

THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND DISABILITY WITH A FOCUS ON SPORTS PARTICIPATION

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DISABILITY, WOMEN & PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS:

Sports is an essential part of a healthy lifestyle, but, for persons with disability it carries an even more significant meaning providing them with opportunities for social inclusion, independence, and personal growth, and has been associated with improved quality of life, greater self-efficacy as well as enhanced psychological well-being (Ruddell & Shiness, 2006).

For women navigating an ableist and sexist society which also comes with subordination, subversiveness, passivity and lack of autonomy in decision making, sports serves as a platform to challenge the oppressive stereotypes, demonstrate strength, capabilities, agility, independence and normalcy (Feliciano et. al., 2025). This makes participation crucial for visibility around the narratives.

BUT, DO WOMEN GET AN EQUAL CHANCE TO PARTICIPATE?

although, the prevalence of disability is slightly higher among women than men; approximately 18% women and 14.2% men experience disability worldwide (WHO, 2022), the participation rates in paralympics have only recently been recorded reaching gender parity in Paris 2024 Paralympics with 1,983 women (45%) among 4,400 athletes.

Women's bodies are already heavily policed by the societal scope of gender norms, laws and cultural practices (Margenroth & Faber, 2025). Participation in sports therefore comes with many societal, structural and personal barriers, particularly for disabled women who occupy intersecting disadvantaged identities. These barriers are often intensified further by other social locations such as caste, class, rural background, or economic marginalisation.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION:

For women barriers to participation include internalised ableism, hierarchical view of disability and "simultaneous oppression" which is partly overcome by "liberal feminist - style empowerment" indicating a sense of pride at being able to "prove" themselves on the playground with men (Hardin, 2007).

This burden to "prove" ones abilities due to systemic biases, stereotypes and unfair judgements arises from a deep sense of internalisation reducing them to "inspiration porn."-the objectification of persons with disability as inspirations to non-disabled people on the basis of their life circumstances (Stella, 2014).

What's your excuse? Angel
The only disability in life is a bad attitude.
Diffability **Before you**
Never Cute quit, try.
give up! **Miracle**
overcome **Despite.**
Hidden **So brave!**
potential 

An image showing many different statements people can say about a disabled person to show how "inspirational" they are: Source; Wikipedia



See Amarilla Veres's Thrilling Reaction to Paralympic Wheelchair Fencing Gold For Hungary. Source: Pinterest

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO INCLUSION IN PARASPORTS:

To make advancements in the societal views of women with disabilities, intersectionality should be the centre of inquiry dealing with policy, society, infrastructure asking for a radical stance inculcating radical feminist frameworks. intersectional approaches in research and policy supports inclusion of athlete voices in discourse and policymaking.

It can be implied by using media as a means to promote inclusive participation, normalization, and improving visibility. Inclusive and equitable media reform shows sport as a space for agency and self-redefinition (Kirakosyan, 2021).

INCLUSIVE EMPOWERMENT:

Limited access, stereotyping, underrepresentation, and discriminatory practices negatively affect athletes' participation and motivation, showing that empowerment is shaped by the broader social context that athletes occupy.

Paralympic games reflect and reinforce systemic discrimination (gender, race, disability etc.) while also offering a platform to challenge and transform these inequalities (Descamps et al., 2024). Thus, the Paralympic Games remain both a reflection of existing inequalities and an important site for resistance, visibility, and inclusive empowerment.