

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW  
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

**[ISSN 2581-5369]**

---

**Volume 4 | Issue 2**

---

**2021**

© 2021 *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlmh.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com>)

---

This Article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Law Management & Humanities after due review.

In case of **any suggestion or complaint**, please contact [Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com](mailto:Gyan@vidhiaagaz.com).

---

**To submit your Manuscript** for Publication at **International Journal of Law Management & Humanities**, kindly email your Manuscript at [submission@ijlmh.com](mailto:submission@ijlmh.com).

---

# The Mythical Level Playing Field: A Study of Inequality and Discrimination in the World of Sport

---

SWARA POPAT<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The field of sports prides itself with providing a level playing field for all participants by categorizing, dividing, and labelling them accordingly to maintain homogeneity as society remains a heterogenous group of individuals. A closer look into its functioning reveals a field highly influenced by discrimination which causes inequality in a setting where equality is key. The intersectionality between caste, class, race, and gender, affects sports as it does any other societal institution. Influencing its functioning, the intersectionality changes sporting experiences for multiple stakeholders, becoming a defining factor in the lives of many sportspersons. Analysing the field of sports as a societal institution, this paper aims to study the typically hierarchical, male-dominated institution that is formed; where gender, caste and class-based divisions and discrimination lead to tainted experiences, ultimately affecting participation. Societal factors and inherent, deep rooted views render the "level playing field" a mere myth, promised but rarely provided*

Almost every individual at some point in life has come in contact with sports. That contact may be consciously made or imposed upon the individual with the general purpose of sport being a source of physical fitness and activity. Sports, over the years, has developed as multiple things: a pastime, a profession, a community activity- but, most importantly, as a complex social institution with various aspects at play simultaneously. When one participates in sports or spectates a game, many social issues are glaringly evident but conveniently overlooked. As a social institution, sports is a privileged one, similar to religion, which by virtue of being close to the hearts of society, often escapes necessary scrutiny (Anderson and White 2018). The most prevalent of these issues are those of inequality and, division and discrimination. This essay focuses on inequality and discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and social classification, analyzing the hierarchical and stereotypical world of sports.

Sports is usually viewed with a functionalist approach considering it as an institution that reinforces societal values and beliefs, supporting the status quo. The activity which developed in different forms for different groups is increasingly becoming inclusive, but the nature of this

---

<sup>1</sup> Author is a Student at Jindal Global Law School, India.

inclusivity is rather questionable. The issue of gender and sports is a rather pressing one as the traditional view of sports being an activity for strong, agile, muscular men still prevails in various parts of the world. Women, though included in the activity, are subject to prejudice, inequality and discrimination since their sex has a prescribed role in society since time immemorial which is further reinforced by almost every institution in society. Women's participation in sports that are considered feminine is generally accepted as these sports involve grace, beauty and coordination: characteristics that a female should ideally possess according to society. Women who participated in these effeminate sports were glorified. At the same time, those who wish to play football or wrestle are disparaged, since it is more "interesting" to watch men play aggressive sports because women are too weak to fight. Sports that required power and strength were deemed inappropriate for women's participation. The Olympic Games, which began in 1894, saw the admittance of women only in 1900, that too in sports that were feminine enough to allow their participation. Track and field, among others, were sports in which females were not considered fit to compete. Women were gradually allowed to compete in other sports, with that of boxing permitted only as late as 2012 and with fewer categories than those available for men. Running, jumping, lifting, throwing were simply activities that were not coherent with the general social ideal and hence unacceptable for women. The idea of women willing to compete in sports or rather, competing in sports was so unacceptable initially that women participating were suspected to be men in disguise. The paranoia around this idea was such that till 1996 the Olympics and other major sporting events had mandatory "gender testing" for female athletes. This image of female athletes is further promoted by influential sources like the media which discriminate against them in terms of coverage. The limited coverage received, shows women in sports as feminine and attractive, putting them in clothes that make these traits more evident. The media portrays hegemonic masculinity (Woods 2015). It reveres and supports the traditional masculine image of sportsmen, in accordance to the majoritarian view of its audience and benefactors. The perception of women as strong, competitive and skilled individuals is far from what the media portrayed. Instead, its primary message objectified female athletes and attempted to fit the stereotypical feminine image to such an extent that the Women's Sports Foundation in America was forced to form guidelines for the portrayal of female athletes in the media (Woods 2015). Participation of women in sports has constantly been on the rise. However, coverage of women's sports in the media has surprisingly seen a downfall since the year 2000 and has been at the same levels as those prevalent in the 1990s (Woods 2015). This lack of coverage has various effects on society, the most important of which is the fact that young girls in sports fail to have role models or

gameplay to look up to and thus, hardly get motivated enough to take up sports or pursue them seriously enough to become professionals. Young boys, on the other hand, receive role models in almost every sport and can watch and observe the game at its best. The traditional view of women and their characteristics still prevail in the world today with women often being associated with lesbianism due to their masculine appearance and participation in sports that require strength and power. The problem becomes even more intense for athletes who actually identify as lesbians. As new genders and sexualities emerge, and society slowly sensitizes to them, the institution of sport remains a concern. The world of sport which struggles to accommodate men and women equally also struggles to involve athletes of the LGBTQIA+ community, with multiple professional athletes facing serious consequences as a result of their sexuality. Coaches of professional teams have publicly stated their inability to accept lesbian and gay athletes on their teams. With time, non-binary individuals are increasingly socially accepted. However, in the world of sports athletes that come out as non-binary individuals remain at risk for exclusion, harassment or even expulsion. Indian athlete Dutee Chand came out and became India's first openly gay athlete, this move though internationally applauded lead to Chand being disowned by her village and facing harassment and threats (Dhillon 2019). Society at large is plagued by attachment to a conservative mindset which carries on into the various social institutions and thus, sport. Further, sporting events are divided into only two categories, men and women. This categorization might have been sufficient during the origin of competitive events, but with increasing participation and further diversity in participants, this division proves to be insufficient. With athletes undergoing surgery to change their sex, their accommodation in sports becomes concerning due to the sheer fact that it is an activity that requires mental and physical skill which differs in a biological male and female. There should always be a level playing field, but how and where does the line have to be drawn to include athletes in all fairness and with respect. Sport as an institution has struggled to accommodate women, having conducted gender tests for almost a hundred years since they were allowed to participate, to say nothing of the accommodation of athletes who have undergone a sex change. Here the example of Thai kickboxer Parinya Charoenphol remains relevant. Charoenphol underwent surgery and took hormones to become female but remains better than the men in the sport (Anderson and White 2018). Is it more acceptable if, after the sex change, she was only as good as the average female? Voluntary changes of sex still provide some amount of clarity with the athlete being sure about the category they wish to participate in and them being medically proven to belong to that sex. However, there have been cases where biological differences that athletes have no control over have been held against them.

Caster Semenya, a South African athlete and Olympic Champion for the women's 800m, underwent a gender test in 2009, years after the practice had been eliminated. This test was firstly taken on the grounds of her 'masculine appearance' and outstanding performance in her races. It further revealed that Semenya was a hermaphrodite, having no ovaries and undescended testes (Woods 2015). Her participation in races was on hold for almost a year as this issue was discussed. Semenya, though still accommodated in the women's category and thriving, remains a topic of discussion when it comes to categorization. Women in sports are forced to overcome multiple barriers and are still expected to fit the gender role defined for them as mothers, caregivers and homemakers. Access to sport for women has always been a pressing issue due to the unequal nature of resources, facilities and support available for women as compared to men. However, gender is not the only ground on which discrimination is visible in the realm of sport. When one spectates an Olympic track and field race, the common mindset is that the African American athletes will dominate. While this is a generally accepted, one can't help but notice the racial undertones in the statement. Racial discrimination and inequality, a pressing issue for the entire society, carries forward into sports as it functions on every level starting from participation in basic school games to international championships and events. The common assumption that continues to be popular belief is that black athletes will excel in sports that involve running. Asian athletes, on the other hand, are expected to excel in sports such as karate, judo, kabaddi which are native to their land and suitable for their body structures. The discrimination faced by black athletes is a point of international concern due to the treatment they receive in their respective careers. Race and athletic dominance have been connected in ways that are hardly backed by science, and their participation in sports is subject to prejudice based on the same assumptions. The distribution of their race all over the world has seen genetic variations in individuals and groups emerging from various parts of the world. The body composition and muscular fibre build up hence varies in each subgroup. While some black athletes dominate sprinting and sports that involve explosive bursts of energy, others dominate sports like powerlifting, wrestling and boxing. Despite that fact, black athletes, in general, are considered suitable for positions that involve running and more raw physical talent than technical, intelligent participation. The idea that blacks have brawn, not brains seeps into sports participation with coaches considering them suitable for limited positions that do not require a lot of active thought while making moves. Harry Edwards, a professor at UC Berkeley, discovered the concept of 'stacking' in sports, which refers to the unusual distribution of black and white athletes in certain sports positions that cannot be explained by random distribution (Woods 2015). This phenomenon is visible in American sports where the

division of black athletes remains limited to certain positions like that of forwards in basketball, outfielders in baseball and running backs or wide receivers in American football. It is observed that white athletes are usually kept in positions that require more thinking and game-deciding decisions. In contrast, black athletes are in positions that require little thought but immense physical capacity in terms of strength, power and explosiveness. Albeit this perception is changing as athletes continuously prove their mettle in various sports and positions; they still face multiple barriers. Among these barriers are those of social class and economic divisions. Although society these days tends to downplay the idea of social class divisions in order to maintain the idea of an equitable society, it would be unreasonable to assume social class does not define the lives of people. Sport, although a universally accessible activity, becomes harder to access for millions with the growth of capitalism and inequality in income structures. Certain sports like basketball, football, athletics are available to the society at large since facilities for the same are publicly available at limited costs. However, various sports require significant expenditure on equipment, training, club memberships etc., which become harder to access for a majority of the population, limiting participation to the select few who can afford the sport. In fact, various sports like golf, polo and tennis were initially leisure activities for the wealthy that were then given the status of sports that could be pursued professionally. Majority of lower-income group families cannot even afford to train their children in certain sports, limiting their access to the sports available in schools, community centres and parks. The economic inequality also affects the choice of sport, where people from lower classes move towards sports that require strength, power and masculinity along with physical violence and risk. Sports that require a modest or no amount of money to participate see the largest participation, with numbers dwindling as the costs go up to sports that are simply out of the reach of the masses.

A close analysis of the institution of sport hence reveals that the 'level playing field' is nothing but a myth as sports continues to be a hierarchical, male-dominated and stereotypical field that struggles to accommodate changes in the societal outlook. Equality may be present in the fields and in front of millions of spectators, but to reach that area of equality, athletes are faced with multiple barriers and immense inequality. Even the basic access to sport for certain social groups is questionable, given the discrimination they face and the structure of society. As society progresses, it slowly overcomes certain barriers, attempting to successfully provide the benefits of sport and competition to all. Though constantly sought and strived for, equality and participation free of prejudice and discrimination remains a distant idea for multiple individuals due to their gender, race, class and orientation coupled with society's perception of the same.

**REFERENCES**

1. Woods, Ronald B. 2015. *Social Issues In Sport*. 3rd ed. Human Kinetics Publishers.
2. Anderson, Eric, and Adam White. 2018. *Sport, Theory And Social Problems: A Critical Introduction*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
3. Slep, Mike. 1998. *Social Issues In Sport*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
4. Murty, Komanduri S., Julian B. Roebuck, and Jimmy D. McCamey. "Race and Class Exploitation: A Study of Black Male Student Athletes (BSAS) on White Campuses." *Race, Gender & Class* 21, no. 3/4 (2014): 156-73. Accessed November 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496990>.
5. Cora Burnett. "Whose Game Is It Anyway? Power, Play and Sport." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 49 (2001): 71-78. Accessed November 29, 2020. doi:10.2307/4066495.
6. Dhillon, Amrit. 2019. "It's Humiliating For Us': Village Disowns Dutee Chand, India's First Openly Gay Athlete". *The Guardian*, 2019. <https://syndication.theguardian.com/automation/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2F2019%2Fjun%2F05%2Fdutee-chand-india-athlete-coming-out&type=article&internalpagecode=world/2019/jun/05/dutee-chand-india-athlete-coming-out>.

\*\*\*\*\*