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Unsung Champions: Participation And Challenges Of Grassroots Women In Indian Sports

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition of women in elite sports, a vast and often overlooked segment of India's sporting ecosystem comprises grassroots-level women athletes. These are the girls playing barefoot in rural fields, the young women participating in school tournaments without proper gear, and the mothers coaching children with no formal training. This paper explores their participation, the unique challenges they face, and the role they play in sustaining local sports traditions. Unlike formal athletes who benefit from structured programs, these grassroots women navigate complex socio-cultural landscapes marked by gender bias, limited infrastructure, and economic hardship. By weaving in stories from rural India and evaluating systemic gaps in policy execution, this study argues that empowering grassroots sportswomen is essential to realizing the inclusive development goals envisioned in Viksit Bharat 2047. The paper concludes by recommending context-sensitive strategies to foster community-based sporting cultures led by women.

Keywords - Rural sports, informal athletes, women empowerment, local games, India, sports policy, social equity

1. Introduction

Sports in India are often portrayed through the lens of stadiums, medals, and televised events. But far from the limelight lies a different world—one where women engage in sports not for recognition or reward, but for the joy of movement, for self-worth, and for community pride. Grassroots women athletes are found in every corner of the country: in tribal belts, in desert villages, in urban slums. Their contributions to India's sporting culture are significant yet systematically excluded from policy discourse. This paper seeks to document their stories, unpack the barriers they face, and highlight pathways for meaningful inclusion.

2. Challenges Beyond the Field

2.1 Gendered Norms and the Politics of Visibility

Girls in many regions are discouraged from playing in public spaces. Physical activity is associated with masculinity, while female visibility outdoors is scrutinized. Sporting clothes like shorts or track pants often attract social disapproval. In such a context, stepping onto a field is a political act.

2.2 Space, Safety, and Time Poverty

Women rarely have exclusive access to sports facilities, even if such infrastructure exists. Fields are typically occupied by boys or used for farming. Additionally, safety concerns limit evening practice. Most women also juggle school, housework, or jobs, leaving little time or energy for sports.



Figure 1: Real-world Challenges Faced by Rural Women Athletes

2.3 Administrative and Financial Hurdles

Registration for tournaments often requires documents, fees, or permissions that grassroots players cannot easily access. Funds earmarked for rural sports development are poorly monitored. Equipment is unavailable or unusable. Policies like Khelo India seldom engage meaningfully with informal sporting ecosystems.

3. Case Narratives

Nagma, the Wrestling Sister from Bundelkhand

Nagma grew up watching her brothers wrestle on a mud akhara. When she began practicing secretly, her parents were furious. Today, she trains local girls, runs a makeshift gym in her backyard, and insists that strength is not a male privilege.

Revathi, the Tribal Sprinter from Bastar

Revathi discovered running during monsoon treks through forests. She won school races barefoot and was later mentored by a visiting coach. With minimal support, she has competed in district-level meets, but her village still lacks a road or playground.

Meenu, the Football Organizer in Jaipur's Periphery

Meenu, a domestic worker's daughter, formed an all-girls football team in her basti. Using stitched plastic balls and borrowed jerseys, her team has beaten boys' groups and participated in NGO-supported street tournaments. She dreams of becoming a PE teacher.

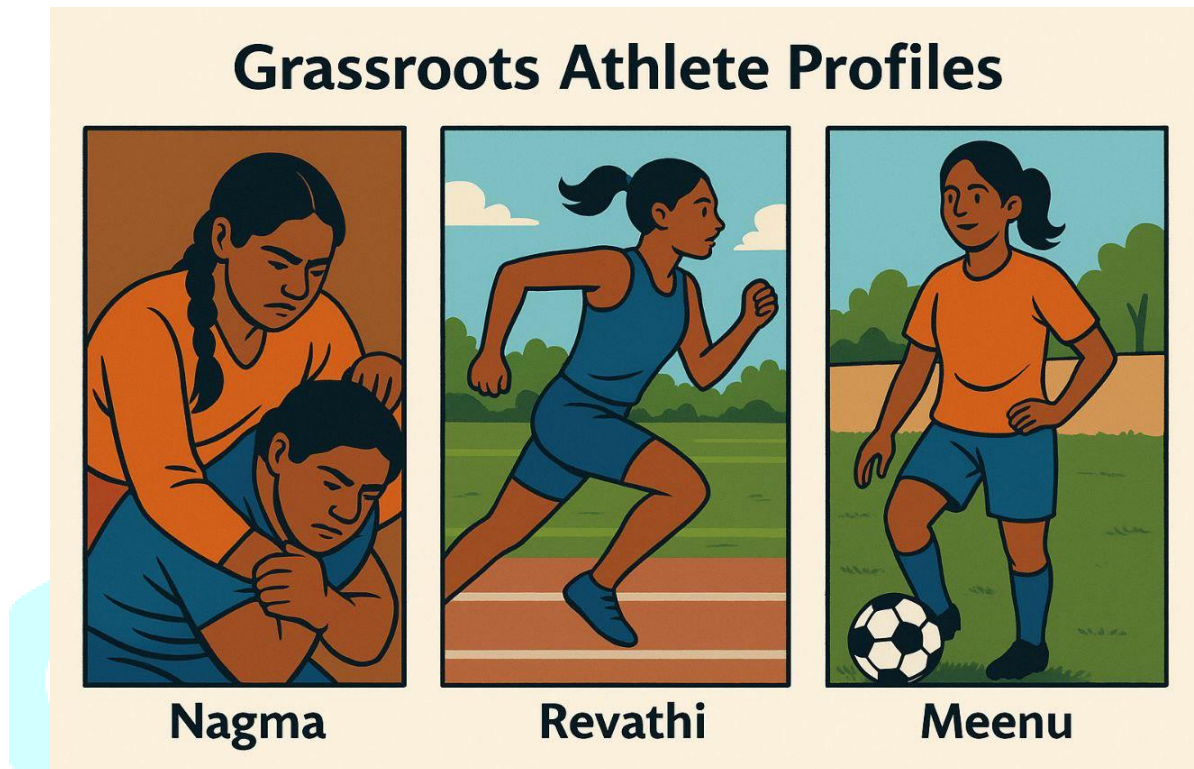


Figure 2: Grassroots Athlete Profiles – Nagma, Revathi, Meenu

4. Disconnect Between Policy and Practice

Government sports programs, though ambitious on paper, often lack contextual implementation. Schemes are designed for structured setups—ignoring the realities of informal athletes. For example, talent scouting in rural areas is rare, and local champions rarely make it past block-level recognition. Even the distribution of sports kits is often mired in favoritism or logistical inefficiencies. As a result, while urban athletes benefit from visibility and infrastructure, rural women remain stuck in a cycle of underfunding and underrepresentation.

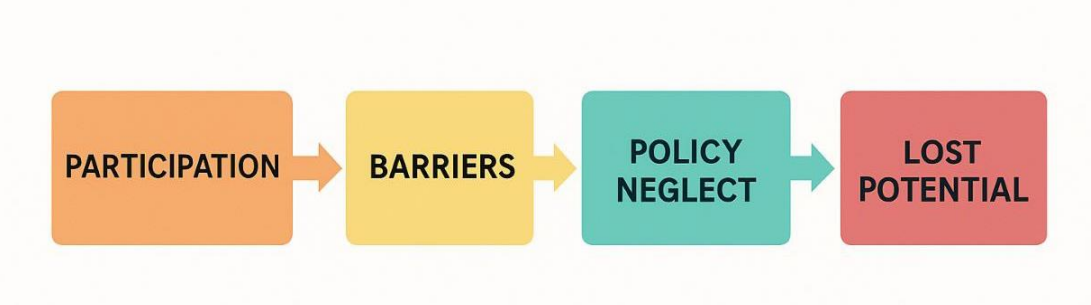


Figure 3: Symbolic Representation of the Policy–Practice Gap

5. Towards an Inclusive Sports Future

- Establish rotating sports libraries in villages with reusable kits.
- Train local women as 'sports catalysts' who coordinate community events.

- Include informal games in school curricula and inter-school competitions.
- Fund travel, uniforms, and nutrition support through decentralized panchayat-based sports grants.
- Launch mobile mentorship campaigns using stories of women athletes from diverse backgrounds.



Figure 4: Proposed Solutions for Inclusive Sports Futures

6. Conclusion

Grassroots women in sports are not waiting to be discovered; they're already transforming their communities. They are building resilience, leadership, and physical literacy where none existed. India's sports future must not be confined to podiums and medals—it must include barefoot runners, village team captains, and self-taught referees. By expanding the definition of who gets counted as an athlete and where sports happen, we move closer to the aspirations of Viksit Bharat 2047—an India that values participation as much as performance.

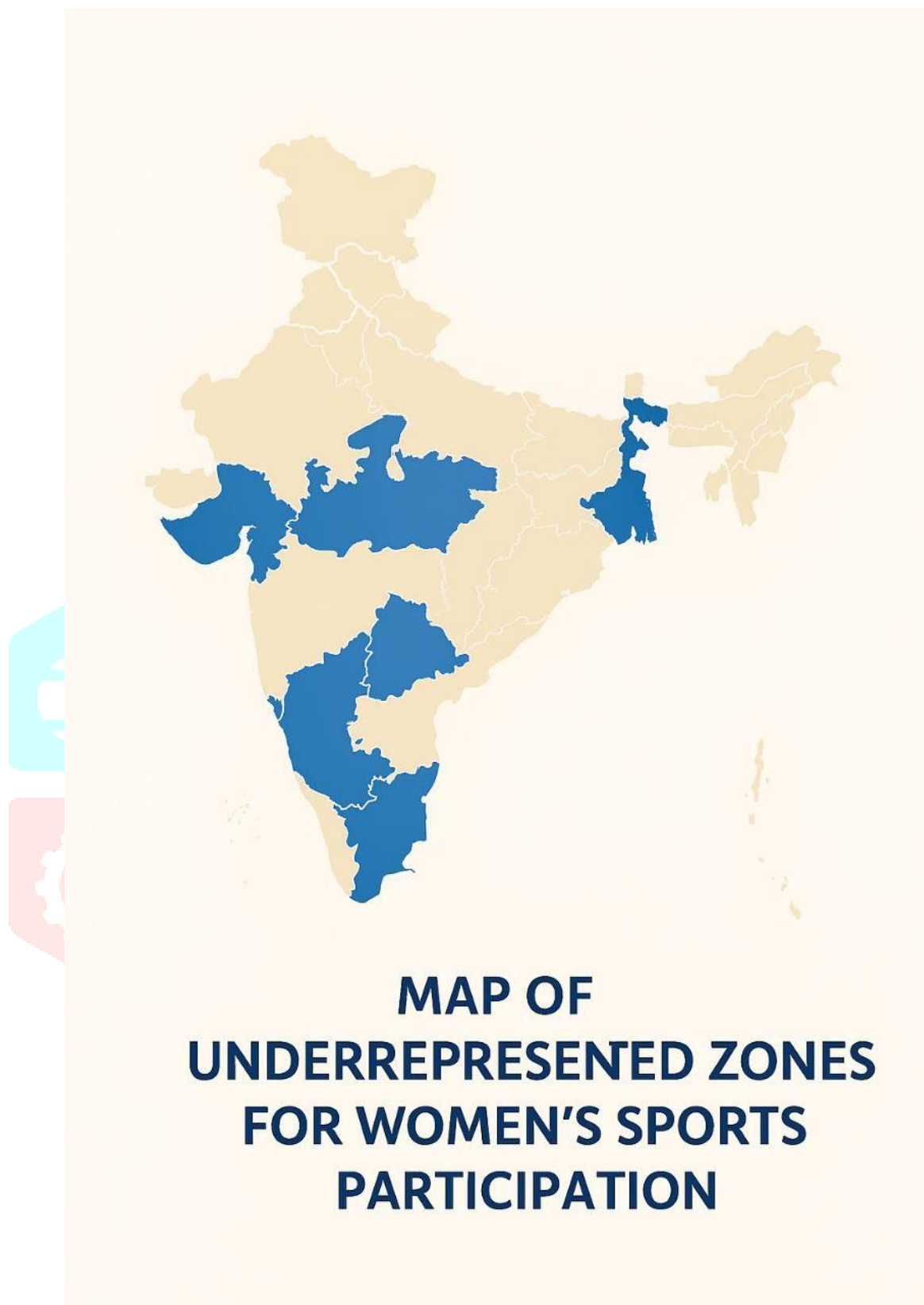


Figure 5: Map of Underrepresented Zones in Rural Sports

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Declaration

We hereby declare that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere for publication. All references used have been duly acknowledged.

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