

CASE STUDY

Levelling the playing field: Creating an inclusive sports culture for participants from a vulnerable community

SABAH KHAN

Abstract

While the historical exclusion of women, particularly minority women, from sports has been noticed and recorded, there is a paucity of initiatives to foster an inclusive environment that welcomes their participation and uphold the ethics of fairness and inclusion. In particular, we do not know well how class and community factors impact gender differentials and women's right to physical space and to play. This is a case study of an initiative by Parcham, an NGO in Mumbra, a suburb of Mumbai, that views gender exclusion in sports through constructing women's access to football. Complicated as it is by the dictates of local religious and community norms, Parcham views women's right to play as an ethical issue and is attempting to address it.

Keywords: *exclusion of women, football, sports, right to play, gender*

"Are women as good as men at sport?" was one of the questions posed in a BBC study in 2020 to assess attitudes towards women's sports, sportswomen and women in India [1]. The research encompassed 14 states in India, interviewing 10,181 respondents. The surprising aspect was not the question itself, but the fact that more than half of the respondents (68%) did not consider gender a determinant of ability in sports. However, 57% of respondents believed that parents should maintain stricter control over their daughters than their sons, 56% of all respondents believed that a woman's place is at home. In a society where a woman's worth is determined by her ability to birth a male child (while married), 38% of all respondents expressed the belief that women's participation in sports affected their femininity and childbearing ability. This patriarchal perspective towards women influences their participation in activities in the public realm. A society which obsesses over fairness and femininity in women prefers to keep daughters away from sports and / or any kind of employment / activity which might tan their skin or make them less "feminine". The implication of such attitudes is reflected in the low participation of women in sports, for, a mere 29% women in the BBC study had engaged in sports [1].

In sports, patriarchy is often manifested in violence when young women, girl children choose to play in a public space. Violence includes physical abuse by family members to "keep the girl in check" and "preserve family honour," derogatory comments from bystanders, the lack of accessible spaces for women and young girls to engage in sports, and instances of sexual abuse. The recent UN report on violence against women and girls (2024) confirms this reality, stating that

"Women and girls in sport face widespread, overlapping and grave forms and manifestations of violence at all levels" [2: p 3].

To uphold the ethics of fairness and inclusion, we must acknowledge the historical exclusion of women, particularly minority women, from sports and understand how class and community factors impact gender differentials in sports participation. What follows is a case study of an initiative by Parcham, an NGO in Mumbra, a suburb of Mumbai, viewing gender exclusion in sports as an ethical issue.

The Parcham story

Parcham, an NGO in the state of Maharashtra, was founded in 2012 in Mumbra, a Mumbai suburb that became a refuge to Muslims in the aftermath of the 1992-93 communal violence in and around Mumbai. It provided affordable housing and a sense of security, living among "their own" in a city becoming increasingly communally segregated.

Parcham aimed to counter the hate for the "other" that had taken root by working towards a vision of a just and equal society, respectful of diversity, celebrating difference and interdependence. We (the founder members) chose football as the first initiative of the organisation, a team game which catered to our objective of bringing together, as teammates, communities divided by hate. Choosing a sports initiative, promoting engagement in a public space with Muslim women would also challenge the persistent stereotype of the Muslim woman, as voiceless, subjugated and imprisoned in her home, challenging narrow narratives.

To start with, we reached out to the young women we had worked with in the past. Our earlier interventions with them had been on education, financial independence and self-confidence, but in a closed room of a women's organisation. The idea of a football programme was met with great enthusiasm. All the 20 young women, 17-20 years old, all of them practising Muslims, all living in Mumbra, were certain they wanted to play.

Living in a Muslim majority neighbourhood provides a sense of security, but it requires an adherence to community norms and the responsibility for protecting the Muslim identity. The *hijab* is a symbol of religious identity in Mumbra, where it is rare to see a woman without one. Most of the young women who joined the programme wore the *hijab*. While they were all enthusiastic, not one of them

considered the fact that the *hijab* would have to come off while playing, or that they would be playing in a public space, or that families may not grant them permission to play. Though technically adult at 18, young women are seldom allowed decision-making autonomy until the time they are married and even post marriage it is often the husband and parents in-law making the decisions until they begin their independent households.

Parcham's football programme allowed the young women to choose the attire they were comfortable playing in. If the *hijab* did not interfere in the game, it was kept on by those wanting to wear it. The players could choose to wear track pants or shorts or the *salwar kameez*, whatever felt right to them. Clothes would not be a ground for exclusion from play. Along with football skills, the programme also provided perspective-building discussions about women's rights, access to public space and the right to play, the complexities surrounding the *hijab*, and issues experienced on account of identity.

Parcham had partnered with Magic Bus [3], a non-governmental organisation (NGO) known for its sports-for-development initiative, to start its football programme. Magic Bus was to provide the coaches and the kits for the programme while we had to find the ground to play in and to mobilise 40 willing players (a mixed group of girls and boys) to start the programme, since the goal of Magic Bus' Sports for Development programme was gender equality. The young women who had enthusiastically become part of the programme were certain that a mixed team would mean they wouldn't get to play. They knew their parents would never approve of them interacting with young boys, even if it was a programme of an NGO supervised by NGO staff. To address the ethical issue of exclusion on the basis of gender, the young women who wanted to join the football programme negotiated with Magic Bus and in the four locations that Magic Bus began this community initiative that year, Mumbra was the only location where they had an all-girls programme. To reach the target of 40, the 20 young women we had reached out to at the start of the programme, went to colleges and schools to recruit more women.

There were no women-friendly spaces available, as all useable grounds were occupied by boys. The vacant spaces in the city, where boys play, are often on privately owned land, to be developed into residential complexes or some other purpose. The ground we located, the only one which was accessible and "safe," had to be cleared of stones and broken glass before every practice. Players often had to wait for long for the boys who were already on the ground playing cricket to leave. Some of the girls were beaten up at home when the family discovered that their daughter was out playing football in an open field, without her *hijab*. Often the coaches couldn't make it to the training on account of commuter issues. Not surprisingly, the team shrank from 40 to 10.

To sustain the interest of those who continued to come to the ground every Sunday and to ensure that the game went on, some took on the responsibility of training, relying on training videos on YouTube. The ones who stayed had become addicted to the freedom of playing; but 10 was too small a group for rigorous practice. The young women were frustrated but not ready to quit. To reach out to more girls, the group came up with the idea of a cycle rally of schoolgirls who had been supplied cycles by school authorities to ensure retention in schools. In the few months of playing football, the group had realised that recruiting younger girls would be easier than reaching out and sustaining a team of young women. More than 100 schoolgirls in Mumbra participated in the cycle rally. Consequently, Parcham's work was recognised by the public-school administration which then initiated a football programme for girls to be conducted by Parcham.

To address the issue of lack of playing fields, the young women initiated a signature campaign for a public ground for women and girls, collecting signatures from nearly 1000 women and young girls. Armed with the signatures, they approached the local elected representatives with a demand for a sports ground exclusively for the use of women and girls. In realising their demand and with the establishment of a sports ground exclusively reserved for the use of women and girls, the first ever, they created history.

A small intervention in introducing football to girls and women had snowballed into a programme with the participation of nearly 500 girls in public schools. We had succeeded in creating public recognition of women's right to play, especially with the reservation of a sports ground exclusively for the use of women and girls.

Gender inclusion as ethical intervention

Multiple studies [4, 5] have shown that participation in sports has benefitted the achievement of development milestones even in the absence of a Sports for Development component. Participation in sports creates a sense of confidence which is reflected in one's body language. It helps us learn to work together, to be good teammates. It teaches us that winning and losing are a part of life. Given this, it is unfair and unethical that women remain excluded from the benefits accruing from participation in sports because of their gender.

Girls in our first team in 2012 had joined because it provided them an opportunity to play, one which they had been denied for being of the "wrong" gender. They wanted nothing more than to experience the thrill of playing football. A year after the programme was initiated, Magic Bus held a football tournament for all partner organisations. Of the three other locations, apart from Mumbra, one was with girls and boys of a residential school which ensured

that all girls who had started the programme stayed with the programme. In the two other community locations which had a mixed group of boys and girls, almost all the girls had dropped out of the programme. The Parcham team had 15 girls ready to play in a 7v7 match. The two other community organisations combined their players to form a team. Parcham had two teams: Parcham A and Parcham B. The Parcham teams won the tournament playing against each other. They won a number of other community tournaments in the following years.

The Parcham team won, not because of superior skills, but because in an all-girls team, the focus was on ethical inclusion. When programmes have a mix of boys and girls, the boys often shine simply because they are encouraged to play, to compete, and develop more strength from better nutrition. They occupy space with a natural ease because they are assured of their uncontested claim to open grounds (based on our experience in Parcham). In the mixed teams, the boys played better than the girls. As is usually the case, those who play better, get the attention of the coaches, who then coach them to become better players. Girls, on the other hand, are diffident, usually apologetic about claiming space, and fear making their presence felt. Girls typically remain on the sidelines and when they drop out, their presence is rarely missed. Over the years, the girls who began to join the programme aspired for more than just wanting to play. They wanted to win. The success of the first team at the community tournaments contributed to this aspiration. To challenge themselves with a competitive opponent, the Parcham girls now began playing with the boys with whom they earlier had bitter fights over using the playground.

We realised we needed a good coach. A friend connected us to a football player who had represented India and was willing to coach the Parcham girls. However, we lost him after two sessions as he felt the girls were “unIslamic” for wearing shorts and playing with boys. He believed training “such” girls was against the Shariat. Another coach told us that it might be a good idea for the Muslim girls in our teams to wear the *hijab* to be identified as Muslim in a mixed team. We recruited many coaches over the years and our experience was that even the most gender-sensitive male coach did not consider women good enough for competitive play. These incidents underline the ethical responsibility of coaches and institutions to create inclusive environments that respect the rights of all participants, regardless of gender, religion, or social background. To address the lack of sensitive and gender conscious coaches, we initiated a programme to train women coaches, resulting in six of our players earning the professional licence required for football coaches.

In 2015, when *Mumbai Mirror*, an English-language daily, hosted a women’s tournament at the Cooperage grounds [6], our team registered to play. To our dismay, we realised that the standards of the teams here were way above our league. All but one team were from elite schools. The girls of Parcham

looked like dwarfs in comparison to the girls they played against in their first match, which they lost. The teams were aggressively competitive, and their parents and coaches more so, especially against an untrained team like ours. That match made us realise how ill-equipped we were to participate in a “real” tournament. We were competing against those who were twice our size in spite of being the same age possibly because of their better nutrition afforded by their economic status. They had the means to afford a coach who trained them on professional turfs, unlike our team which had neither a coach nor a proper training ground. The girls in the Parcham team had to constantly negotiate family circumstances to attend training, and to complete the household chores of cooking, cleaning and washing clothes before being allowed to leave the house. Women’s right to play, we realised, is closely connected to how gender roles are perceived and operationalised in society.

The one space where girls from economically vulnerable communities are allowed to play and engage in recreation is at school. The girls we work with have access only to government or municipal schools or low-fee private schools where sports are not a priority. As Chanda and Shrivastava [7] note, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face significant barriers to sports participation, including “poor facilities” and “lack of necessary facilities and trainers” that hamper athletic development. In our experience, low-fee private schools rarely have a playground and in most, “physical education activity” constitutes a once-a-week 40-minute game period and 40-minute physical education period. Often, even these hours are taken over by academic subjects like maths and science to complete the required syllabi. In co-ed schools, girls are often found playing hopscotch or dodgeball in the corridors, while boys occupy the playing grounds with cricket or football. Most often these schools lack dedicated physical education teachers. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Survey 2022 [8] conducted for rural India, recorded that only about 16% of the schools had a dedicated Physical Education teacher. The data for urban India would be similar. It comes as no surprise that in the BBC survey [1], a mere 29% of female respondents stated that they participated in sports or physical activity.

What can be done?

The easiest path to encouraging a sports culture is through schools. The Right to Education Act 2009 has made it mandatory for every child till the age of 14 to attend school. A dedicated woman sports teacher for girl students, a focus on the participation of every girl student, not just those who excel, safe grounds and adequate sports equipment and infrastructure will ensure that even girls from vulnerable communities have access to sports. Parcham’s experience with children and young women has been that once they begin playing and enjoying a sport, they find ways to

continue playing. If efforts are made to include them, even marital status will not keep women from continued participation in sports. Last year, the programme had two women in their 30s, married and with children, playing football with the rest.

Every child, irrespective of gender and ability loves to play. We need systemic changes which allow them to realise this basic human need of play. India needs to enact a Right to Play Act which makes it mandatory for the State to ensure access to sports for all school children, to ensure that none leaves behind a childhood without the memory of joyous play.

Ensuring the Right to Play for all also means the right to safe open spaces for recreation. This may mean ensuring reserved open spaces for women in each administrative block, maintained by the city. Such action legitimises the rights of women to protected public spaces irrespective of age or marital status. Equally, sports federations should ensure that women are in decision-making positions so as to enable pro-women decisions in play and sports provisioning. While gender-sensitive decisions may not be immediate due to existing organisational culture and the influence of decision-makers, women's consistent presence in decision-making roles can gradually normalise such considerations, making gender-sensitive decisions more likely over time.

Conclusion

Patriarchy informs the perceptions of women while assigning gender roles to them, and rewards women who follow the norm with the tag of a good (morally upright) woman. Given how deeply ingrained patriarchal gender roles have been in society, non-conformism is an ethical act of resistance, requiring courage. Muslim girls playing football in Mumbra, a Muslim majority neighbourhood shocked the community, the elected representatives and the media, with every national daily and some international publications writing about us. This resistance to patriarchal expectations was not only a personal act of defiance but also a collective challenge to a system that restricts women's physical mobility and societal participation. Football for women and girls became a reality in Mumbra because Parcham initiated a football programme specifically for women and girls, and because of the courage of the young women who chose to defy community norms and patriarchal impositions on their mobility.

The ethical issue this case study seeks to highlight is the right of women to participate fully in all areas of life, including sports, without facing discrimination or exclusion based on gender, religion, caste, or economic status. Inclusiveness requires a consciousness of the impediments to women's participation in sports. Recognising that women inhabit multiple identities, each adding a layer of vulnerability, a consciousness of the additional disadvantages experienced by Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, and all economically disadvantaged women is a first step towards ensuring their inclusion in sports, as in every other field. This consciousness needs to be

followed up with affirmative action to address the impediments.

Women's participation in sports needs to be the norm rather than an aberration. This means ensuring that schools actively encourage girls' involvement in physical activities, providing safe and accessible public sports grounds for women, and promoting the visibility of women in sports as frequently as that of men. If a non-governmental organisation, Parcham, with its limited resources can create this possibility in an under resourced Muslim majority neighbourhood, the government with its resources can ensure fairness and inclusiveness in sports, such that women, irrespective of their religious /caste identity / economic status, have access to the same benefits as men.

Author: Sabah Khan (corresponding author — sabah.if@gmail.com), Co-Founder, Parcham Collective, Grant Road East, Mumbai – 400008, INDIA

Conflict of Interest: None declared

To cite: Khan S. Levelling the playing field: Creating an inclusive sports culture for participants from a vulnerable community. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on March 12, 2025. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2025.022

Guest Editor: Padma Prakash, Janelle Joseph

Peer Reviewer: An anonymous reviewer

Copyright and license

©*Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* 2025: Open Access and Distributed under the Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits only non-commercial and non-modified sharing in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

References

1. BBC. Attitudes towards women's sports, sportswomen and women in India: research report [Internet]. 2020 Mar 8 [cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/attitudes-towards-womens-sports-sportswomen-and-women-in-india.pdf>
2. United Nations. A/79/325 Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences (A/79/325). 2024 Aug 27 [cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a79325-report-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-and-girls-its>
3. Magic Bus Foundation. Sports for development: End of year report 2007-08 [Cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: <https://www.globalgiving.org/pfil/2566/projdoc>
4. Das D, Kumar P, Dixit A, Vivek N. The missing gender: Examining the barriers to women's participation in sports in India. *Bus Perspect Res*. 2023 [cited 2025 Jan 23];0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/22785337221148557>
5. Women's Sports Foundation. Go out and play: Youth sports in America. 2017 Feb [cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/go-out-and-play-youth-sports-in-america-full-report-one-pager.pdf>
6. Mirror Sports Bureau. Over 100 teams book their spot for girls' soccer. *Mumbai Mirror*. 2015 Oct 7 [cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/sport/football/Over-100-teams-book-their-spot-for-girls-soccer/articleshow/49252026.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
7. Chanda S, Shrivastava D. Championing equality and inclusivity: leveraging the principles of TEFU Article 165 to forge a bias-free society in Indian sports. *ShodhKosh J Vis Perform Arts* [Internet]. 2024 May [cited 2025 Jan 23];5(5): 641-649. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.2099>
8. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). ASER 2022 [cited 2025 Jan 23]. Available from: <https://asercentre.org/aser-2022/>