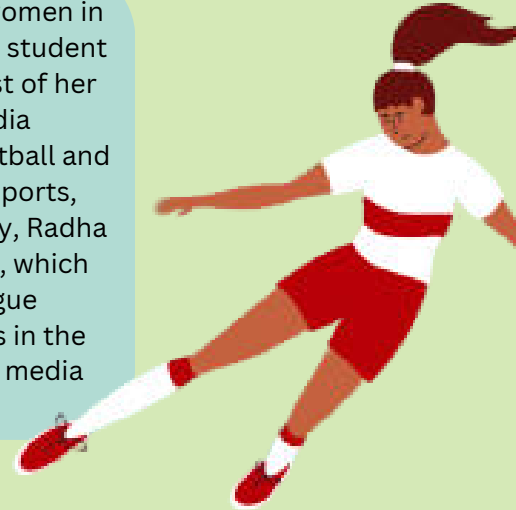


WOMEN IN SPORTS: ON THE FIELD, BUT OFF OUR MINDS

COMMITTEE FOR MANAGING GENDER ISSUES

The July issue of the CMGI newsletter focuses on women in sports. We have **Radha Lath Gupta**, a first-year PGP student at IIMA. Radha has played and watched sports most of her life, and more recently covers sports as a media professional. She focuses primarily on women's football and cricket. She has previously contributed to Sony Sports, Scroll.in, and The Bridge, among others. Additionally, Radha has her own sports media platform, [She Talks Ball](#), which aims to increase content, coverage, and dialogue surrounding women in sports. Using recent events in the sporting world, she discusses the current state of media coverage of women's sports.



“Sports coverage is hugely powerful in shaping norms and stereotypes about gender. Media has the ability to challenge these norms, promoting a balanced coverage of men's and women's sports and a fair portrayal of sportspeople – irrespective of gender.” UNESCO, 2018

The media, in its many forms, wields tremendous power over setting the narrative on a variety of topics, sports being one of them. “With great power comes great responsibility” is an appropriate adage here, and how the media carries this responsibility needs to be closely understood. Media coverage can be assessed along two lines— quantity and quality, and when it comes to women in sports, it appears to be lacking on both fronts. In this piece, I look at how this is done and what needs to change.

How much is enough?

A few years ago, UNESCO undertook a [study](#) where they found that while 40% of athletes participating in professional sports are women, only about 4% of the sports coverage is dedicated to them. Why is there this skew when the same game is being played? “My dad would often be watching sports, so I would sit with him... I really don't remember watching women's sports. A couple of matches of tennis once in a while and that too in the more recent years, 90% [of sports consumed] was men's sports.” - recalls Rekha*, a PGP student. Faiza*, her colleague, agrees and adds, “Even today, we are doing very well, but sports is still male-dominated. It is a luxury for women when you see the social responsibilities we are confined by.”

Many others agreed that most of the sports we have grown up watching are male-oriented. The lack of visibility of women in sports at the national and international level has a trickle-down effect on our neighbourhood playgrounds or even in the field on a college campus. As a result of this invisibility, two things take place -

- (a) Women do not realise that engaging in a sport can be a hobby or even a career path.
- (b) Many people do not recognise sporting areas as spaces that can be occupied by women. Girls are often fewer in number and have to prove themselves on the field before being ‘accepted’. Increased coverage and conversation around women's sports not only shows young girls what is possible, it shows young boys what is normal.

When we receive coverage, it is frequently accompanied by subtle or sometimes overt gender stereotypes. The hypocritical double standards and internalised sexism that manifest as queries to female athletes can be frustrating. For instance, Mirchi Plus hosts a show, “What Women Want ” in which the host, Kareena Kapoor, does a series of interviews. Harmanpreet Kaur, the star batter and captain of the Indian women's cricket team, was featured in Episode 6. In the rapid-fire segment, not only was she asked “One actor whom you would like to date?”, she was also asked, “Never have I ever had a crush on someone from the men's team.” It comes as no surprise that Mirchi Plus also put out a [clickbait](#) headline later saying, “Harmanpreet Kaur crushes over THIS Bollywood actor and Indian cricketer!” Women across professions have often called out such interview questions as opposed to their male colleagues who get the more ‘serious’ questions focusing on their career and future.

While this may appear to be an innocuous interaction, it illustrates the extent to which the media believes it is acceptable to trivialize the careers of women athletes. On 23 July 2023, prior to Morocco's FIFA World Cup match against Germany, a BBC World Service correspondent asked Morocco's captain, Ghizlane Chebbak, the following question: "In Morocco, it's illegal to have a gay relationship. Do you have any gay players in your squad and what's life like for them in Morocco?" Although the moderator of the press conference was quick to interject and dismiss the question, it should never have been posed. The athlete was visibly shocked when she was asked this question, which was not only unethical but also highly politicized and not related to sports.

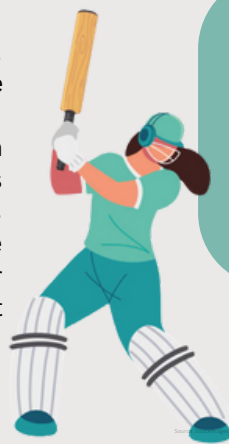
A deep dive into the dearth of quality coverage in women's sports reveals other problematic elements. Women athletes are expected to stick to their gender roles, their identities often being only that. Male athletes are celebrated for being dominant, powerful, and competitive, whereas female athletes are expected to be humble, appreciative, and polite. Alex Morgan, American footballer and World Cup winner gestured she was drinking tea as a goal celebration against England during the semi-finals of the World Cup. She was labelled with phrases such as "disrespectful" and "arrogant." Meanwhile, men's events see all sorts of celebrations, often bordering lewd innuendos, which pass without comment and are taken in the spirit of the sport. The fact that only women are expected to adhere to a higher standard stands out.

Gendered language in sports

Language has plenty of politics associated with it, gender being one. Commonly used words can quickly become exclusionary. The language around sports is male by default. On Instagram, you'll find @ESPN and @ESPNw. The official name for the football world events is FIFA World Cup and the FIFA Women's World Cup respectively. For most of us, World Cup cricket means men's cricket. This subconscious gender bias extends to day-to-day conversations as well. Answers to questions such as 'What club do you support?' or 'Who is your favourite player?' almost always have answers from the men's teams with names of men, this is highlighted not to disparage their achievements. The idea is to show how women's sports events have historically lacked investment and coverage, and as a result, women do not feature in our conversations unless specifically asked - who is your favourite female player?

Tennis player Andy Murray was posed with the following statement by an interviewer: "You're the first person ever to win two Olympic gold medals; that's an extraordinary feat, isn't it?" To this observation, his reply was, "The first to defend the single title [yes], I think Venus and Serena have won about 4 [gold medals] each." The conversation is a classic example of how the achievements of women are often overlooked and their contributions neglected. To the interviewer and by extension many of us, Andy plays tennis, and Serena/Venus play women's tennis.

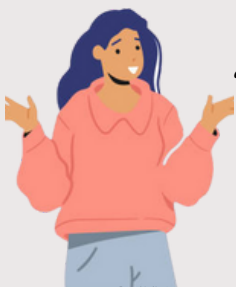
Moving away from this default understanding and consciously using gender-neutral language can ensure that one day, one can just use "athletes" instead of specifying "female athletes". Examples include saying Player of the Match instead of Man of the Match, "batter" instead of "batsman", and "sporting spirit" instead of "sportsmanship". These changes can make a great difference in women feeling included. They shouldn't have to settle for 'it is what it is' or be grateful for any inclusion people provide. Let's make it normal. As Anuja*, a PGP student, says, "... I do wish we didn't have to hear things like 'Oh, you play so good for a girl!' or 'Oh, she can play!' It is high time we realise these are not compliments and change what we perceive as normal or unusual.



***Fun fact:** In 2021, the MCC [governing body of cricketing laws] announced [amendments](#) to the laws of cricket to use the gender-neutral terms "batter" and "batters", rather than "batsman" or "batsmen".

Moving Ahead

Nevertheless, the situation is improving. Brands are releasing advertisements that portray women as the athletes they are. Nike's campaigns for the FIFA Women's World Cup have impressed supporters. Women are no longer required to choose between parenthood and pursuing a sports career. What can one do about this? Some may consider coverage to be the role of a journalist or broadcaster alone who has to cater to what the masses want. After all, how can they regulate the amount of space devoted to women's sports in a newspaper if there is no demand? Putting aside media coverage for the moment, let us look at what you and I can do. A link share, tweet, or Instagram story is a conversation starter. We can call out clickbait content, and amplify good quality work. Additionally, we must understand the loop that we are operating in. When investment in the game increases, top coverage will also increase. This will occur when stadiums reach capacity. For fans to occupy stadiums, however, they must be informed of the events. And once again, we need greater coverage to make this happen. Engage with quality coverage, call out substandard work, and accept women as the rightful and respectable inhabitants of the sports world. Critique and celebrate all athletes for their craft, irrespective of gender. Similarly, advocate for equal investment. As Mary*, a PGP student, points out,



"We have a lot of good female sporting role models, we just don't know about them. More awareness is required. We should talk about Smriti Mandhana like we talk about Virat Kohli."

POP QUIZ

Q1) Which footballer has the highest number of international goals to their name?

Q2) Here is one for the cricket fans- Who scored the first ever international ODI double hundred?

Q3) Who is the youngest Indian to score an ODI century? Or the youngest to score a test match 200?

A1) At the time of publishing, Canadian captain Christine Sinclair has 190 to her name, and there are six more women in line before Cristiano Ronaldo enters the list at number 7 with 123 goals.
A2) Australian cricketer Belinda Clarke achieved that feat 13 years before Sachin Tendulkar achieved the record.
A3) Both records are held by the stalwart Mithali Raj.

ANSWERS

Recent wins in women's sports

In this section, Radha summarises a few recent changes that have been made in women's sporting events over the world.

- [New payment model guarantees support for every FIFA Women's World Cup 2023 team and player](#)
 - Participating Member Associations to receive record distributions at every stage of the tournament
 - The model also guarantees all players will receive fair contributions for their work, securing the endorsement of the global players union, FIFPRO
- [The International Cricket Council \(ICC\) announces equal prize money for the men's and women's teams at ICC events](#)
 - Teams will now receive equal prize money for finishing in similar positions at comparable events, plus the same amount for winning a match at those events.
- [Fans break attendance records at Women's Football World Cup](#)
 - New Zealand broke the record for most attended football match, men or women.
 - Australia broke the record for the most attended home women's football game, and third largest crowd in WC history.
- [Brazil's government changes work hours so fans can watch Women's World Cup in Australia](#)
 - "On days when the games are held at 8 am, the working hours will start at 12 pm Brasilia time," Brazil's Minister of Management and Innovation in Public Services Esther Dweck said.
- [Wimbledon changes its women's dress code for the first time in 146 years](#)
 - In 2023, female athletes can now wear dark-coloured undershorts, a change intended to ease anxiety around periods.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions to us regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:
Email: chr-cmgi@iima.ac.in
Phone: 97129 15533
Please note that any communication with the CMGI is strictly confidential.

The monthly newsletter from the Committee for Managing Gender Issues (CMGI) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at theresea@iima.ac.in for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.