



Sports for Inclusion and Empowerment: Examining the Impact on Persons with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explored the impact of sports participation on individuals with disabilities, focusing on perceived benefits for empowerment; social benefits, challenges, and perceptions of inclusion. A sample of 30 participants with disabilities from Jammu and Kashmir, UT, aged between 15 to 30 years, were included in the study. Data were collected through an online questionnaire.

Sports involvement benefited both physical and mental health, participants reporting better overall well-being and stress management. However Physical and societal limitations restricted their ability to participate in sports. The main limiting issues were particularly inadequate accessibility and prejudice. Sports participation has been shown to empower individuals by increasing their confidence and self-esteem. Most individuals felt respected and appreciated by others, however some had unfavourable perspective alterations. Within the disability sports community, opportunities for leadership and advocacy were limited. Participants, on the other hand, felt the community as inclusive and friendly.

Disabled sports athletes advocated for more accessible facilities and equipment, improved leadership and advocacy opportunities, and expanded education and knowledge about disability rights and inclusion to encourage empowerment and social inclusion. The findings can help policymakers, organisations, and practitioners improve the inclusion and efficacy of disability sports programmes.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, Empowerment, Disability, Sports

INTRODUCTION

There are currently more than 1 billion disabled people in the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) a disabled person is anyone who has “a problem in body function or structure, an activity limitation, has a difficulty in executing a task or action; with a participation restriction”. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that approximately 253 million people worldwide are visually impaired, with various degrees of blindness or visual impairment. This represents around 3.2% of the global population.

Regarding disabling deafness and hearing loss, the WHO estimates that around 466 million people worldwide experience disabling hearing loss. This corresponds to approximately 6% of the world’s population.

In terms of intellectual disabilities, it is estimated that around 200 million people globally have an intellectual disability, defined as having an IQ below 75. This represents roughly 2.6% of the world’s population.

As for the number of individuals who require a wheelchair for daily mobility, it is estimated that approximately 75 million people worldwide need a wheelchair. This represents around 1% of the global population [World Health Organization].

Children with disabilities often face discrimination and barriers when it comes to participating in sports. Research shows that only 20% of children with disabilities are actively engaged in sports programs, compared to 70% of children without disabilities (Smith et al, 2019). This significant disparity highlights the challenges faced by disabled children in accessing sports opportunities.

Discrimination and exclusion can manifest in various ways. Disabled children may encounter limited access to adaptive sports equipment, inadequate facilities, and insufficient coaching or training resources (Johnson, 2018). Negative attitudes and misconceptions about the abilities of disabled individuals can further hinder their participation in sports (Brown & Lee, 2020). Moreover, societal stereotypes and lack of awareness contribute to the marginalization of disabled children in sports. Negative perceptions and assumptions



about disability can lead to lower expectations and reduced opportunities for participation. Girls with disabilities, in particular, may face additional barriers due to gender biases and stereotypes (Anderson & Martinez, 2019).

Efforts to address these challenges and promote inclusion have been made. Inclusive sports programs, such as unified sports, aim to bring together disabled and non-disabled children in an inclusive and supportive environment (Smith & Wilson, 2021). These programs have been found to enhance social interactions, improve self-esteem, and challenge stereotypes about disability (Jones et al., 2022)

Empowerment is a critical component in advocating for the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities. It entails empowering people to take charge of their life, make educated decisions, and actively engage in society. Many techniques for empowering people with disabilities have been discovered, ranging from legislative and legal frameworks to individual-level interventions. Inclusive education programmes, play a critical role in empowering students with disabilities by offering equitable access to excellent education. Similarly, vocational training programmes and job placement services have proven to be helpful in increasing economic empowerment among people with disabilities (Smith, 2017; Johnson et al. 2018).

Self-advocacy and active engagement in decision-making are essential components of empowerment. Jones and Brown (2019) underline the necessity of self-advocacy training programmes that provide persons with disabilities with the information and skills to successfully articulate their needs and rights. Furthermore, increasing the inclusion of people with disabilities in decision-making bodies and organisations has been shown to empower people on both an individual and communal level (Anderson, 2020). Social support networks and institutions are critical in empowering people with impairments. Family, friends, and peer support groups offer emotional support, knowledge exchange, and social possibilities. A study emphasizes the importance of building inclusive and supportive communities that foster empowerment and social inclusion for individuals with disabilities. Despite progress, several barriers and challenges persist in the empowerment of persons with disabilities. These include societal attitudes, discriminatory practices, lack of accessible infrastructure, and limited participation in decision-making processes. Another research underscores the need for comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, awareness campaigns, and capacity-building initiatives to address these barriers effectively (Garcia et al, 2019; Smith et al, 2022)

Objective: To examine the empowerment perceptions and benefits through sports participation among persons with disabilities

Methodology: The present paper focused on sampling individuals with disabilities who were actively engaged in sports and play activities. The sample consisted of 30

participants aged 15 to 30 years from Jammu and Kashmir, UT, India. Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire. A snowball sampling technique has been utilized for data collection.

Sampling Criteria: Only those participants were selected who had benchmark disability and were actively engaged in sports activity.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Table 1.1. Sex of the respondents

Sex	n=30
Male	26(86.7%)
Female	4 (13.3%)
Total	30 (100%)

The table 1.1 depicts the sex distribution of the sample data indicates that the majority of the participants were male 26 (86.7%) of the sample. In contrast, the number of female participants was lower 4 (13.3%) of the sample. This disparity in gender representation shows a higher level of male participation in sports compared to female participation

Table 1.2. Types of disabilities

Disability	n= 30
Visual impairment	13 (43.3%)
Loco-motor disability	7 (23.3%)
Thalassemia	1 (3.3%)
Physical disability	6 (20%)
Other	3 (10%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 1.2 depicts that most 13 (43.3%) of the sample participants had visual impairment followed by loco-motor disability 7 (23.3%), physical disability 6 (20%), thalassemia 1 (3.3%) and other disabilities 3 (10%).

Table 1.3. Types of sports respondents play

Games	n=30
Cricket	20 (66.6%)
Badminton	3(10%)
Chess	2 (6.6%)
Judo	2 (6.6%)
Wheelchair race	1 (3.3%)
Carrom board	2 (6.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 1.3 presents the distribution of sports games among the participants. The findings indicate that the most popular game among the respondents was cricket, played by 20 (66.6%) participants. This was followed by badminton, with 3 participants (10%), chess and judo with 2 participants each (6.6% each), and carrom board with 2 participants (6.6%).

Additionally, one participant (3.3%) engaged in wheelchair race.

Table 02. Impact of sports participation on the health, purpose, and well-being

Categories	n=30
It has improved my physical health	4 (13.3%)
It has improved my mental health	4 (13.3%)
It has given me a sense of purpose	6 (20.7%)
All of the above	15 (51.7%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 02 indicates that the majority of participants 15 (51.7%) acknowledged experiencing improvements in all three aspects: physical health, mental health, and a sense of purpose. 4 (13.3%) reported that their physical health had improved as a result of engaging in sports activities. Sports involvement contributed positively to their overall physical well-being. In terms of mental health 4 (13.3%) mentioned that participating in sports had a positive impact on their psychological well-being. It helped them enhance their mental health and cope with stress. Furthermore, 6 participants (20.7%) expressed that their sports participation had given them a sense of purpose.

Findings revealed that sports involvement contributed positively to their overall physical well-being. Being actively involved in sports activities provided them with a sense of direction and meaning in their lives.

Table 03. Explored social benefits through sports participation

Categories	n=30
Yes, I have made new friends through sports	25 (83.3%)
No, I have not experienced any social benefits from sports	3 (10%)
I have experienced negative social experiences through sports	2 (6.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 03 depicts that the majority of participants 25 (83.3%) reported that they had made new friends through sports which indicates a positive social outcome of their involvement in sports activities. On the other hand, a small proportion of participants, 3 (10%) stated that they had not experienced any significant social benefits from sports participation that shows their sports involvement may not have resulted in substantial social connections or friendships. Only few 2 (6.6%) participants mentioned experiencing negative social experiences through sports which implies that, despite engaging in sports activities, they encountered unfavorable social interactions or challenges that impacted their overall social experience.

Table 04. Challenges or barriers experienced by participating in sports

Categories	n=30
Yes, I have faced physical barriers such as lack of accessibility to facilities	10 (33.3%)
Yes, I have faced social barriers such as discrimination or lack of understanding from others	10 (33.3%)
No, I have not experienced any barriers to participating in sports	10 (33.3%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 04 reveals that an equal number of respondents, 10 (33.3%) each, reported facing physical barriers such as lack of accessibility to facilities and social barriers such as discrimination or lack of understanding from others. On the other hand same number of participants 10 (33.3%) stated that they had not experienced any significant barriers, which indicates a positive sports environment for their engagement.

Table 05. Sense of empowerment gained through participating in sports

Categories	n=30
Yes, I feel more in control of my life through sports	24 (80%)
No, I do not feel any sense of empowerment through sports	6 (20%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 05 depicts that the majority of participants 24 (80%), reported feeling more in control of their lives through sports, indicating a strong sense of empowerment resulting from their sports involvement. On the other hand, 6 participants (20%) expressed that they did not feel any sense of empowerment through sports.

Findings reveals that majority of the participants acknowledged that engaging in sports activities had a significant positive impact on their overall empowerment, providing them with a sense of autonomy, self-determination, and control over their lives. Through sports, they were able to overcome challenges, develop skills, and achieve personal goals, leading to an enhanced sense of empowerment.

Table 06. Confidence and self-esteem boosted by participating in sports

Categories	n=30
It has improved my confidence and self-esteem	26 (86.6%)
It has had no impact on my confidence and self-esteem	2 (6.6%)
It has decreased my confidence and self-esteem	2 (6.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 06 represents that majority of participants 26 (86.6%) reported that sports participation had improved their confidence and self-esteem. A small number of participants, 2 (6.6%), stated that participating in sports had no impact on their confidence and self-esteem, and 2 (6.6%) stated that sports participation had decreased their confidence and self-esteem.

Engaging in sports activities has provided these participants with opportunities to develop their skills, overcome challenges, and achieve personal goals, leading to a boost in their confidence and self-esteem. The positive experiences, achievements, and recognition gained through sports have contributed to an enhanced sense of self-worth and belief in their abilities. However, it is important to address the experiences of those who did not report an improvement or experienced a decrease in confidence and self-esteem, ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to support their overall well-being within the sports context.

Table 07. Changed perception of others through sports participation

Categories	n=30
Yes, I feel more respected and valued by others	23 (76.6%)
No, I have not noticed any changes in how I am perceived by others	6 (20%)
I have experienced negative changes in how I am perceived by others	1 (3.3%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 07 data depicts that most 23 (76.6%) of the participant reported feeling more respected and valued by others as a result of their sports participation. They perceived a positive change in how others perceived them. 6 (20%) mentioned that they did not notice any significant changes in how they are perceived by others since they started participating in sports. Only 1 (3.3%) participant reported experiencing negative changes in how they are perceived by others following their sports involvement.

Table 08. Experienced leadership and advocacy opportunities in disability sports

Categories	n= 30
Yes, I have had opportunities to be a leader or advocate for disability rights through sports	13 (43.3%)
No, I have not had any opportunities to participate in leadership roles or advocacy through sports	17 (56.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 08 depicts that the majority of participants 17 (56.6%), mentioned that they had no opportunities to participate in leadership roles or advocacy through sports. Whereas 13 (43.3%) participants reported that they had opportunities

to be leaders or advocates for disability rights through their involvement in sports. They have actively taken on leadership roles and engaged in advocacy efforts within the disability sports community.

Table 09. Inclusivity and welcoming nature of disability sports community

Categories	n=30
Yes, I feel that the disability sports community is inclusive and welcoming	25 (83.3%)
No, I feel that the disability sports community is exclusive and unwelcoming	5 (16.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 09 represent that majority 25 (83.3%) of the participants expressed feelings that the disability sports community is inclusive and welcoming. They perceive the community as being open to individuals with disabilities, providing equal opportunities for participation, and fostering a sense of belonging. Whereas, 5 (16.6%) participants stated that they feel the disability sports community is exclusive and unwelcoming. They perceive barriers to entry, lack of inclusivity, and limited opportunities for engagement within the community and also feel that more efforts are needed to improve inclusivity and address any exclusivity within the community.

Table 10. Improving empowerment and social inclusion in the disability sports community

Categories	n=30
More accessible facilities and equipment	5 (16.6%)
Greater opportunities for leadership and advocacy	8 (26.6%)
More education and awareness about disability rights and inclusion	4 (13.3%)
All of the above	13 (43.3%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 10 reveals that the majority of participants, 13 (43.3%), mentioned that they would like to see improvements in all three aspects: accessible facilities and equipment, greater opportunities for leadership and advocacy, and more education and awareness. 8 (26.6%) participants expressed the desire for increased opportunities to take on leadership roles and engage in advocacy within the disability sports community. 5 (16.6%) emphasized the need for improved accessibility in terms of facilities and equipment. Only 4 (13.3%) participants mentioned the need for enhanced education and awareness initiatives focused on disability rights and inclusion.

These findings highlight the importance of creating an inclusive and empowering environment in the disability sports community by addressing accessibility, leadership opportunities, and education about disability rights and

inclusion. By implementing these improvements, the community can foster greater empowerment.

Table 11. Role of disability sports in awareness, abilities, and challenging stereotypes

Categories	n=30
By promoting awareness and understanding of disability issues	8 (26.6%)
By providing a platform for disabled individuals to showcase their abilities	5 (16.6%)
By challenging societal stereotypes and promoting positive attitudes toward disability	3 (10%)
All of the above	14 (46.6%)
Total	30 (100%)

Table 11 data reveals that the majority of participants 14 (46.6%), recognized the collective impact of disability sports in promoting awareness, showcasing abilities, and challenging stereotypes. They emphasized the interconnection of these factors and the need for a comprehensive approach to maximize the benefits of disability sports. 8 (26.6%) participants recognized the role of disability sports in raising awareness and fostering a better understanding of disability-related issues. 5 (16.6%) participants highlighted the significance of disability sports as a platform for disabled individuals to showcase their talents and abilities. Only 3 participants (10%) acknowledged the role of disability sports in challenging societal stereotypes and promoting positive attitudes toward disability.

CONCLUSION

The present paper aimed to examine the perceptions and benefits of empowerment through sports among individuals with disabilities. The study involved a sample of 30 participants from Jammu and Kashmir, UT, within the age group of 15 to 30 years, who were actively engaged in sports activities. The findings revealed that sports participation had a positive impact on various aspects of participants' lives.

The majority of participants reported improvements in their physical and mental health as a result of sports involvement. They also experienced a sense of purpose and empowerment through their engagement in sports. Furthermore, participating in sports provided social benefits, such as making new friends and gaining respect from others. Leadership and advocacy opportunities within the disability sports community were found to be limited, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and opportunities for individuals with disabilities to take on such roles. Similar results have been found by Ginis et al, (2021).

The present paper emphasized the importance of creating more accessible facilities and equipment, providing greater opportunities for leadership and advocacy, and promoting education and awareness about disability rights and

inclusion within the disability sports community (Joshua et al, 2020). These suggestions can contribute to enhancing empowerment and social inclusion for individuals with disabilities through sports (Pensgaard & Sorensen, 2002; Kiuppis, 2018).

Overall, present research sheds light on the significance of sports participation in empowering individuals with disabilities and improving their overall well-being. The findings highlight the need for continued efforts to promote inclusive and empowering sports environments, as well as the importance of recognizing the valuable contributions and abilities of individuals with disabilities in challenging societal stereotypes.

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