"Change needs to start at home": A reflexive thematic analysis of girl athletes' and coaches' experiences of body image in New Delhi, India

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ABSTRACT

Despite the physical, psychological, and social health benefits of sport participation, multiple barriers keep girls and women on the margins of sport in India. Further, body image concerns are implicated globally as a hindrance to sports engagement among adolescents but are rarely acknowledged in India. Due to a lack of research, the unique restrictions to sport participation faced by girls in India are yet to be understood. Drawing on the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image, this study explored the intersection of body image and sports from the perspectives of Indian athletes and coaches. Twelve athletes (girls aged 11–17 years; football $n = 6$, netball $n = 6$) and six coaches (football $n = 3$, netball $n = 3$) from New Delhi, India, participated in semi-structured focus groups. Reflexive thematic analysis was used and we formulated three themes: 1) "To Do What We Love, We Must Struggle"; 2) "What Will People Say?"; and 3) "Hold On To Your Power, Be You". The themes provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences of athletes and coaches on and off the playing field. The findings shed light on several individual and systemic factors, such as harassment, societal norms, feelings of empowerment, and internalising appearance ideals, that impact girls' engagement with sport in New Delhi, India. Methods to improve sports engagement, discrepancies between athlete and coach perspectives, and recommendations for sports organisations to combat body image concerns and improve sports uptake among girls in an Indian setting are discussed.

1. Introduction

Sport participation offers numerous physical, psychological, and social health benefits (Khan et al., 2022; Poitras et al., 2016), but often declines from adolescence to adulthood, particularly among girls (Corder et al., 2019; Guthold et al., 2020). This decline is compounded by issues such as limited investment, inadequate infrastructure, gender stereotypes, and intersecting psychological factors, including body image concerns (BBC, 2020; Das et al., 2023; Satija et al., 2018). Although these issues are considered barriers to girls' and women's sport participation globally (Plaza & Boiché, 2017; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), most studies have been conducted in Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) countries. This limits our understanding of girls' and women's unique experiences in sport in other cultural contexts, particularly where sport participation is especially low

(Guthold et al., 2020) and where other sociocultural factors may be present (Gomathi & Veeramani, 2023).

1.1. Barriers to sport participation for girls and women in India

India is the second largest country in the world, with a population of more than 1.2 billion, encompassing approximately one-sixth of the world's population (World Bank, 2022). Further, India has the largest population of adolescents in the world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2015). Yet, 73.9% of Indian adolescents are insufficiently active, and this number is higher among girls (76.3%; Guthold et al., 2020), reflecting global trends (Guthold et al., 2020). In India, girls' and women's sport participation has been limited by societal norms, lack of infrastructure, and minimal support from families and institutions (Nair & Eapen, 2021). In recent

years, the visibility of female athletes, such as P. V. Sindhu (winner of the 2019 World Badminton Championships), Vinesh Phogat (Olympic Wrestler), and Mary Kom (Olympic boxer), has increased, inspiring girls to take up sports (Kumari, 2022). These athletes also act as role models to help keep girls and women in sport. Further, government initiatives and policies aimed at promoting sports, such as the *Khelo India* programme[1] (Singh & Bali, 2020), have also contributed to increased participation rates. Nonetheless, challenges such as unequal opportunities and persistent gender biases in the sports domain remain (Basu, 2017).

Emerging evidence suggests that numerous factors related to structural, societal, and cultural characteristics may impact sport participation among athletes from global majority countries, including a lack of parental support, safe physical environments, and/or opportunities to play (Harkness, 2012; Tinoco et al., 2023). Specifically, sociocultural norms may play a key role in Indian girls' uptake of sport (Fernandes et al., 2023; Gomathi & Veeramani, 2023), often creating barriers that limit their involvement (Harkness, 2012; Hayat et al., 2020; Ranjha et al., 2016). Traditional gender roles emphasise domestic responsibilities and modesty, discouraging physical activities and public visibility for girls. Many families prioritise education over sports, viewing athletic pursuits as inappropriate or unnecessary for their future roles as wives and mothers (Hayat et al., 2020). Additionally, concerns about safety, particularly while commuting, further restrict opportunities for girls (Das et al., 2018). Social stigma around wearing sports attire and participating in competitive environments also contributes to lower participation rates (Ranjha et al., 2016). For example, a study conducted with 20 female students in the rural areas of Dera Ghazi Khan in Pakistan found that both the social and physical environment prevented girls from taking part in sport activities (Hayat et al., 2020). Specifically, parents did not allow their daughters to take part in sport, and there were no sports facilities for women in rural areas. A similar study by Ranjha et al. (2016) found that Pakistani women who participated in sports were often subjected to social stigma, with others judging them as "too liberal", "bad", and as going "against cultural values".

Research from the Indian diaspora also sheds light on the cultural and contextual impact on sports participation. For example, one study among second-generation Indian women living in the United Kingdom (UK; Bhatnagar et al., 2021) found that barriers and facilitators to physical activity were similar to those reported by White British women (i.e., concerns around appearance, safety, and access to facilities). Contrastingly, another study among first-generation immigrant Indian women living in Australia, suggested that gender and cultural expectations like getting married, becoming a mother, and looking after your family, in addition to experiences of direct and indirect (institutional) racism hindered their participation (Sawrikar & Muir, 2010). These studies highlight the impact of the sociocultural context on sport participation and the cultural burdens Indian women bear. As such, significantly different factors may impact girls' and women's sport participation in India, compared to the Indian diaspora.

Although research on the psychological determinants of sport participation, such as body image, is expanding (e.g., Matheson et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023; Vani et al., 2021), few studies have examined how body image interacts with sports engagement in the Indian context (Kaim, 2015). This is of concern as several studies suggest comparable rates of body image concerns with WEIRD countries (e.g., Diengdoh & Ali, 2022; Pike & Dunne, 2015). To this end, a qualitative study from New Delhi, India, exploring the barriers and facilitators of physical activity among adolescents, found that psychosocial factors

were prominent deterrents to girls' engagement in physical activity (Satija et al., 2018). Girls shared concerns around getting tanned (when playing outside) and sweaty, as well as body weight and height as potential barriers to physical activity. Further, girls found it difficult to engage in sport in skirts (a part of their usual school uniform) and spoke of an environment in schools which restricted girls, while supporting boys (Satija et al., 2018). Although this study did not explicitly examine body image, the findings highlight its salience in sport participation (e. g., concerns around uniforms and appearance). Notably, body image concerns of girl athletes were outside the scope of this study. Thus, more research looking at the intersection of body image and sport among athletes in India and the sociocultural influences at play, is needed to bridge this research gap.

1.2. Body image and sport participation

Body image—the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves towards their body, its appearance, and how it functions (Cash & Smolak, 2011)—is a key indicator of psychological well-being among adolescents and adults (Rodgers et al., 2023). The Indian landscape reflects global trends, whereby girls and women in India are at a higher risk of developing poor body image compared to boys and men (Delfabbro et al., 2011; Deshmukh & Kulkarni, 2017). Among Indian adolescents, the desire to be thinner (Singh et al., 2016) and taller (Johnson et al., 2015) exists in parallel with specific concerns, including those around body hair (Phadke, 2017, pp. 247–261) and skin colour dissatisfaction (Peltzer et al., 2016). Such concerns have been cited as critical barriers to sport participation among girls and women (Satija et al., 2018; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Vani et al., 2021).

For girls and women occupying sports spaces, the environment and influential members within it (e.g., coaches) can impact how female athletes feel about their bodies when playing sports. For example, sports environments that promote unrealistic appearance ideals, restrictive regulations around uniforms, and gendered and sexualised portrayals of female athletes can contribute to negative body image among athletes (Koulanova et al., 2021; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Vani et al., 2021). The resulting body image concerns, in turn, prevent girls from enjoying their sports experiences and can contribute to adverse outcomes, such as appearance anxiety, disordered eating, compulsive exercise, and even lead to sport dropout (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Vani et al., 2021). On the other hand, supportive sports environments and coaches can foster positive body image (Deogracias-Schleich et al., 2022; Varnes et al., 2013) when they focus on athlete well-being and body functionality over appearance (i.e., what our bodies can do and experience, rather than what they look like; Alleva & Tylka, 2021).

Coaches play a key role in curating girls' experiences, performance, and well-being in sport. Despite this, little research on athlete body image has been conducted from the perspective of coaches (Koulanova et al., 2021; Sabiston et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2023). Coaches have reported low self-efficacy in identifying and addressing their athletes' body image concerns, due to lack of knowledge around body image and fears of making the concerns worse (Schneider et al., 2023). Further, research from WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries, predominantly conducted among athlete samples, shows that coaches can intentionally or inadvertently put pressure on athletes to meet appearance ideals (Coppola et al., 2014; Matheson et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023; Tinoco et al., 2023; Vani et al., 2021). Coaches may encourage athletes to eat or exercise in a particular way (Beckner & Record, 2016; Coppola et al., 2014) or compare athletes' bodies (Lucibello et al., 2021). In more extreme cases, this can manifest through coaches bullying and shaming athletes' appearance, as well as engaging in other harmful comments and behaviours (Vani et al., 2021).

Despite their importance in fostering positive body image among their athletes, the role of coaches on girls' body image in sport settings in India is unexplored. Given the cultural values of obedience and agreeableness (Nadeem & Haroon, 2019), and the stronghold of patriarchal

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[1] The Khelo India Scheme is a government initiative to promote sports engagement at the grassroot level by increasing infrastructure and funding for young athletes with the goal of eventually training them to become international level athletes.

norms that keep girls and women at the bottom of the social order, it can be expected that coaches would play a powerful role in the sports and body image experiences of female athletes in India. To this end, the current study was conducted with girls and coaches to gain a more holistic understanding of body image and sport among girl athletes in New Delhi, India.

1.3. Sociocultural Theory of Body Image

The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image (Thompson et al., 1999) posits that body image concerns, and body dissatisfaction are a composite response to the discourse around bodies that one receives from media, peers, and the family. In doing so, it also reflects the role of larger social structures, such as patriarchy and capitalism, in reinforcing appearance ideals. Although this theory was originally conceptualised in a Western context, studies from India suggest a similar pattern among Indian girls and women (Verma & Ray, 2023). Additionally, globalisation and the ease of access to international content through social media have increased the impact of Western appearance ideals (Verma & Ray, 2023). This is also reflected in Indian media, particularly Bollywood, where female characters tend to be depicted in more stereotypical and sexualised roles, compared to Hollywood movies (Ghaznavi et al., 2017). In the context of sports, a wide range of actors dictate how bodies should look on the playing field, including peers, the media, and coaches (Daniels, 2009; Schneider et al., 2023). These actors create an ecosystem that can either contribute to, or dismantle, the existing discourse around bodies in sport, thereby harming or protecting the athletes involved. Considering the heightened role of the community in collectivistic cultures such as India, it is necessary to utilise a culturally driven perspective to understand girls' and coaches' experiences in the present study (Kim, 2009).

1.4. The current study

To the authors' knowledge, no studies have explored the intersection of body image and sport in New Delhi, India. Drawing on the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image, this study aims to explore the experiences of Indian athletes and coaches in relation to body image in sports contexts. To this end, we conducted a secondary analysis of three focus groups from New Delhi, India using reflexive thematic analysis. The data was collected as part of a larger research project that aims to create safer and more inclusive sports environments that foster positive body image among girls in sport (Matheson, Schneider, Tinoco, Gentili, et al., 2023; Matheson, Schneider, Tinoco, Silva-Breen, et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023, 2024).

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This research received ethical approval from the University of the West of England, Bristol (ref no. HAS.21.03.120) and the University of Minnesota (ref no. STUDY00012457) before commencement. Participants were recruited via a community partner, Laureus Sport for Good, that works with grassroot sports organisations in New Delhi, India. Sports organisations were selected based on their associations with the community partner and specialised in football and netball. Three semi-structured focus groups were conducted with girls and coaches from two New Delhi based organisations (football [girls $n = 6$, aged 11–14 years; coaches $n = 3$]; netball [girls $n = 6$, aged 15–17 years; coaches $n = 3$]). The focus groups lasted approximately 120 min and were held separately for coaches ($n = 6$; five women and one man), and girls aged 11–14 years ($n = 6$) and 15–17 years ($n = 6$). Aligning with the wider scope of this project (Matheson, Schneider, Tinoco, Gentili, et al., 2023; Matheson, Schneider, Tinoco, Silva-Breen, et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023, 2024), focus groups were chosen for their ability to generate rich,

diverse insights through interactive group dynamics and synergistic discussions. Additionally, this method allowed for the efficient collection of varied perspectives in a single session, providing a broader understanding of the topic in a cost- and time-efficient manner. This data collection methodology also aligns with the ontological and epistemological approaches utilised here, which encourages the collective sharing and co-constructing of experiences (Bloor et al., 2000).

2.2. Procedures

Following parent and participant consent, girls and coaches were provided a preparatory handbook in Hindi, one week before the focus groups were held. This included an overview of the research project, key definitions (e.g., body image), and brief activities to facilitate discussions (e.g., a visualisation and journaling activity and a drawing activity where girls were asked to listen to an audio and draw an image reflecting their experiences playing sport). Preparatory materials were discussed during the focus groups but not monitored by the research team, as they were designed to be a conversation starter.

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the social distancing requirements in India at the time, as well as the geographical location of the researchers, focus groups were conducted online. Girls and coaches dialled in from their private devices and were familiar with the video conferencing software used. In line with safeguarding policies, an adult representative from the sports organisation attended the focus groups held with girls (e.g., administrative staff member, assistant coach). Focus groups were facilitated by the first and fourth authors. Having two facilitators allowed for more efficient management of any potential challenges that could occur during the focus groups (e.g., managing breakout rooms, reconnecting with participants if they faced connectivity issues, taking notes, etc.), with minimal disruption.

To begin, facilitators introduced themselves and the aims of the focus group, followed by a few ground rules to promote a safe, judgement-free, confidential, and open environment. Participants were encouraged to jump into the conversation as desired, but were asked to be respectful of their peers, keep discussions confidential, and not interrupt each other. Furthermore, the facilitators reminded participants that there were no right or wrong answers, that this was a safe space, and that all their experiences were valid. During the focus groups, girls described both positive and negative body image experiences in sport, and brainstormed activities that would help girls feel more body confident when playing sport. Similarly, coaches shared their perspectives on girls' body image concerns and how these impact girls' sport participation, as well as exploring any assistance required to effectively address body image concerns among their athletes (see Tables S1 and S2, Supplementary Materials). The facilitators allowed girls and coaches to lead the conversation and deviate from the suggested structure of the focus groups but intervened to redirect the conversation if it went off topic or when encouraging participants to contribute.

After the focus groups, girls and coaches were provided a debrief form, which outlined the research aims and signposted accessible well-being resources. Girls and coaches received an electronic gift card in their local currency, equivalent to approximately 50 Great British Pounds (£) for participating in this study. The full procedure is described in detail elsewhere (Matheson et al., 2023; Schneider et al., 2023).

2.3. Data analysis

Focus groups were conducted in Hindi and were audio recorded, translated, and transcribed by the first and fourth author; the first author also reviewed the recordings and transcriptions for accuracy in translations. Transcripts were analysed by the first author using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2024). RTA was considered appropriate given the focus on exploring participant experiences and perceptions, and alignment with our study aims. RTA's exploratory nature was also ideal for the limited body image and sport research in

this geographical context. Additionally, the rich data from focus groups and the researcher's consistent engagement demanded a level of reflexivity uncommon in other analyses. The analytical process of RTA therefore captured the on-the-ground realities of athletes and coaches. Codes and themes were formulated inductively at a semantic level; however, considerations to deeper latent content were given where necessary. Further, the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image was used to guide final theme generation, as well as the write up of the manuscript. In line with previous research using RTA, a sample of 12 girls and six coaches was deemed suitable to carry out the analysis (Chopra et al., 2022; Tinoco et al., 2023). All content associated with girls' and coaches' sports experiences and/or body image was selected as data.

Following the steps of RTA as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2024), the first author (a) familiarised herself with the data, (b) generated initial codes, and (c) collated codes and created initial themes. These themes were then (d) reviewed in collaboration with the larger team over several iterations. To allow for a fresh perspective and deeper engagement with the data, following step (d), the first author conducted a deep re-reading of the transcripts and reassessed any discrepancies with the larger team. After revising the themes, (e) the scope of the themes was defined and (f) the findings were written up, following recent reporting guidelines for RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Initial themes were generated from codes that clustered together meaningfully. Following this, themes were refined using a range of processes including revisiting code clusters, conducting reflective team meetings to develop a coherent narrative, and then using the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image to organise participant data in an accessible and meaningful way.

Although the analysis followed the steps outlined above, there was considerable oscillation between steps (c), (d), and (e). Specifically, because the transcripts were translated from Hindi to English for coding, the lead author revisited the original audio recordings following the first round of theme generation. This helped ensure that the themes generated from the translated materials accurately reflected the authors' reading of the focus groups in their original form. The fourth author was instrumental in the coding process as a critical friend; as a native Hindi speaker from New Delhi, her initial data transcription allowed her to have a profound connection to and immersion in the data. She reviewed codes and collaboratively reflected on the shared meaning derived across participant groups. Moreover, before the final analysis, updated RTA guidelines were reviewed following peer feedback from the journal and conference presentations. This led to a renaming of the themes, refining theme content, and adding context to the findings. Finally, during the analysis, frequent reflective discussions and reviews were held with the co-authors to refine themes and codes. In cases of disagreement, the first author revisited the recordings and transcripts to ensure themes accurately reflected the data and engaged in further discussion to resolve discrepancies. For example, in the first iteration of theme generation, codes around lacking private spaces to play and the infrastructural needs for safe sports environments contributed to a singular subtheme. However, after feedback from the team about how these can be interpreted differently —with one reflecting the present environment and the other suggesting recommendations for the future —the primary author revisited the raw data and made the final decision to separate these out into different themes. This was followed across the theme formulation and development process. Codes and themes were formulated inductively at a semantic level; however, considerations to deeper latent content were given where necessary. The Sociocultural Theory of Body Image was used to guide final theme generation as well as the write up.

2.3.1. Reflexivity statement

The first author, an early career researcher from New Delhi, India, conducted and analysed the focus groups. She has experience in mixed-methods research, including focus groups and interviews on intimate partner violence in Haryana and body image and gender stereotypes in Rajasthan. Her alliance with the context allowed her to explore complex, culturally relevant experiences and how these intertwined with the topics being discussed. As a native, she was able to pick up on unspoken power dynamics within the family and community (e.g., acceptable conversation topics for fathers vs. mothers, adolescent agency in families, the differential treatment of girls and boys, etc.). This familiarity extended to the structural constraints that hinder women's life engagement in India, such as the lack of safe public transport, or the need for women's toilets.

In the context of the focus groups, this familiarity opened avenues for deeper and more sensitive discussions, as participants did not have to explain their social context to the facilitator. Participants were likely to have felt at ease given the shared background and being able to converse in the local language (Hindi). At the point of analysis, this helped navigate where semantic analysis was adequate, where a more latent analysis was warranted, and how the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image tied the narrative together. This was particularly evident with specific "Hinglish" words, which often have different meanings from their English counterparts (for instance, "healthy" used in specific contexts is a socially acceptable way of describing someone as "fat"). Similarly, she was able to decipher contextual terms of reference and their nuanced differences; for instance, the use of the word "Didi" (meaning sister) to refer to any slightly older woman with respect, or the use of the word "Ma" (meaning mother) as a term of respect and endearment for a much older woman. Finally, to address researcher-participant power dynamics, the focus groups were framed as "co-creation workshops", emphasising participants' expertise as athletes and coaches, alongside the researchers' scientific knowledge.

The fourth author was involved in co-facilitating the focus groups and transcription of the data. She is also an Indian national and has a PhD in health and nutritional sciences. The first and fourth authors both identify as women and are fluent in Hindi. The second and last authors are senior researchers in body image and sport and the third author is an early career researcher with a background in body image and disordered eating in clinical settings. The second, third, and last authors were involved in the conceptualisation of the focus groups, as well as the larger project that this study feeds into. They offered expert insights from theoretical and practical standpoints on all aspects of the manuscript.

2.3.2. Philosophical assumptions

This study adopts a relativist ontology, viewing reality as a subjective construct (Moon & Blackman, 2014), and a social constructivist epistemology, where knowledge is shaped through social interaction and is dynamic (Adams, 2006; Kim, 2001). This approach facilitates the exploration of lived experiences in Indian sports, accounting for both cognitive aspects of body image and the Sociocultural Theory of Body Image, which emphasises social influences on body ideals. It also highlights shared cultural contexts between participants and researchers, uncovering layers of oppression (e.g., misogyny, classism) and internalised mechanisms which may perpetuate them. By understanding these subjective realities, resources can be developed to better serve female athletes in underserved nations like India. Methodologically, these perspectives position participants as experts, and justify the use of focus groups to access culturally specific experiences. They also align with RTA's emphasis on contextually generated knowledge and researcher positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

3. Results and discussion

Rich explorations of the issues girl athletes face in New Delhi, India occurred across focus groups and individual, situational, and systemic challenges experienced by them were identified. There was overlap between coaches' and girls' perspectives; as such, data from all three focus groups were combined for analysis and are reported together. The researchers formulated three themes: 1) "To Do What We Love, We Must Struggle"; 2) "What Will People Say?"; and 3) "Hold On To Your Power,

Be You". Throughout the results, the participants are referred to by codes based on the focus group they attended. Participants from the younger girls' focus group (11–14 years) are referred to as 'YG' followed by a number (e.g., YG1), while participants from the older girls' focus group (15–17 years) are referred to as 'OG' followed by a number (e.g., OG1). Participants from the coaches' focus group are referred to as 'CO' followed by a number, alongside their self-reported gender (e.g., CO1, female coach). Additional context and interpretation is provided within or alongside the quotes where necessary.

3.1. *"To Do What We Love, We Must Struggle"*

The pervasive impact of the participants' social context pushing against their desires was palpable across all focus groups; athletes and coaches fought for space and equality through and for their game. Participants were acutely aware of the various hurdles girls had to overcome to play sport. These challenges began at the individual level, through changes in girls' bodies because of puberty and concerns around uniforms, and consistently arose at every subsequent stage.

An overall lack of understanding and misinformation about puberty and menstruation seemed to plague the athletes, making coaches fill in as experts to support girls in their athletic journeys. Girls' experiences centred around discomfort engaging in sport during menstruation and feeling preoccupied with it: "When I get my period, I don't feel like playing at all […] my entire concern is on my period" (OG2). Unfortunately, girls' discomfort during menstruation was exacerbated by the lack of facilities to support them during their periods on the playing field. As recounted by a facilitator following a conversation in a breakout room: "When they are playing, there are no washrooms available, they go to the nearby police station and use their washroom".

Relatedly, coaches spoke about how reluctant girls were in speaking about pubertal concerns and their attempts at normalising this for their athletes: "The most important point is that they should be taught about puberty, the girls already have misconceptions that if they are on their periods they can't play or run" (CO1, female coach). The role of coaches as guides during this developmental period was essential and shed light on the various roles they play in an athlete's life. Here, coaches were helping girls overcome the stigma that they felt around their menstruating bodies and how this impacted their athletic performance. They were also able to qualify this impact.

> We take sessions on menstrual hygiene and body image quite often here. Sometimes girls don't feel very confident regarding their periods. So, creating such an atmosphere that whenever they come to the ground, if they are menstruating, they can share it very comfortably. (CO3, female coach)

Despite the coaches' active support during this challenging time, the girls still faced stronger forces, particularly social hurdles, just to be present on the field. As one coach articulated: "During the times when a girl gets her period […] they are restricted [by their parents] a lot, it's a strict no for playing, that's not a question" (CO1, female coach). Such misinformation around menstruation and puberty was considered a catalyst to reduced sports engagement, and coaches found that busting myths around periods with girls and parents could aid girls' sports engagement. Girls did not comment on any communication around puberty or menstruation from their parents.

When girls managed to fight against the stigma and discouragement stemming from puberty and menstruation, they were met with new hurdles. The rampant objectification and harassment of girls and women in New Delhi manifested in their relationship with their sportswear. Specifically, girls mentioned their struggles wearing shorts as a part of their uniform. However, they also reflected on the joys of finding a unique comfort in wearing them, citing their peers and coaches functioning as a catalyst for this change. These discussions centred around bodily autonomy that the participants were afforded through their sport participation. These mixed feelings were reflected in the moralistic quandary that girls faced when making decisions about their sportswear. Here, a young athlete talks about how even though she was coaxed into it she was surprised to find that she preferred wearing shorts.

> Then my team members gave me some advice that you should wear shorts because you will feel more comfortable. So, I started wearing shorts and then started to feel very good about it. That I can look good wearing this, it's not a bad thing. (YG4)

Considering the sexual harassment and surveillance women experience in public spaces in India, pressures to wear revealing clothing could have a profound impact on sports engagement (Anand & Nanda, 2022; Verma & Ray, 2023). Despite providing some positive feelings, uniforms seemed to attract attention from unwanted spectators in public spaces and discontentment from family members. This contentious relationship with clothing has also been observed in another qualitative exploration of young women's body image in India (Verma & Ray, 2023), which found that women consciously altered their clothing choices based on their body types and the presence of men, even for traditional Indian wear. In the case of clothing, becoming more "modern" may be considered desirable or reflecting a higher social status; however, there is a point at which this plateaus (Verma & Ray, 2023). Conversations around wearing shorts picked at this deeper tension between tradition and modernity.

Similarly, participants in this study were conscious of the male gaze on athletes and their performance. Girls were also cognisant that clothes were not the problem: "We always say that bad things *[referring to sexual assault]* happened to this girl because she was wearing shorts, but these things happen to someone wearing full-length clothes as well" (OG1). The sexualisation of women's sports attire and the subsequent body image and objectification concerns are now well-understood in the literature (Daniels, 2009; Sherry et al., 2016; Steinfeldt et al., 2013). Revealing uniforms are understood to actively contribute to lower body esteem, increased self-consciousness, and increased appearance comparisons and discomfort (Howard, 2023; Steinfeldt et al., 2013).

For girls, issues related to unwanted attention and harassment stemmed from people external to the sports setting: "It isn't about the boys [we play with] but these people who drink alcohol and come over and then record [videos of] us, they shouldn't be there. They can do anything with these videos" (OG1). Conversely, coaches believed that girls were uncomfortable mixing with boys within sport settings; they suggested that girls felt objectified by, and/or unsafe because of, their male peers:

> Some of the girls refused [to play] because they were worried about how the boys would treat them and said the boys might pinch them *[touch them without consent]* or do something else […] girls are scared [to play with boys] so to remove that fear and develop confidence in them we play fun games with them. (CO2, male coach)

The fear expressed by the girls, as noted by their coaches, highlights the daily harassment faced by women in India when occupying public spaces (Anand & Nanda, 2022), specifically revealing the impact of objectification on athletes. Objectification, where individuals are treated as objects (Calogero, 2012), is linked to negative body image, eating disorders, and psychological issues including depression and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It also leads to self-objectification, where individuals internalise this evaluative gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In this case, objectification diminished athletes' ability to fully engage in their sport, as they became self-conscious about how they were perceived by men. One coach noted the girls "see themselves through others' eyes" (CO1, female coach), illustrating the internalised gaze that limits their participation, a common experience for female athletes worldwide (Matheson et al., 2023).

3.2. *"What Will People Say?"*

Within collectivistic cultures, the preferences of the group are often

put above the preferences of the individual (Hofstede, 2001). Athletes and coaches spoke of the lack of freedom afforded to the participants, and the unwelcome commentary that was experienced or anticipated from a range of sources. Often, this was perpetuated by parents and extended family and community members (e.g., neighbours). Participants spoke about how gender and age impacted their experience, and how this affected girl and women athletes. Participants elaborated on how this societal dialogue may become internalised for girls and women, resulting in further disconnect from sports, the self, and the body. While the culture promoted policing and control of girls, participants also reflected on its potential power to make a difference in girls' sports engagement.

Gender was a deciding factor for sports engagement; girls were questioned by both family and community members about their participation, their clothes, and the timings at which they left their homes to play. The policing of women was particularly evident in the following comment: "Girls are always portrayed as the ones in the wrong" (OG2). This athlete touched on the burden of proving her presence and the vilification of women in society regardless of their actions. Coaches also reflected on the comparative ease with which boys were able to participate; conversely, girls were restricted to staying home and supporting their parents with housework:

> Puberty changes their [parents'] behaviour towards girls, and the family or community starts trying to control girls, like they won't be allowed out after 7pm […] but it is the opposite for boys. Boys can come and go as they please. There is no equality at home. (CO4, female coach)

> [Parents believe] that their daughter has to be at home and do household work. They are reluctant to send their boys to us but if they have a girl, she is told she must stay home. (CO2, male coach)

In India, the needs of girls and women often come second to those of other male family members; they may also come second to the family unit itself (Kim, 2009). The collectivistic nature of Indian society becomes especially prominent in this theme, as does its ability to propagate vicious cycles of sacrifice and entrapment for women (Kim, 2009). As the burden of household responsibilities rests on female family members, time away from daily commitments (like education) is expected to be spent on domestic labour, even for adolescents (Sharma et al., 2007). Particularly for this age group, where the prospect of marriage becomes more salient, parents are often worried about their daughters' safety, as well as changes to their appearance, including injuries or getting tanned while playing outside (Kukreja, 2021). Furthermore, some parents fear that their daughters will be considered morally corrupt due to the clothing that is required for sport or because of occupying traditionally male dominated spaces (i.e., sports clubs). As seen in another qualitative exploration of sexual harassment in India, young men make judgements about a woman's character based on her appearance and actions, and feel it is warranted to sexually harass women they judge to be "bad girls" (Zietz & Das, 2018). Findings from Zietz and Das's study reiterate that a woman's "worth" may be dictated by the way she carries herself in public spaces. In turn, this leaves little to no room for girls and women to explore spaces that may be considered "for boys", keeping them at the margins of sport in India.

The following exchange, as girls recounted discussions from a breakout room, is further telling of the policing of girls in their attempts to engage with life and sport. It provides insight into the intertwined relationship between body image, harassment, and protective discrimination of women in India, and how intrinsic it becomes. Here, the girls were trying to justify their parents' perspectives and highlighted the different factors that kept women at the margins of sport in India.

> OG2: […] as girls get older, parents think that they might not feel comfortable in shorts anymore, or as girls have gotten older their thighs have become heavier. So, they don't allow them to wear shorts. […] We can tell girls and their parents that we can play in longer bottoms, too […].

> OG3: One more thing I want to add. [OG2] had also mentioned that parents say, "don't go there, boys are there".

> OG2: Yes! Many parents say, "don't go outside".

In addition to the parental influence, the extended community also played a significant role in girls' sports experience. Coaches mentioned the fear around "*Log Kya Kehenge*? [What will people say?]" from parents about their daughters. Similarly, girls shared instances where people in their neighbourhood made comments about their clothes and bodies when they were commuting to or from practice, especially at unconventional hours.

> So, there are people in my neighbourhood who come out for a morning walk, they look at me and ask me "Where are you going in these kinds of clothes?" […] They try to make this about me, they wonder "What does this girl think? She is leaving the house in such small clothes at this hour, don't know what she must be up to? She's so fat she must not be able to play either." (YG6)

Although safety concerns have been cited as deterrents in other contexts (Matheson et al., 2023; Tinoco et al., 2023), in this case, there was a larger culture of protective discrimination and a resultant purge of girls and women from public spaces in India. Notably, this restriction was driven by a "coming of age", whereby coaches and girls indicated that while parents may be comfortable with younger girls playing sport, they had different rules for older girls: "People talk about timings. "Why has she gone out at night? She can't go out; she is getting mature now, she should do household work."" (OG2). This perception was also shared by coaches:

> So, a 7, 8, or 9-year-old girl's parents don't put any restrictions on her […] but as soon as they start to mature and enter adolescence, parents start restricting them. "Don't go out. You are having your period" […] parents feel that something might happen to her if she goes out. (CO5, female coach)

> Evidence suggests that a woman is harassed every 51 minutes in India (Bhattacharyya, 2013). Thus, restrictions on girls' and women's mobility may be a response to the rampant violence that exists.

The impact of the community in dictating behaviour also meant that girls' engagement with sport would benefit greatly if parents and community members were more involved. As one coach noted: "We are making the children learn […] but parents don't get a chance [to learn], and nobody tells parents about these things" (CO5, female coach). She highlighted the need for change to come from all areas of an athlete's life. All focus groups suggested that bringing parents into sport settings regularly would help them feel more comfortable allowing their daughters to play: "[…] our parents should also be called [so] they get to know what their daughter is doing […] that way parents get convinced and will be more open to sending their daughters [to play]" (OG2). Girls and coaches shared that change needed to come from the social context (i.e., "change needs to start at home" [CO3, female coach]).

Apart from pressures from family members and the community, participants also spoke about the wider pressures within sports spaces specifically. These included messages of what athletes "should look like" from peers and coaches, as well as the internalisation of such appearance and performance standards. For example, coaches mentioned girls teasing each other on the playing field and girls feeling conscious about their appearance. As one coach said: "So, girls who are healthy *['healthy' is a way of saying 'fat' in Hinglish]*, they think they are fat, and other participants tease them "You can't run. You are fat. You can't play this game."" (CO3, female coach). Participants also struggled with narrow perceptions of what athletes should look like and suggested that bigger-bodied people cannot be involved in sport. As one participant stated: "I

was very healthy […] I used to think I am so fat, how will I play? […] If I run, will everyone laugh?" (YG2). Given the sexualisation of women in sport and the drive for thinness that is propagated through mainstream media (Daniels, 2009; Sherry et al., 2016), it is unsurprising that participants felt this way.

The athletic ideal was encountered in a range of sources and was difficult for the girls to shake. The expectation that athletes exist only in certain body shapes and this body shape was the only one that deserved to occupy sports spaces, was observed. Notably, although girls had concerns about looking fat, they never mentioned issues with muscularity. In fact, some spoke about getting stronger as a positive aspect of sport participation: "I became strong after I started playing football. I got the confidence to be on the field, I was able to train." (YG1). This differed from the perspectives of coaches, who reflected on girls being conscious of their bodies and of looking 'masculine': "Girls that have big muscles, that look just like men […] sometimes they might wonder, "How will [people] look at me?". But when they have love for their game, they need to get over these thoughts." (CO1, female coach).

From the coaches' perspectives, these struggles were a part of the sports experience. Whether it was changing one's body *for* the sport or *because of* it, coaches seemed to consider this an expected outcome that athletes "just have to deal with". While sport can be protective for body image (Sabiston et al., 2019), elements of sports environments can exacerbate concerns (Vani et al., 2021). Here, although coaches did not explicitly mention the need for their athletes to look a certain way, they discussed educating athletes on "good" and "bad" foods, and even spoke about how women become fat after marriage and "lost control" of their bodies. This pointed to a larger issue around body size perceptions and their associations with athlete performance among the coaches, which may fuel the same among athletes.

3.3. "Hold on to Your Power, Be You"

Athletes in this study represent a small subset of a population that is held exclusively at the margins of this male-dominated community in India. However, athletes that managed to persevere regardless of the hurdles they faced, found many benefits of their sports engagement. The active struggle that embodied their presence in sports settings made the athletes aware of the subversive nature of their engagement. Considering the hardships to enter the sports space, and the pressures within and outside this space, the participants' presence was a form of resistance. An undercurrent of enjoyment and an inkling of freedom from oppression also accompanied girls' engagement with sport. Participants reflected on using sports as a space to fight patriarchal gender norms: "If boys are going out, girls should also go out. There should be no restrictions. Nowadays, girls are earning a name in sports, this is encouraging many girls [to play]." (OG3). The slowly changing landscape of the subcontinent seemed pertinent to improve engagement and provided evidence that sport was a place for women. Younger girls seemed to feel more comfortable asserting their personhood than the older girls' group, with some sharing vivid imagery of resisting against boys that dominated the playing field: "Many boys don't let girls play with them […] my drawing is based on this; this image is of a girl shooting a goal and the boys are left speechless" (YG5).

Coaches shared their own experiences as athletes, including their ability to push back against community standards through sport. The resistance was seen in fighting internalised misogyny and objectification from their community:

When you are a player, you have to wear shorts […] I liked it very much. But in our family girls don't go out wearing shorts, so other people commented "oh my god, your daughter is wearing shorts and going out" […] but slowly through sports, my thinking has changed, and now I know that girls can wear shorts and go out, without any fear or worries about anyone seeing them or saying something, they can be confident. (CO3, female coach)

The sports environment allowed participants to explore a part of themselves that was unavailable to them in other spaces—one with more bodily autonomy and confidence. There was anger around the status quo and sports was considered a place where girls could break free from the stereotypes, expectations, and standards they were held to in other settings. This also stemmed from the like-minded community that accompanied it, highlighting the need for single-gender spaces in sport. While coaches spoke about the team coming together, girls spoke about making new friends. During the focus groups, girls jumped in and responded to each other and were excited about being with close friends, reiterating this comradery. Participants also reported a change in their outlooks and personalities. As one participant said: "Earlier, I felt left out because I didn't have any friends, I was lazy, I felt that girls can't do anything. [After starting football] I was able to train and make many friends. I became happier." (YG4). There was a shift in the way she viewed girls and women after seeing their capabilities in a sports setting, showcasing the need for young girls to see women as individuals with agency over their own futures.

The need for female-only spaces was most apparent during an activity in the younger girls' focus group, where a participant brought a sketch of her starting a girls-only football team:

In this image there is me and a boy. And I am asking the boy, will you let me play football? The boy responds, "you are a girl, how will you play". So, I made a girls' team […] and I was able to beat the boys. (YG3).

The joy of finding a girls-only space was shared by many; athletes felt more at ease and discussed actively dismissing boys from trying to encroach on their space. One participant shared a story about getting into an altercation with her male teammate who shouted at her publicly for a missed pass:

Boys get aggressive while playing, while running their bodies heat up and so do their minds. Once, while playing a match with the boys in the last five minutes, a boy passed the ball to me. It was a very good pass, but I couldn't score, so he got hot-headed, and shouted at me in front of everyone […] during that time I felt disappointed and uncomfortable. (YG1)

While she felt sad about missing a shot, it was evident that such behaviour was common and almost justified for boys in sport. Her interaction was telling of a larger atmosphere of belittling one's own emotions and making space for boys and men. Although athletes claimed to feel comfortable playing with boys, their interactions with boys and men on the playing field and outside it suggested an atmosphere ridden with strife to claim their own space. In contrast, a female-only community was empowering and helped the athletes explore their own personhood in a supportive environment.

The community and lack of male presence also seemed to promote a greater embodiment among athletes. Both younger and older girls talked about being able to channel a state of flow where they were focused on the game. Indeed, they often contrasted this state to being worried about how their bodies look while playing sport:

Sometimes I think that my body is looking a bit awkward when I am running around on the field, [but while playing] I have forgotten about all those things, I am focusing on my game, and I don't care how my body looks. (YG4)

This state was a primary motivator for the older girls. As one girl noted: "[When I am playing] the positive thing is that I am concentrating on the game and my mind doesn't get diverted to anything I am stressed about" (OG2). The mind-body connection was recognised by coaches as well: "The more a child will perform the better they will play, their body structure, shape will also become stronger, their shyness, fear slowly fades" (CO2, male coach). This coach shared a clear connection between sports engagement and the development of confidence among his

athletes. However, he tied this confidence into body shape, harking back to athletic appearance ideals being reinforced by coaches. Despite this, confidence development was seen by coaches as a primary outcome of their engagement with athletes. According to them, a positive coach-athlete relationship was a driving force to improve girls' participation in all spheres of life:

> We need to create an environment where they can raise their voice without being scared and hesitant, whether it is the playing field or their homes. Build confidence in them so they can keep speaking up. It often happens that a girl is not able to talk in front of her brothers or even in a group, so we need to motivate them, to make them a leader. (CO1, female coach)

Evidence shows that poor body image can contribute to, and correlate with, reduced engagement across a range of spheres in life for adolescents (Atkinson & Diedrichs, 2021). As such, encouragement from coaches prompting athletes to build confidence may be vital in supporting and promoting positive self-evaluations among girl athletes.

4. Implications, recommendations, and future directions

This study reports on the secondary analyses of three focus groups held with girl athletes and coaches in New Delhi, India, to understand their experiences of body image in sports contexts. The three themes ("To Do What We Love, We Must Struggle", "What Will People Say?", and "Hold On To Your Power, Be You") reflect the multifaceted experiences of women and girls in sport. Primarily, girls and coaches focused on societal structures that maintained the marginalisation of girls in sport. Systemic factors, including limited access to bathrooms, lack of privacy from the public eye, lack of single-gender spaces to play, and breaking down stereotypical gendered norms, were cited. Participants also touched upon individual factors, such as body image concerns, managing familial expectations, personal preferences with uniforms, and issues around menstruation. Some of these factors are reflected in both low- and high-resource settings across the globe (Findlay et al., 2020; Sawrikar & Muir, 2010). For instance, in a multisite study looking at sports engagement among girl athletes, Matheson and colleagues (2023) found that most girls spoke about stereotypical gendered norms and the need for single-gender spaces to avoid harassment and objectification, suggesting the need for a shift in how we envision sports spaces. In the Indian context, participants discussed how girls are consistently discouraged from engaging in sports spaces, predominantly by parents and peers. While the barriers and facilitators of girls' and women's engagement in sport has been highlighted in prior research (Satija et al., 2018), the perspectives shared in the current study replicate, and extend on, these findings. Specifically, this study highlights what sport looks like for girls who are pursuing an extracurricular activity, outside of school settings. This is salient to improve how we support girls who are already occupying sports spaces and to develop resources to intervene prior to the drop-off that is observed among girls in adolescence (Corder et al., 2019; Plaza & Boiché, 2017).

4.1. Body image concerns in sports

Specific to body image concerns, athletes and coaches in this study discussed issues around internalisation of appearance and performance standards, and teasing and harassment from boys and men. This mirrors findings from other recent research conducted across multiple countries and cultural contexts (i.e., France, UK, United States, Mexico, India, Japan, Canada; Koulanova et al., 2021; Matheson et al., 2023; Satija et al., 2018; Schneider et al., 2023; Tinoco et al., 2023). In keeping with global trends, as well as the current standard of beauty, drive for thinness was pervasive within this population. The Sociocultural Model of Body Image chalks this up to the idolised images that are readily available across the globe of what an athlete is expected to look like (Thompson et al., 1999). Participants here were conscious when they

did not fit that idealised image and found it difficult to engage with sport if they believed they looked different to the propagated ideal. Further, the theory also posits that achieving these ideals is often expected to be associated with better health and happiness (Thompson et al., 1999). This was reflected in comments made by the coaches that bought into this cultural ideal. For example, some participants suggested that body shape was inherently tied to other positive personality characteristics, such as confidence and athletic capability. The interaction of body image concerns and cultural norms around clothing was also salient. Participants shared beliefs about how body shape and size affected clothing decisions, with larger girls and women being pushed towards dressing more modestly.

4.2. Recommendations for sports organisations

Discrepancies between athletes' and coaches' experiences highlighted organisation-level improvements that could benefit girls' engagement with sport. The first was regarding safety, specifically from men. While coaches focused on co-educational interactions on the playing field, girls were worried about outsiders that made them feel unsafe. Coaches and other key agents in sports organisations need to pay attention to their facilities' surroundings and safeguard athletes from internal and external threats. Second, we observed a disconnect in the infrastructural needs of girls and coaches. While coaches looked for policy and government-level changes, girls wanted basic facilities, such as toilets and private spaces to change. As seen here, and elsewhere (Matheson et al., 2023), girls may benefit from female-only spaces, contributing to the absence of the male gaze and the subsequent harassment. Additionally, previous literature also suggests that access to clean and safe toilet facilities can positively impact girls' engagement (Ray & Datta, 2017). Organisations may also benefit by taking measures to ensure the privacy of athletes on the field. Previous literature has highlighted the detrimental impact of primarily male audiences on athletes (Steinfeldt et al., 2013). Obscuring views using temporary or permanent structures may help girls feel more comfortable and safer while playing. Further, organisations could provide safe pick-up and drop-off services to boost engagement. As exemplified by a study in Bihar, India, providing girls bicycles for a safer commute improved school enrolment by approximately 30% (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017). Therefore, prioritising some club- or organisation-level changes can have significant impacts on engagement, and is crucial for improving girls' sports experiences.

4.3. Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study was the first to explore the impact of body image on sports participation among Indian athletes and coaches. The semi-structured nature of the focus groups and analytical style of RTA allowed for a rich and thorough exploration of girls' and coaches' experiences. Further, the participant-driven nature of the study was important given the dearth of research in this field. The researchers' backgrounds allowed participants to converse in their native language alongside facilitators who understood their context intimately, leading to quicker rapport building and greater comfort between the participants and the researchers.

However, several limitations of the current study should also be acknowledged. First, the study suffered from logistical constraints due to COVID-19 regulations in India at the time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, girls and coaches had to join from personal devices in their homes. Although this method has been used extensively in qualitative research (Greenspan et al., 2021)), it did have some drawbacks in this context. Participants were from lower socio-economic groups and many of them suggested that they were using a family member's device or were in a communal space; this was more prominent for athletes than coaches. As such, they may have felt uncomfortable sharing issues candidly, particularly if their families or other community members

were present. Relatedly, in line with safeguarding policies, adult representatives from the sports organisations were present for the athletes' focus groups. While they were asked to minimise their involvement, their presence could have limited what athletes shared during the focus groups. To counteract this, participants were routinely reminded that the goal of the focus groups was to help girl athletes feel confident while playing sport, and that the group was a safe and confidential space. Nonetheless, having the focus groups in person or in a neutral space without the presence of significant others in the room may have enabled a more critical dialogue. Additionally, it is important to consider the impact of the cultural context. Collectivistic cultures tend to be more agreeable and less critical of their context, as such, participants may have been measured in their responses (Nadeem & Haroon, 2019).

Further, this study primarily included Hindu girls and coaches in New Delhi, India, a necessary addition to the largely White, Westernised perspective that is prevalent in research within this space. There is a need to expand the research by bringing in broader perspectives, particularly from global majority countries. As reiterated by the coaches, Muslim women have been found to have greater barriers to engaging in sport (Maxwell et al., 2012), and such differences in participation may exist across other intersections. It would be in the interest of future research to explore body image experiences of young people with intersecting identities and characteristics (e.g., Muslim athletes, adolescents not currently occupying sports spaces, girls from individual and aesthetic-focused sports).

5. Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced perspective into the experiences and needs of girls and coaches in sport in New Delhi, India, extending prior research conducted predominantly in WEIRD countries. The experiences of participants captured here provide a guide to improving body image, mental health, and sports engagement for girls in India. It also brings forward larger societal issues that need to be combated to achieve this. The findings of the current study suggest a need to affect change across multiple levels to improve the experiences of girl athletes, starting in the microcosm of the home.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mahira Budhraja: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jekaterina Schneider:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Aline Tinoco:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Preeti Khanna:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Emily L. Matheson:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Funding

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

This research was externally funded by two commercial funders (Dove Self-Esteem Project, Unilever and Nike, Social & Community Impact). Emily Matheson is an independent consultant for Dove (Unilever) and Nike (Social & Community Impact). The authors declare no other conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102774.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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