

## GENDER DISPARITIES IN SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: A SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS OF SAI ANNUAL REPORTS (2020–2024)

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**Abstract:** *This research paper explores gender-based disparities in sports participation using secondary data drawn from the Sports Authority of India (SAI) Annual Reports from 2020 to 2024. The study evaluates trends in male and female athlete representation across major SAI schemes: National Centers of Excellence (NCOE), SAI Training Centers (STC), Extension Centers, and National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC). Findings reveal consistent underrepresentation of girls, though a gradual improvement is noted in certain schemes. Institutional efforts, such as Khelo India and Fit India initiatives, have contributed positively but gaps persist. Through content and tabular analysis, the study also examines the socio-cultural and structural barriers contributing to this imbalance. The study concludes with recommendations to enhance gender parity in Indian sports.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Sports Sociology, SAI, Participation, India, Secondary Data, Khelo India, Training Centers, Grassroots Sports, Women in Sports*

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### INTRODUCTION

Gender disparity in sports is not a recent phenomenon but a deeply rooted issue within the sociocultural fabric of many societies, including India. Historically, sports have been perceived as a masculine domain, where physical prowess and competitiveness were aligned with traditional notions of masculinity (Messner, 2002). This association marginalized women from mainstream sports participation and relegated their involvement to non-competitive or informal settings.

From a sociological standpoint, this exclusion can be interpreted through **structural functionalism**, which argues that society functions through a system of interdependent parts that maintain social order. Traditional gender roles, reinforced through institutions like family, school, and religion, have maintained a division of labor that places

women away from competitive physical spaces (Coakley, 2009).

Moreover, **feminist theory** critiques how patriarchal power structures embed gender inequality in social institutions, including sports. Feminist scholars argue that institutional practices in coaching, selection, media coverage, and funding perpetuate male dominance in sports (Lorber, 1994). This results in fewer opportunities for girls to access training facilities, scholarships, and professional recognition.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of **habitus and capital** further explains how individuals internalize societal norms, leading to differentiated participation in sports. Girls and women may not actively pursue sports due to a lack of symbolic capital (recognition, prestige) and cultural capital (sports knowledge, family

encouragement), which are more accessible to boys from a young age (Bourdieu, 1986).

In the Indian context, factors such as parental restrictions, safety concerns, early marriage, and inadequate infrastructure for girls compound this disparity. Despite progressive schemes like *Khelo India* and *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, their implementation often lacks gender sensitivity and intersectional focus.

Given this context, the role of public institutions like the Sports Authority of India becomes crucial. SAI has launched numerous schemes aimed at enhancing sports participation. However, whether these schemes translate into equitable outcomes for both genders require empirical evaluation. This study thus employs a sociological lens to explore gender disparities in participation using four years of SAI data.

In India, sports have traditionally been dominated by male athletes, particularly in structured and competitive settings. Despite notable achievements by Indian sportswomen on the global stage, systemic barriers continue to hinder equal participation. The Sports Authority of India (SAI), through its various schemes and training programs, plays a pivotal role in nurturing sports talent. However, whether these efforts are reaching girls and young women equitably remains a crucial question.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

Understanding gender disparity in sports participation is not only a policy concern but also a critical sociological issue. This study is significant because it applies established sociological frameworks to interrogate structural inequalities in access to sports. From a feminist theoretical perspective, gender inequality in sports is a reflection of patriarchal institutional arrangements that prioritize male dominance and limit female opportunities (Lorber, 1994). Despite policy-level reforms, such inequalities are often reproduced in

practice due to cultural inertia and institutional bias.

Furthermore, Bourdieu's theory of capital (1986) explains how boys are often endowed with greater cultural and social capital related to sports—such as familial support, recognition, and access to coaching—giving them an advantage in participation and performance. Girls, especially in rural or low-income communities, frequently lack such capital, leading to underrepresentation at various competitive levels.

The study also draws on structural functionalist views which posit that social institutions like family, education, and sports help maintain traditional gender roles (Coakley, 2009). These roles influence early socialization and shape perceptions of sports as a male-dominated space. By investigating gender representation through the lens of SAI's schemes, the research contributes to a deeper sociological understanding of how systemic norms and institutional practices intersect to shape outcomes in sports.

By analyzing SAI's secondary data from 2020–2024, this study provides empirical evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of institutional interventions like Khelo India in bridging gender gaps. It aims to highlight not just numerical disparities, but the social processes and embedded ideologies behind them.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are grounded in a sociological understanding of gender inequality and institutional structures in sports. Given the growing importance of gender equity in development discourse and the pivotal role of sports in shaping identity, opportunity, and empowerment, this study outlines the following aims:

1. To examine gender-wise participation in the key training schemes run by the

Sports Authority of India (SAI)—namely the National Centers of Excellence (NCOE), SAI Training Centers (STC), Extension Centers, and the National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC)—over the period from 2020 to 2024.

2. To analyze the trends in female representation and participation across different schemes and over time, identifying progress or regression in numerical representation.
3. To assess institutional efforts toward promoting gender equality in sports in light of theoretical frameworks such as feminist critique and Bourdieu's concept of social capital.
4. To identify potential gaps in policy implementation, outreach efforts, and grassroots-level engagement that may be inhibiting gender-inclusive participation.

These objectives are driven by the understanding that gender disparities in sports are not merely about participation figures but about access to cultural, symbolic, and institutional capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the role of state institutions in enabling or impeding gender justice (Lorber, 1994).

2. To analyze trends in female representation and progress over time.
3. To assess institutional efforts toward promoting gender equality in sports.
4. To identify possible gaps in outreach, policy execution, and grassroots implementation.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and cross-sectional research design rooted in the analysis of existing documentation and reports. Since the focus is on understanding the structural and institutional patterns of gender-based inclusion in Indian sports, secondary data serves as a reliable and comprehensive source. A cross-sectional approach enables the comparison of

gender-wise data across years and schemes, facilitating a trend analysis without the influence of experimental variables (Neuman, 2014).

- **Type:** Descriptive, cross-sectional, secondary data analysis
- **Approach:** Systematic document analysis and tabular synthesis using publicly available data from SAI Annual Reports (2020–2024)

#### 3.2 Data Sources

The study relies on a variety of authoritative sources:

- **Sports Authority of India (SAI) Annual Reports** from 2020–21 to 2023–24, which include detailed statistics on participation across schemes by gender.
- Supplementary materials such as guidelines and program evaluations from initiatives like **Khelo India**, **Fit India Movement**, and other policy circulars issued by the **Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports (MoYAS)**.

These documents offer insights not just into raw numbers but into the institutional narrative and orientation toward gender parity, which can be analyzed qualitatively (Bowen, 2009).

#### 3.3 Analytical Tools

- **Data Extraction Tables:** Used to systematically organize gender-wise enrollment data from the reports.
- **Percentage Computations:** Gender ratios (% Female) are calculated to facilitate cross-year and cross-scheme comparisons.
- **Comparative and Trend Analysis:** Year-wise analysis to identify consistencies, growths, or regressions in female participation.
- **Narrative Policy Review:** A qualitative review of official statements, goals, and

measures related to gender equity to evaluate the institutional emphasis on inclusion.

These tools allow for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, grounded in sociological frameworks that understand data not as neutral but as shaped by and reflective of deeper social structures (Coakley, 2009).

**\*\* Descriptive, cross-sectional, secondary data analysis**

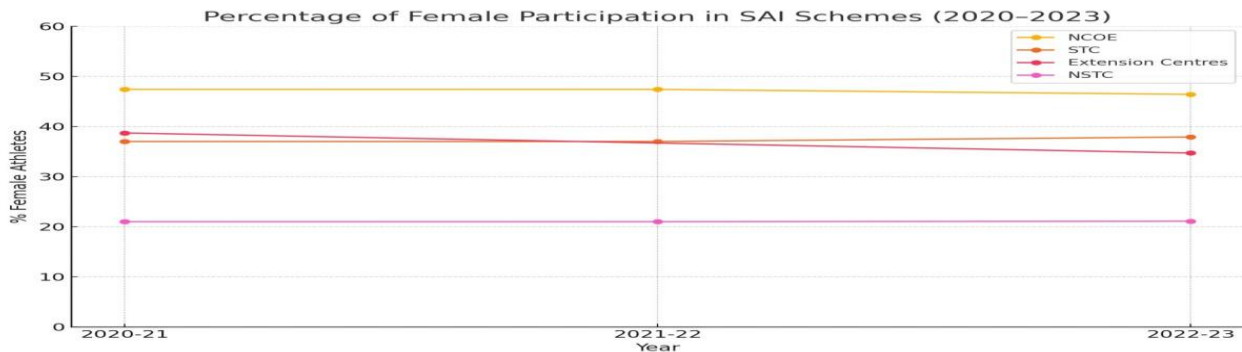
- **Approach:** Document analysis and tabular synthesis of SAI Annual Reports (2020–2024)

## . Data Analysis and Results

### 4.1 Gender Distribution in Major SAI Schemes

Scheme	Year	Boys	Girls	Total	% Female
NCOE	2020–21	1466	1322	2788	47.4%
NCOE	2021–22	1466	1322	2788	47.4%
NCOE	2022–23	1737	1503	3240	46.4%
STC	2020–21	3033	1786	4819	37.0%
STC	2021–22	3033	1786	4819	37.0%
STC	2022–23	2906	1771	4677	37.9%
Extension Centers	2020–21	332	210	542	38.7%
Extension Centers	2022–23	277	147	424	34.7%
NSTC	2020–21	850	226	1076	21.0%
NSTC	2021–22	850	226	1076	21.0%
NSTC	2022–23	653	175	828	21.1%

### 4.2 Visualization of Gender Trends in SAI Schemes



**Figure: Percentage of Female Participation in SAI Schemes from 2020–2023 across NCOE, STC, Extension Centers, and NSTC. NCOEs show the highest and most stable gender balance, while NSTC remains the lowest.**

### 4.3 Interpretation

The gender-wise participation trends across key SAI schemes from 2020 to 2023 present a layered narrative:

- **NCOE:** Participation by girls hovered consistently around 46–47%, indicating strong representation at the elite level. This trend suggests that once athletes break into professional pipelines, institutional support is comparatively more balanced. The near-parity here could reflect better infrastructure, funding, and mentorship available at NCOEs, especially in urban or national centers.
- **STC:** Female participation is stuck around 37%, showing minimal progress over three years. These centers form the intermediate stage of sports development, and stagnation here implies systemic bottlenecks in transitioning female athletes from local to elite levels. Possible reasons include lack of female coaches, restrictive social norms, and dropout due to academic or familial pressures.
- **Extension Centres:** A notable decline from 38.7% to 34.7% between 2020–21 and 2022–23. These centers aim at community and school-level engagement, and falling numbers indicate a failure in grassroots mobilization, especially among girls. This is concerning since this is the entry-level pipeline for identifying young talent.
- **NSTC:** Female participation remains persistently low at around 21%. Despite being a flagship talent identification program, NSTC has not made significant strides toward inclusivity. The data reflects deep-seated gender biases in early scouting, training access, and parent/community support.\*\* The most concerning finding, with persistent female underrepresentation (around

21%), reflects deep-rooted cultural and infrastructural challenges.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of gender participation data from SAI schemes reveals consistent disparities, particularly in grassroots and mid-level programs such as NSTC and STC. This inequality is not merely a statistical phenomenon but a reflection of broader social structures, which can be understood through various sociological theories.

### *Feminist Theory and Institutional Barriers*

Feminist sociologists argue that sports systems reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms that position physical strength, competition, and public visibility as masculine traits (Lorber, 1994). These cultural norms marginalize female athletes through unequal access to resources, lack of representation in leadership, and a dearth of female role models. This is particularly evident in schemes like NSTC, where female participation stagnates below 25%, showing that entry into sports remains gendered from the outset.

### *Bourdieu's Capital and Habitus*

According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), participation in fields like sports is influenced by the distribution of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Boys often accumulate sports-related capital early through school encouragement, peer validation, and family support. In contrast, girls—especially from rural or lower-income communities—lack access to such resources. Bourdieu's concept of habitus explains how internalized social expectations deter girls from seeing themselves as “sporting subjects,” especially in competitive or contact sports.

### **Structural Functionalism and Gender Role Reproduction**



From a structural functionalist perspective, sports function as a socializing institution that often reinforces traditional gender roles (Coakley, 2009). In many training institutions, activities are still designed with implicit gendered expectations—boys are directed toward competitive and contact sports, while girls are steered toward less physically aggressive or individual pursuits. This leads to systemic dropout or disinterest among girls, not due to lack of talent, but due to institutional design.

### *Intersectionality and Marginalized Girls*

Gender disparity in sports participation is further compounded by intersectional factors—caste, religion, economic status, and geography. A Dalit girl from a rural district may face not only patriarchal constraints but also infrastructural and economic barriers. These overlapping disadvantages require a nuanced and multi-dimensional response in policy planning and program delivery.

### *Policy Implementation Gaps*

Although initiatives like ***Khelo India*** promote inclusion, the lack of gender-disaggregated evaluation metrics, insufficient female coaching staff, and safety concerns in infrastructure limit real outcomes. Programs tend to remain top-down without adequately addressing local cultural resistance, especially in rural or conservative states.

In summary, the discussion underscores that closing the gender gap in Indian sports requires more than expanding opportunities. It necessitates a transformation in social attitudes, institutional accountability, and targeted interventions informed by sociological understanding.

### 5.2 Barriers to Female Participation

The low representation of girls in schemes like STC and NSTC can be attributed to multiple socio-cultural and institutional factors:

- **Cultural norms and family resistance**, especially in rural and semi-urban India.
- **Limited access to safe, gender-sensitive sports infrastructure.**
- **Scarcity of female coaches and mentors**, which affects role modeling and comfort.
- **Gender bias in early talent identification**, where boys are often favored for serious training.

### 5.3 Institutional Efforts

Programs such as **Khelo India**, **Fit India**, and specific initiatives mentioned in the annual reports (e.g., International Women's Day events, Girls Sports Camps) represent sincere efforts. However, these often lack continuity or focused tracking.

### 5.4 Trends and Patterns

While elite participation through NCOEs is improving, the feeder systems (like NSTC and STC) lag behind. This disjoint indicates the risk of **missing talent at grassroots levels** due to social exclusion and administrative inefficiencies.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 6.1 Conclusion

The study reveals a mixed pattern in gender representation across sports training levels in India. While schemes like the National Centers of Excellence (NCOE) have made significant progress toward achieving near gender parity, grassroots and feeder-level programs such as the SAI Training Centers (STC), Extension Centers, and the National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC) continue to show disproportionately low female participation.

This discrepancy highlights the complex intersection of institutional structures and socio-cultural norms. Despite policy-level

interventions and campaigns promoting women's participation in sports, deeply ingrained patriarchal values and systemic barriers persist, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts. Safety concerns, lack of female coaches, early marriage pressures, and inadequate infrastructure remain critical deterrents.

Moreover, the discussion highlights that gender disparities in sports are not just a numerical gap but are embedded in unequal access to social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Feminist theory further underscores how sports institutions may unintentionally reinforce gender hierarchies (Lorber, 1994). These perspectives illustrate that to improve female representation, systemic changes are needed at the cultural, institutional, and operational levels.

The data from SAI's annual reports clearly show that progress at the elite level is not automatically mirrored at the base. This reinforces the need for targeted policy implementation, gender-sensitive outreach, and better accountability measures. Without a shift in societal attitudes and more inclusive program delivery, gender equity in Indian sports will remain aspirational rather than a reality.

## 6.2 Recommendations

1. **Grassroots sensitization drives** to challenge gender norms in rural areas.
2. **Dedicated recruitment and training of female coaches** in every SAI region.

3. **Mandatory gender-disaggregated reporting** across all SAI schemes.
4. **Incentivize institutions with high female athlete performance and participation.**
5. **Safe transport and infrastructure** must be prioritized in underrepresented states and districts.

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