports provide a powerful platform for disabled women to raise awareness about their rights and advocate for inclusive policies and practices. By showcasing their achievements and sharing their stories, disabled women athletes can challenge the invisibility and marginalization they often experience. Their visibility in the sporting arena can inspire others, change perceptions, and mobilize support for disability rights. Disabled women athletes can become role models, breaking down barriers and serving as ambassadors for human rights, promoting respect and inclusivity for all.

Barriers

There are many barriers that disabled women comes across who wish to access sport and recreation-

1. Discrimination - The participation of women and girls in sport challenges a multitude of gender stereotypes and discrimination. For women with disabilities, this discrimination is far greater.
2. Lack of Role Models and Representation: Limited visibility of successful disabled women athletes and a lack of role models in mainstream media and sports coverage can contribute to a lack of inspiration and motivation for disabled women to pursue sports. The absence of representation can make it challenging for them to envision themselves succeeding in the field.
3. Limited grassroots opportunities - At the grassroots level, disabled individuals encounter challenges in accessing suitable training programs, facilities, and resources tailored to their specific needs. The lack of inclusive initiatives and dedicated grassroots structures hinders their ability to explore and engage in sports from an early stage.
4. Less media coverage - According to the World Health Organization, the insufficient media coverage of disability is often tied to prejudiced attitudes, negative perceptions, and stereotypes, which pose significant hindrances to achieving complete inclusivity and ensuring accessibility for individuals with disabilities to key social experiences.⁽⁶⁾ This includes enhancing the presence and prominence of women sport reporters and analysts during significant events, as well as addressing and challenging instances of sexist depictions and unfair expectations regarding the conduct and attire of women athletes. Furthermore, it is important to encourage male athletes to actively join forces in promoting a culture that upholds values of equality, respect for diversity, and non-violence both within and beyond the realm of sports. Their participation in fostering such an

environment will serve as a powerful model for others, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society

5. Massive gaps in prize money and sponsorship - Across workplaces globally, for work of equal value women just earn approximately 77% of men's salaries. Similarly, within the realm of sports, there are substantial disparities in sponsorships, prize money, equipment, and facilities provided to female athletes. Sport federations and authorities have a crucial role to play in reversing this trend.⁽⁷⁾

6. Lack of accessible design - This becomes apparent in terms of accessibility and design, both in terms of physical structures and sporting equipment. What is missing is that features in products, facilities, and services being usable independently by individuals with a diverse variety of disabilities.⁽⁸⁾

Efforts Of International Paralympic Committee

Constitution of International Paralympic Committee (hereinafter as IPC) clearly states in its vision to make inclusion world through para sports and lays an identified objective of promoting social inclusion through para sports. The IPC functions as an umbrella organization, representing several sports and disabilities. IPC in its strategic plan (2019-2022) indicates enhancement of the paralympic games experience and advances its reach as a celebration of diversity among human race. Create opportunities for para athletes with different types of impairment, in particular athletes with high support needs, to compete in events with equal opportunities for male and female athletes. Advance the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals & Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. ⁽⁹⁾ The new strategic plan is also The new strategic plan is also released in march this year which states drive impact through para sports.

6 Olga Kolotouchkina & Carmen Llorente-Barroso & María Luisa García-Guardia & Juan Pavón, 2020. "Disability, Sport, and Television: Media Visibility and Representation of Paralympic Games in News Programs," Sustainability, vol. 13(1), pages 1-13, December

7 Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Op-ed: Empowering women through sport (2019) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/4/op-ed-ed-phumzile-empowering-women-through-sport> (last visited on Dec 16, 2024)

8 Casey Atkins, Barriers for Women with Disabilities in Sport and The Benefits (2021) <https://www.ideas.org.au/blogs/barriers-for-women-with-disabilities.html> (last visited on Dec 16, 2024)

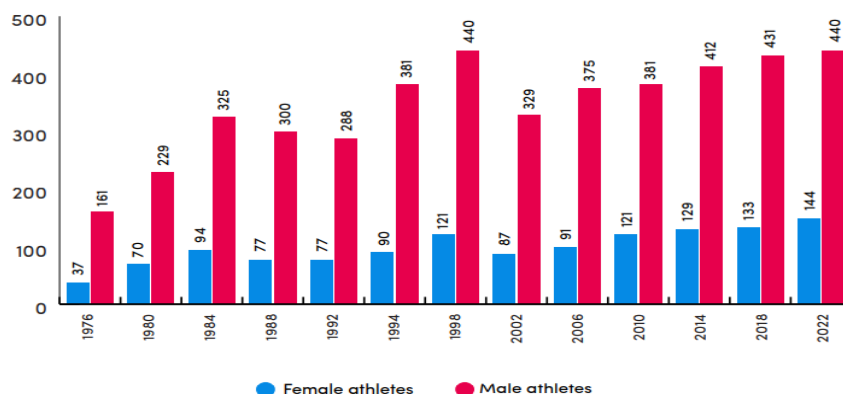
If this impact is brought through empowerment of disabled sportswomen, it will create social change.

IPC views gender equity in sports as priority. In this regard, in the year 2003 it formed specific committee namely Women in Sports Committee (WISC). More specific roles of the WISC include:

- Raise the voice for the full inclusion of

women at all levels of Paralympic sport; Recognize the obstacles that hinder participation and propose initiatives and policies to overcome these barriers; and • Follow up the implementation of initiatives to increase participation. .⁽¹⁰⁾

Figure 1 : Number of Male and Female Athletes in the Paralympic Winter Games, 1976-2022



Source: Data released by A Women’s Sports Foundation Research Report, December 2022

Figure 1 data highlights the smaller number of female participation in para sports throughout. Till 2022 the number of female participation has not gone beyond 25% as compared to male counterpart. Although in the history of paralympic games female participation reached a new high the but at slow pace. In 2022, there were total 46 countries in the Paralympic Winter Games, out of which 16 countries did not include women in their athlete delegation.⁽¹¹⁾ There is an requirement to increase the number of women’s events and enhance participation in these events.

Fig 2: The number and percentage of female and male athletes in the paralympic winter games 2010-2022

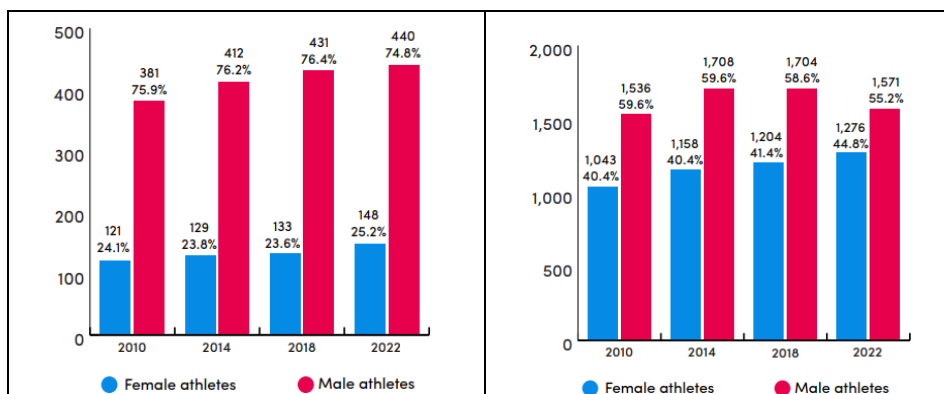


Fig 3: The number and percentage of female and male athletes in the Olympic winter games 2010-2022

Source: Data released by A Women’s Sports Foundation Research Report, December 2022

Figure 2 and 3 comparatively reflects that women representation in sports is less in both Olympics and Paralympics. In 2022, there is 25.2% disabled female participation in Paralympics whereas 44.8% female participation in Olympics.

⁹ IPC. (2019). International Paralympic committee strategic plan 2019 to 2022 https://www.paralympic.org/sites/default/files/document/190704145051100_2019_07+IPC+Strategic+Plan_web.pdf (last visited on Dec 17, 2024)

¹⁰ IPC, IPC Women in Sport Leadership Toolkit (2010) https://www.paralympic.org/sites/default/files/document/130130154714620_2010_10_01++IPC+Women+in+Sport+Leadership+Toolkit.pdf (last visited on Dec 17, 2024)

¹¹ E. Houghton, L. Pieper & M. M. Smith, (2022). Women in the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Games: An Analysis of Participation, Leadership, and Media Coverage. Women’s Sports Foundation.

India's Efforts

India is a party to the 'Incheon Strategy for the Asia-Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013-2022)', formulated under the supervision of United Nation ESCAP. This strategy outlines ten goals for Asia-Pacific nations to promote the inclusion and empowerment of individuals with disabilities in the region. One such is ensuring gender equality and women's empowerment. Also the Department of Empowerment of Person with Disabilities (DoEPwD) released the draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2021. The policy document focuses in-depth commitment to **education, skill development, health and sports and culture, employment, social security, accessibility and other institutional mechanisms.**⁽¹²⁾

The power of sports as a developmental tool is of particular importance for disabled women who frequently experience discrimination on the basis of sex and disability. It is estimated that only 7% of women with disabilities are involved in sports, globally. Therefore, by improving inclusion of PwDs, sports can help advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁽¹³⁾

Section 30 of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (hereinafter as RPwD Act) also states that appropriate Government shall take measures to ensure effective participation in sporting activities of the persons with disabilities. It also lays that the sports authorities shall accord due recognition to the right of persons with disabilities to participate in sports and shall make due provisions for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their schemes and programmes for the promotion and development of sporting talents. Section 4 lays that government shall take steps to ensure that women rights are enjoyed equally with others.

Some Steps for Empowerment of Disabled in Sports which will also specifically help disabled women.

- Draft of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Amendment) Rules, 2023 on accessibility standards for sports sector were notified inviting comments from the general public and stakeholders recently by the DoEPwD, Ministry of Social Justice and
- Empowerment.
- The Government has laid the foundation stone for Centre for Disability Sports at Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh with world class facilities for both indoor and outdoor games and training facilities for about 300 persons with disabilities. It is expected to be functional soon this year.

- National Fund for Persons with Disabilities has been established as per Section 86 of the RPwD Act, 2016. Scheme for Providing Financial Assistance to Persons with Disabilities under National Fund includes support for PwDs who have excelled in sports level to participate in the National/International events.
- Khelo India are gender neutral scheme and provides opportunities to women too for participating in sporting activities and development of sports, leagues, competitions and tournaments for women, as well as other disadvantaged groups, may be organised in different disciplines at various levels.⁽¹⁴⁾

In April 2022, Internal Complaint Committee for Prevention of Sexual Harassment of women at Workplace has been established at Paralympic Committee of India. It is noteworthy here that classic example of leadership role is Deepa Malik who has been elected as president of the Paralympic Committee of India.

Few Instances of Challenges faced by Disabled Women in Sports

One of the incident is of M. Sameeha Barvin, who is deaf and speech impaired athlete. Despite her excellent performance, she was not selected to participate in the World Deaf Athletics Championship just for the reason of being only female participant. She also fought legal battle and than court directed to declare her as selected and permit her to participate in the 4th World Deaf Athletics Championship held at Poland under the women category. .⁽¹⁵⁾

12 <https://www.iasparliament.com/current-affairs/gs-ii/the-draft-national-policy-on-disability> (last visited on Dec18, 2024)

13 Draft National Policy For Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan), 2021 <https://disabilityaffairs.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Draft%20Copy%20New%20National%20Policy%20May%202022%20.pdf> (last visited on Dec 18, 2024)

14 Operational Guidelines, Khelo India Scheme 2021-22 to 2025-26 , Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports <https://kheloindia.gov.in/uploads/Khelo-India-Scheme-Operational-Guidelines.pdf> (last visited on Dec 21, 2024) ¹⁵ M. Sameeha Barvin vs. The Joint Secretary, Ministry of Youth & Sports & Ors. (Writ Petition No.16953 of 2021)

- India's two leading and top ranked women para-athletes, Pooja Yadav and Sakshi Kasana, have alleged injustice at the hands of the Paralympic Committee of India regarding their selection for World Para-Athletics Grand Prix 2023.⁽¹⁶⁾ The complaint of Pooja and Sakshi is with regard to deposit of 2.5 lacs with PCI. Both have put forward their complaints before office of Sports Ministry. Such incidents reflects lack of financial support to disabled women which discourages their participation at International level.
- There are certain sports areas which has no teams or participation by the disabled women. In future if any disable sportswomen/athletes shows interest than it should be fully supported by all stakeholders. India's first women's disabled cricket team faced challenges which needs special mention.⁽¹⁷⁾

Findings & Discussion

The research findings reveal that India has made commendable strides in recognizing the rights of disabled women in sports. Legal provisions, such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, have laid the foundation for inclusive practices and non-discrimination. Government initiatives, sports organizations, and civil society efforts have contributed to creating avenues for disabled women's participation, skill development, and recognition in various sports disciplines. These advancements have played a pivotal role in empowering disabled women and challenging societal perceptions surrounding disability. There are initiatives by the government either for women or for persons with disabilities. But there is no specific initiatives for disabled women.

However, despite progress, several challenges persist. Barriers such as limited infrastructure accessibility, lack of awareness, social stigma, and inadequate support systems continue to hinder the full participation and empowerment of disabled women in sports. Financial constraints, limited opportunities for training and competition, and societal biases often create hurdles that need to be addressed to ensure a level playing field for disabled women athletes. Furthermore, the intersectionality of gender, disability, and other factors necessitates a nuanced approach that recognizes and addresses the unique challenges faced by different groups of disabled women.

Conclusion

In the contemporary scenario, the empowerment of disabled women through sports in India has witnessed significant progress, but challenges persist. This research

paper has explored the topic of disabled women's empowerment in sports in India, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the issue and the complex interplay between disability rights, women's rights, and the sports landscape. Through a comprehensive analysis of legal sources, policies, and practices, this study has shed light on the current state of affairs and the opportunities for further advancement.

To further advance the empowerment of disabled women through sports in India, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach is required. This includes the need for continued advocacy and awareness campaigns to challenge social norms and stereotypes surrounding disability. Investment in accessible infrastructure, specialized training programs, and coaching support is crucial to nurture talent and enable disabled women athletes to reach their full potential. Collaboration between government agencies, sports organizations, NGOs, and the private sector can help create a more inclusive and supportive ecosystem that fosters the empowerment of disabled women in sports.

In conclusion, while progress has been made, there is still work to be done to enhance the empowerment of disabled women through sports in India. By addressing the remaining barriers and implementing targeted interventions, India can build upon its achievements and create a more inclusive and equitable sports environment. Empowering disabled women in sports not only promotes their individual growth and well-being but also contributes to social inclusion, dismantles stereotypes, and fosters a society that embraces diversity and equality. It is through collective efforts and a rights-based approach that India can truly transform the contemporary scenario and provide disabled women with equal opportunities to thrive in the world of sports.

16 Sabi Hussain, Top female para-athletes allege 'mental harassment' by PCI, Times of India(2023) http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/100194189.cms?from=mdr&utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (last visited on Dec 22, 2024)

17 Divya Arya, Undaunted by disability: Meet the 'superwomen' who play cricket against all odds, The Bridge (2019) <https://thebridge.in/women-cricket/indian-disabled-women-cricketers-superwomen-40554?infinite-scroll=1> (last visited on Dec 22, 2024)

Source of Support: Nil

Conflict of interest: Nil

Acknowledgement: None

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How to cite this article: Almas A, Bhartiya V G. Strength Beyond Limits: The Role of Sports in Uplifting Disabled Women in Contemporary India Subharti J of Interdisciplinary Research, Aug. 2025; Vol. 7: Issue 2, 8 - 15