



Crossing the Hurdles of Gender: Sports and Women in the Schools of Tamilnadu

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Received 10th September 2014, Accepted 10th November 2014

Abstract

The paper showcases the general attitude of women students and the approach of teachers, at schools in Tamilnadu, towards Sports and Physical Education. It maps the wide difference in the involvement of women students in games and exercises in girls-only schools and coed schools. The traditional notions that Sports and Physical Education are unfeminine, undesirable in women and not suitable for the so-called 'weaker sex' hinder the enthusiastic participation of women students in these activities. The paper explores ways and means through which these challenges could be overcome. It charts out some effective modules in training women students, at school level, in games and exercises. It also points out how sports and physical education is a prerequisite soft skill and training women students at school level in this skill is essential for their physical, psychological health and academic productivity.

Keywords: Women, Sports, Schools, Gender, Hurdles.

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Introduction

In this present day of technology, school students are expected to undergo an education that would mould them into excellent employees who can face the challenges and demands of the modern job market. It is true to some extent that Sports and Physical Education have been sidelined in contemporary educational systems in which students are made to mechanically labour with textual curriculum, rigid examination patterns and taxing workloads. Traditionally too, these fields are believed to be male centered and usually not the ideal domain for women. But today's post-globalised era brings with it many innovations, both in people's ways of life and in their ways of thinking. In this regard, the attitudes towards Sports and Physical Education have also changed. New and numerous job opportunities are being identified in these fields in which the participation of women has comparatively increased. When Sports and Physical Education is a prospering profession, its role and significance in schools today, especially with reference to the participation of women students needs to be redefined.

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Education

Education obtained at school has an everlasting impact on human beings. Being the foundation stage in the process of gaining knowledge, the education at school level moulds an individual's nature, ideas and ideologies. In short, the long span of time, spent within the portals of the school, contribute significantly to the making of an individual. It can be said that an individual is a product of the factory called 'school'. The way people think, the perspectives they take towards personal, social, political, economical, cultural, communal, regional, national and global issues amalgamate generally from the values they imbibe when at schools.

So if people must acknowledge Sports as an intrinsic part of the education system, it is important that schools must inculcate the right attitude towards sports in students. While students are sensitized about the importance of sports for intellectual, emotional and physical well-being, it needs to be taken into account that gender constructions in an Indian state like Tamilnadu hinder all such attempts.

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Women Participation in Sports

In this era of technology, the time people spend in every little activity as a learner becomes an ‘investment’ for their futures and people expect to reap profit later on out of this investment of time. The skills students learn are expected to fetch them a profession that will be beneficial to them either in terms of money, popularity or political influence. Parents and students look at the professional dimensions of Sports i.e they look at the possibility of Sports as a prospective profession. Though considerable number of students involve in various sports activities at school level, only a handful sustain their passion at higher education and very few build it up as a profession. At the level of higher education, the interest shown in Sports at school level is generally compromised for the education chosen for the purpose of a profession.. Moreover, not all who are involved in Sports at schools level, remain in the field as professional sports persons. Very few are able to shine as this is a highly competitive and challenging field which requires one to constantly keep performing. When this is the general case, it becomes a popular assumption that opportunities are more remote for women to professionally excel in the field of Sports. This inhibition makes girls to show less interest in Sports related activities in school.

Cultural preoccupations about gender are the ‘highest hurdles’ for girls to participate in sports. “Young boys and girls are viewed as having similar traits and characteristics but they are treated differently and given different opportunities” (Hanson “Young Women, Science and Sports”). It is true that Sports as a career, just like any other profession, demands time and commitment for rigorous training. When women have significantly progressed in various fields, still many girl students complacently accept this traditional idea that marriage, childbirth, childcare and taking care of their families might not make it possible for them to opt for sports as a profession. Ironically, girls are willing to take up ‘7 am to 9 pm’ jobs in the IT sector which are more stressful, strenuous and time consuming. The impossibility of taking up Sports as a profession makes girls chide away from sports activities at school. The career-oriented material outlook towards sports prevents people from looking at it as a life skill. Physical Education and Sports related activities in schools are mostly confined to single hour Games periods. The attitude of subject teachers to sports activities in school makes students not take sports very seriously. In many schools, students of 10th and 12th standards who will be sitting for public examinations, are not allowed to participate in sports related activities.

The participation of girl students in sports activities in coed schools in Tamilnadu is less when compared to the girls-only schools. In government co-education schools in Tamilnadu, except a few, girls do not mostly engage in sports beyond 14 years of age. When asked to participate in sports, girls hesitate to do so in the presence of boys but feel comfortable when only girl students are around. This self consciousness,

which stems from age-old ideas and beliefs that discriminate women’s physique, is a great hurdle to make girl students to take part in sports in coed schools. Many families and societies are against girls participating in sports as it is still considered to be an unfeminine activity. Some parents do not want girls to ‘waste’ time in these activities – they better get home to attend tuitions or help their mothers in domestic work.

Many “theories of sports suggest that participation in sports may have a positive influence on achievement” of women in science (Hanson and Kraus “Do Female Athletes Have an Advantage”). Based on these theories, an experiment was done for a period of 6 months involving the 80 girl students from standard eight of the MGR Nagar Government Higher Secondary School in Chennai, which is a coeducation school. Sports was made a compulsory activity and all students were compulsorily made to participate in any one sports activity – either volleyball, throwball, basketball, football, shuttle badminton, tennis, kabadi and kho-kho. The students were made to stay back for one hour every day after school. Though there were funding limitations to call coaches separately for each and every activity, help was taken from a few interested colleagues. Initially, the academic level of students was recorded by noting their marks in each grade separately. After a period of six months, when they had taken their final examinations, their marks were recorded again. The marks of most of the students had improved remarkably. Moreover, many students felt that their daily routine of playing had been a stress relief to them. All students wanted to continue this routine of playing the game for at least one hour a day. Students also felt fresh, energetic and healthy. Apart from mental and physical health, playing for an hour helped students to coordinate with peers and helped them build friendly relationships with their group-mates. The students felt they their social skills had improved along with their academic skills. It has to be noted that the girls were not self-conscious while playing because boys were not allowed in the playground. If such a condition was not implemented, many girls would not have participated or even if they had participated, would not have been comfortable while playing. This would have been a great distraction in the process of the experiment and would not have been beneficial to the girls. Hence, gender constructions play a significant role on the impact of sports.

Lack of awareness among women about the benefits of sports activities is a great hindrance. Previously, the girl students who participated in this experiment were not aware of the advantages of sports activities. Through this experiment, they learnt practically for themselves the benefits of playing sports. Initially, they had assumed that playing sports for one-hour after school hours, when they were already tired after classes, would further drain their energy out. Moreover, they would have to attend tuitions and study later in evenings and get ready to prepare for the next stressful day. Girls thought playing sports would further make them weak. But at the end of the experiment,

students realized that their assumptions were wrong. Contrary to their expectations, their productivity and energy had increased and they felt fresh throughout the day. It is essential that such awareness about the physical, mental and social benefits of sports must be created among girl students. The Government has recently announced more funding allocation for the development of Sports in Tamilnadu. In engineering colleges, the seats reserved for sportspersons have been increased to 500. In Employment, a considerable ratio is allocated for players. The job opportunities, financial support, reservation in higher education, many such benefits and concessions given by the Government to players must also be brought to the notice of girl students for their enthusiastic participation in Sports.

More than creating awareness among girls at school, the parents need to be enlightened on gender issues, sports and its importance for women's wellness and the availability of education and career opportunities. Parents are caught in their own workloads and financial commitments that they do not have time to take broader outlooks at their children's system of education.

Conclusion

Gender poses sensitive issues in when sports is taught as an essential life skill at school level. If the perspectives about gender in women's sports

participation must change, the parents, teachers, and learners must work together towards a prosperous future. Hard work, endurance and competing without personal jealousy for success are life skills that a sport teaches its players. Along with these, a relaxed mind, energetic body and friendly orientation and problem-solving abilities are products of playing sports. For women of our society to benefit completely from the advantages of Sports activities, gender hurdles must successfully be crossed.

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