



## Patriarchy undermining women's participation in sports: Expressions from female student athletes

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### Abstract

The present study, using a phenomenological approach, aimed to understand female athletes' experiences of patriarchal control in college level sports competitions in West Bengal, India. Seven female student athletes were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview. Using Colaizzi's techniques of data analysis, the study found that female student athletes encounter patriarchal control during their participation in sports. The result of the study revealed that fear of shame and stigma, peer pressure, male gaze, traditional gender role expectation, control on outdoor movements and offensive comments were the dominant patriarchal challenges/control encountered by female athletes in College sports. Based on the result of the study, it was concluded that women's life in sports can be said to be under patriarchal control and it is undermining their participation.

**Keywords:** patriarchal control, female student-athletes, college sports

### Introduction

Women's oppression is a universal phenomenon and it is generally refer to male domination, to the power relationship by which men dominate women, and to a system whereby women are kept subordination in a number of ways. Such system and practice of male dominations are the characteristics of patriarchy.

Patriarchy refer to the control of women and women's sexuality through the prevailing practices and beliefs. These beliefs and practices are the underlying structures or forces that have its deepest affect on the lives of women (Uma Chakravarty, as cited in Gogoi, 2014) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Women's oppression, as feminism perceives, varies from one society to the other. But, certain characteristics such as control over women's sexuality and mobility are common to all patriarchal society. This control has developed historically and is institutionalized and legitimized by several ideologies, social practices and social institutions (Ray, n.d.).

Several scholars like Mukhopadhyay (1994), Subrahmanyam (1998), Derne (1994) and Chanana (2001) (as cited in Soman, 2009) <sup>[20]</sup>, have argued that patriarchal ideology is concern with female sexual purity and family responsibility, where women are prohibited from having prolonged contact with unrelated men, engaging in travel without a proper male escort, exercising authority in household decisions, or maintaining a residence separate from their families.

According to Kamla Bhasin, women's productive or labour power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility, property and other economic resources, social, cultural and political institutions are the areas of women's lives and societies can be said to be under patriarchal control (Bhasin, 2017) <sup>[2]</sup>. Sports being the part of culture and society are of no exception. Although sociological studies on patriarchal forces influencing women's life in sports have not

gained a particular attention from main stream sociology but few studies especially by Hargreaves (2004) <sup>[11]</sup>, an early pioneer of sports sociology specialised in gender issues, has highlighted the patriarchal character of women's oppression in sports.

The preceding views of different scholars ascertain the existence of patriarchal forces and its affect on women's life in society. This is also the case with Indian women participating in sports. And, sports being social locations or sites are rich in their potential for providing memorable and meaningful personal, social, and cultural experiences (Coakley, 2009) <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, using phenomological approach, the present study seeks to understand the underlying patriarchal forces undermining women's participation in sports in terms of female student athletes participating in Inter College level sports competitions.

### *Patriarchy and Indian Society*

According Indian sociologist S.C. Dube, the Indian social system, with few exceptions, is also characterised as patriarchal as it recognises male dominance and female subordination. He contends that there are three principle areas in which controls are exercised on women: 1) sexuality, which is controlled much more strictly than men's 2) restrictions on women mobility and contacts, 3) belief system, which promotes the idea that women resources need regulation and control. He further maintained that the manner in which these controls are exercised depends to a great extent on social structure, role allocation, value premises, and the rigidity or flexibility of social control (Dube, 1990) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Forces of patriarchy operate in private and public spheres of social life dominating the lives of women. This patriarchal logic is rigorously practised in the Indian context, particularly an ideology of appropriate female behaviour that emphasises

chastity, obedience and modesty (Soman, 2009) <sup>[20]</sup>. Regarding the prevalence of patriarchal forces controlling women's movement, Kamla Bhasin, an Indian feminist writer, says that whenever women have talked about their experiences of even subtle discrimination, bias or non-acceptance, they have actually described the different forms of patriarchal control that they have personally experienced (Bhasin, 2017) <sup>[2, 3]</sup>. Even during and after the reform movements started by Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj, women's education as well as women's access to physical education were given importance. But, only some section of people believed that physical culture should form a part of the curriculum, another section of people still believe that physical activity on a regular basis was unnecessary and detrimental to the kind of role women were expected to play in the family (Chatterjee 2015, as cited in Basu, 2017) <sup>[4,1]</sup>. Therefore, women's position within Indian social and education system can be said to be under patriarchal control and there is no exception in the case of female student athletes.

### Approach and participants

Phenomenological approach was used to gain an understanding of the experiences of female student athletes, as this concentrates on how individuals experience a particular phenomenon or event. To interview participants, purposive sampling method was used. In this sampling primary consideration is researcher's judgement on selection of subjects with regards to who can provide the best information to accomplish the aim of the topic under investigation (Kumar, 2011; Tanveer Ahmad Khan & Wasia Hamid, 2020). The sample included seven female student athletes whose ages ranged from 18 to 22. All participants were kho-kho players and track and field athletes who regularly participate in different inter college level competitions. The subjects of the present study were from rural part of Burdwan district of West Bengal, India. The positions occupied by a researcher as a physical education teacher cum coach of College level sports made it possible to select the experienced participants as subjects for interview as they provide a significant amount of quality information. According to Smith and Osborn (2015) [as cited in Remi Richard et.al. 2019] <sup>[19]</sup> this choice of a small sample of experienced people or subjects ensure a detailed interpretative account of the cases included.

### Data collection process

The data were initially collected in the month of January, 2018 during a district level inter-College games and sports championship in the District of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. But, due to other academic engagements of participants as well as present pandemic situation it was completed much later. Through purposive sampling seven players were selected for interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand female athletes' life in sports and to get them to report to their experiences they encountered during their interaction in sports. The length of the interviews was between 25 and 40 minutes. Prior to the start of the interview, informed consent was obtained from the participants and each was made aware that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. To retain the

nuances of meaning, all the interviews were conducted in the Bengali language. Both individual and group interview were taken as the subjects were found more expressive in group than in individual interview. All participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and assured that the data would solely use for academic purposes. The most common patterns and regularities of expressions given by the athletes were noted for key themes. However, the patriarchal controls varies from culture to culture and region to region, these finding of the study represents only of female athletes participated inter-College competition in Burdwan district of West Bengal and they are not meant to be representative of all female student athletes of West Bengal. It is also acknowledged that the authors' institution during the time of data collection and his presence in that institution had no ethics committee for the clearance of any ethical issues. But, the present study has followed the research ethical guidelines as and when required.

### Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed subsequently combined with the notes taken during the interview. Data analysis of the transcripts was accomplished using the process outlined below and was based on Colaizzi's method of data analysis in qualitative research (Edward & Welch, 2011, Hamid, 2020). (1) Researchers read the transcripts and listened to the recorded interviews numerous times until the meaning of the content was understood; (2) Researchers extracted those major statements associated with the phenomenon under study; (3) Researchers prepared and noted down the meanings of each major statement; (4) Researchers then structured this information into different themes or issues. To authenticate the themes or issues, researchers compared them with the original interviews and improved them by using a process of reflection and discussion; (5) Researchers integrated the results into an extensive picture of the phenomenon under investigation; (6) Researchers requested that the available participants read the report to make sure that it represented their responses (as a measure of the credibility and validity of the research findings).

### Result and Discussions of the study:

Using Colaizzi's techniques of data analysis, the study found that female student athletes encounter patriarchal control/challenges during their participation in sports. The result discussed in the subsequent paragraphs, revealed that fear of shame and stigma, male gaze, traditional gender role expectation, peer pressure, control on outdoor movements and offensive comments were the dominant patriarchal control/challenges encountered by female student athletes in College sports.

### Fear of Shame and Stigma

Every courageous act women perform to assert themselves is condemned as unfeminine. Women are called *beparda* (shameless) as soon as they try to step out of their defined spaces and roles. Norms and practices which define women as inferior to men, which impose controls on women, are present everywhere: in our families, social relation, religions, laws, school, textbooks, media, factories, offices' (Bhasin, 2017)

[2,3]. One of the participants of this study reveals a similar experience. She says- *whenever i go to the ground for practice people in the locality gives a weird look at my dress and asks- where are you going? Many girls of my village believes that if they play sports wearing shorts/half pant than people of the village will think that they are indisciplined and shameless. Such a tag of shamelessness tarnishes our image in the village and this ultimately influences our marriage prospects in future (participant 1)*. Her experience tries to make us understand that the meaning of being sports-women at village level is somewhat stigmatised. It appears that stigmatisation has embodied in sports dresses in the context of village life, and it has negative impact on women's participation in sports. Her fear of becoming impure or shameless for wearing sports dress and its influence on her marriage prospects indicate the influence of patriarchal forces on the decision making power of girls in the village. Similarly, Sania Mirza a trailblazer in Indian Tennis has also once told that there are cultural changes needed for women to get equal opportunities in sports, as she was once asked by her parents, neighbours, aunts and the uncles to stop playing as "no one would marry" her if her complexion turned "dark" due to the rigours of an outdoor sport (News18, 2019).

### Peer pressure

According to Ruth Gavison, (as cited in Mahanta, 2015) [14] the private space is something unobserved and public space is something known or observed, or at least capable of being known or observed, because it occurs in the public place. But, these public and private spaces are controlled by some underlying patriarchal forces. In the case of college sports, capable of being observed, male peer group found acting as a patriarchal force controlling the behaviour of female athletes. As one of the participants recounted that-*When we had gone to play kho-kho tournament outside of our village, and after reaching the venue one of my friend refuse to play, all of a sudden. When I asked her gently why she does not want to play; then she said that she does not want to play wearing shorts/half pant because her boyfriend has also come to witness her game and if i wear shorts he may feel bad about it (participant 4)*. She further expressed that *'her friend refused to wear shorts simply because her boyfriend was in the crowd witnessing her game and he may feel embarrassed seeing her in shorts'* (participant 4). This generally makes a sense that patriarchal control also operates in women's sports. Surprisingly, such patriarchal controls seem to be internalised by women themselves since young age. It appears that women's life in sports is not bereft of such patriarchal control. As Soman has rightly emphasised that the structures of patriarchy are operating in all spheres of social life, dominating the lives of women and this patriarchal logic is rigorously practised in the Indian context (Soman, 2009) [20]. Moreover, the women's engagement in public events like sports seems to be something not desirable in the patriarchal society. The boundary of women's mobility and sexuality framed by the patriarchal ideologues found as being carried forward by the male peer group. Participants' short narration about their experience in sports appears to be sociologically significant as they emphasise the act of boys as the agent of patriarchal power that pushes women into challenging

situations.

### Male gaze

In one of the Indian English newspaper, Suprateek Chatterjee reported about male gaze in India. He reported the view of a freelance photographer of France who spent 15 years in India and took four months going through nearly 10,000 photographs of Indian women on the internet. These pictures were posted by men and came from all over India — villages, small towns, cities and even metros. Freelance photographer of France opined that the sexual aspect lay not in the photographs themselves, but in the act of taking the photograph. This seemed to excite them and almost give them the feeling of knowing the woman sexually. In some pictures, one can see the woman glaring at the camera in resentment and fear, knowing that she's been photographed and feeling utterly helpless about it. This sub-culture doesn't speak about all Indian men, but there definitely seems to be a significant portion of men across the country whose gaze towards women is very unbalanced. (Chatterjee, 2012) [4]. In the field of sports it is of no exception, as our participants make it explicit that how they tackle the male gaze just by wearing the full pants instead of shorts. One of our participants says: *during inter college competition most of us had worn full pant because all the strips/jerseys were tight fitting style type which makes us feel uncomfortable in front of boys, as they look at us in a weird manner. Many female players of different teams also refused to wear tight fitting strips (participant 6)*. Another participant also expressed her encounter with male gaze in her village roads. She says: *whenever i wear sports dress and go to the ground for practice, villagers stare at me and say-in a weird manner- where are you going? (participant 1)*. Her feeling of uneasiness to wear tight fittings strips/jerseys highlights the presence of male gaze in sports. However, such male gaze seems to be of two dimensional rather than one which means that the tight fitting sports dresses and male gaze are also constructed. It appears that through different permutation and combination of sports outfits or dresses, the cultural industries try to make sports and sportswear more attractive for the audience to capture the best glamour from the field and thereby lulling male dominated sports crowd. Such symbolic sexism for commodification seems to be at the center for sports or cultural industries. Student athletes, who are culturally grown up in Indian villages, are unknown to the intension of cultural industries that symbolically use their bodies for commodifying sports dresses/strips/jerseys. This process of symbolically commodifying sports dresses also reproduces dichotomous assumptions of femininity and masculinity in the society. The present study found that the control of women's sexuality by women themselves appears to be weak. Female student athletes' experiences revealed that sports women are afraid of male gaze and they are uncomfortable wearing those tight fitting strips/jerseys. This male gaze, according to Jonathan Schroeder (1998), signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which gazer is superior to the object of gaze". (Henna Saeed, Amir Ilyas, Sana Haroon & Attia Zulfiqar, 2013) [12].

### Traditional gender role expectation

Though sports in many cultures are no longer seen as

exclusively masculine activities, the traditional gender definitions and associated clothing may still keep some girls out of the action (Coakley, 2009) <sup>[5]</sup>. This traditional gender role and expectation was also reflected in this present study as one of our participant expressed that - *right from my childhood I have never worn halfpant as there was no such atmosphere to wear halfpant in the locality and it has now become a habit. If I wear halfpant people in the locality as well as family members will say that I have now grown up that is why I am not giving any heed to them* (participant 3). Her expression emphasises the traditional gender norms and expectation of women in the society. She further reiterates that there is no such environment where they can wear modern outfits, and if she wears so, it is considered as impure or shameless in the locality. Feminist Kamla Basin, in a similar vein, has argued that every courageous act women perform to assert themselves is condemned as unfeminine and called *beparda* (shameless) as soon as they try to step out of their defined spaces and roles. In order to control women sexuality their dress, behaviour and mobility are carefully monitored by familial, social, cultural and religious codes of behaviour. The restriction on leaving the domestic space, a strict separation of private and public, limits on interaction between the sexes, all control women's mobility and freedom (Bhasin, 2017) <sup>[2,3]</sup>.

### Offensive comments

Control over women's sexuality is an important area of women's subordination. Threats are another way in which women's sexuality is dominated through an invocation of shame and honour (Basin, 2017) <sup>[2,3]</sup>. Such verbal threats or unfavourable comments are also common in women sports. One of the participants of the present study says that- *we, athletes, usually wear shorts/half pant from inside and wear full pant from outside to keep the body warm before the game begins. But, when i was taking off my full pant and getting ready for the match, an offensive comment, heard from the crowd mostly comprised of boys, saying that 'see! she is taking off her cloth in front of us'. There were other girls standing next to me said that this offensive language is the reason why they don't want to play* (Participant 1). Hargreaves (2004), sports feminist, also highlighted the powerfully patriarchal character of, and the centrality to, women's oppression in sports (as cited in Richard Giulianotti) <sup>[8, 11]</sup>. Another participant also expressed similar experience- *She said! I always wear full track pant while playing games because of the fear of embarrassing comments come from the crowd- they (boys) usually say in a very weird tone that 'See! She is wearing half pant'* (Participant 2). Such offensive language or comments are becoming barriers for women participating in sports.

### Control on outdoor movements

The Indian sociologist S.C. Dube highlighted the three principle areas in which controls are exercised on women: 1) sexuality, which is controlled much more strictly than men's 2) restrictions on women mobility and contacts, 3) belief system, which promotes the idea that women resources need regulation and control (Dube, 1990) <sup>[6]</sup>. The present study also found patriarchal restrictions on women mobility and contacts in terms of their participation in sports. As one of the

participants of this study shared her experience that: *when I was awarded 1<sup>st</sup> position in throwing events during College Annual Sports, I was asked to represent College in Inter College Athletic Competition at University level. But I refused to take part simply because the venue of competition was in the town which was very far from my village. I refused because by the time I reach my home after attaining the competition it becomes almost dark in the evening and my parents never allow that* (participant 7). This expression of participant who missed the University level competition due to the distance of competition venue from her village and due to the fear of becoming late in the evening to get back home reflects family restriction and unsafe locality for women after sun set. According to Fredrickson and Harrison and Young that parents and other adults tend to monitor the bodies and actions of girls more closely than they do for boys, even during infancy. This pattern of protectiveness often limits the range of physical skill development and sports participation among many girls (as cited in Coakley, 2009) <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Conclusion

This study explored female athletes' experiences of patriarchal control within inter-college level sports. Using Colaizzi's techniques of data analysis, the study found that female student athletes encounter patriarchal control during their participation in sports. The result of the study revealed that fear of shame and stigma, peer pressure, male gaze, traditional gender role expectation, control on outdoor movements and offensive comments were the dominant patriarchal challenges/control encountered by female athletes in College sports. Based on the result of the study, it was concluded that women's life in sports can be said to be under patriarchal control and it is undermining their participation.

Although this paper provides insights about the existence of patriarchal forces undermining women's participation in college level sports, it has limitations. In this study semi-structured interview and purposive sampling technique was used to obtain data which has the potential for bias and reduces the generalizability of results. Future research in the same area may be conducted employing different logic of inquiry and using large sample size.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Notes on Contributor

Awashes Subba is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physical Education and Sports Science, Visva-Bharati University, India. Research area of interest is sociology of sports.

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