

MAKING SPORTS ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Human resources, Youth, Sports and related issues

Avani Lekhara during the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games in Asaka, Japan. | Photo Credit: AP

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympics was a watershed moment for Indian sports. History was written when a Paralympic gold medal was won by a female Indian athlete for the first time. This achievement was an important symbol of how far India has come in using sports to foster inclusion. It also became a conversation starter about how Indian women are finally claiming space for themselves in what is traditionally seen as a male-dominated field. To build on the successes of the Paralympics, it is important to provide more opportunities and an enabling environment for greater participation of women and persons with disabilities in sport.

We know that when sports become inclusive, they have the potential to transform not just the lives of those playing but also of the wider community by encouraging the values of fair play. Systems and structures that give a voice and opportunities to everyone tend to be more stable and peaceful. It is no wonder, therefore, that sports are at the heart of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In its contribution towards achieving educational, health and equality outcomes, sport plays a vital role in furthering the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

However, in India, like in many other parts of the world, COVID-19 challenged the inclusive legacy of the 2020 Paralympics, in turn threatening the wider benefits that sports can generate for individuals and communities. As lockdowns and social distancing measures were imposed, fewer people were practising and benefiting from sports. This intensified physical inactivity and the deterioration of mental health. Data from UNESCO's worldwide survey of school physical education show that some 70% of physical education teachers consider their students' physical and mental health to have worsened during the pandemic, with children with disabilities among the most affected. This crisis context is backlit by a landscape where already not enough was being done to ensure equal participation for all in sports. Budget allocations for physical education and sport remain low. In addition, social and cultural barriers restrict the participation of women and girls in sport. The sports landscape is far more unfavourable for women and girls with disabilities, with opportunities minimised due to discriminations based on gender and disability. This necessitates the need for making sports accessible and inclusive for all by challenging the stigma and stereotypes that surround women and persons with disabilities in sport.

In this respect, sports are a creative tool that can be used to reach across divisions to promote inclusion and equality. Inertia is always an easy choice, but it is time that we use sports as an enabler in COVID-19 response and recovery strategies. Recovering from the crisis means making communities healthier, stronger and more resilient. Societies will need to prioritise solutions that benefit all people to 'build back better'. Creating an inclusive sporting culture requires effective policies, progressive curricula focused on quality physical education, and well-equipped/trained physical education professionals. It also requires good coordination among the different organisations and bodies with an interest in sports, and flexibility to account for the cultural, demographic, and infrastructural diversity in India.

To support this vision, UNESCO is launching its Fit for Life flagship initiative in India. Fit for Life is designed to activate smart investments in impactful sport policies, school curricula, and grassroots participation to scale up effective solutions tackling rising physical inactivity, mental health issues, social exclusion, and inequalities. In doing so, and alongside complementary ongoing initiatives such as the Fit India campaign and Khelo India, it is hoped that there will be

greater collaboration for healthier, more inclusive and equitable communities.

Since marginalised communities, women and persons with disabilities are often ignored in sporting policies and activities, increasing their visibility in all aspects of sport should be considered as an important tool to enhance their participation in sport. Promoting female role models is therefore an imperative to strengthen the engagement of women and girls in sports.

Today, as we mark the UN International Day of Sport for Development and Peace, we are presented with an opportunity to recognise the role sport plays in making our world a better place. Through our efforts, we hope to break stereotypes so that everyone feels confident to engage and excel in sports.

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