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EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH FOOTBALL: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF REGIONAL HUBS IN INDIA

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Keywords	Abstract
<p><i>Women's Football, India, Regional Development, Gender Empowerment, Grassroots Programs, Professionalization.</i></p>	<p>Background: Women's football in India has evolved significantly over the past five decades despite facing socio-cultural barriers, limited institutional support, and infrastructural challenges. From informal school-level participation in the 1970s to the establishment of structured competitions and professional leagues, the sport reflects broader changes in gender roles and sports governance in India. Certain regions—Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala—have emerged as key developmental hubs.</p> <p>Objectives: This study aims to trace the historical evolution of women's football in India; examine the role of selected regional hubs in talent development and competitive growth; analyze socio-cultural, economic, and institutional influences on participation; and identify achievements, challenges, and future directions for sustainable development.</p> <p>Methods: The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design based on secondary data analysis. Sources include academic journal articles, AIFF reports (2016–2023), historical records, and regional case studies. A thematic</p>



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regional analysis approach was used to compare contributions, socio-cultural contexts, institutional mechanisms, and developmental outcomes across the four selected states.

Results: Findings reveal that Manipur has consistently produced international-level players due to strong grassroots networks and cultural acceptance. West Bengal has leveraged its urban club structure and school tournaments to provide competitive exposure. Odisha has promoted inclusion through state-supported academies and tribal outreach programs, while Kerala has integrated progressive educational and sports initiatives to foster female participation. Across regions, women's football has contributed to social empowerment, leadership development, and mobility for marginalized girls. However, challenges such as financial constraints, infrastructural gaps, limited professional contracts, and unequal media coverage persist.

Conclusion: Women's football in India demonstrates transformative potential for gender equality and social development. Strengthening grassroots systems, expanding professional pathways, enhancing infrastructure, and ensuring inclusive policy support are essential for sustainable growth and international competitiveness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Football, globally celebrated as the "beautiful game," has historically been a male-dominated sphere in India, with men's leagues, clubs, and competitions commanding the overwhelming share of institutional attention, financial resources, and media coverage (Dey & Choudhury, 2020). In stark contrast, women's football has navigated a protracted and arduous journey, characterised by significant socio-cultural resistance, systemic institutional neglect, and profound infrastructural deficits (Bala Devi et al., 2022). Despite these formidable constraints, the past five decades have witnessed a gradual yet definitive emergence of women's football as a recognised competitive sport. This evolution is a testament to the resilience of pioneering athletes, the advocacy of supportive communities, and incremental shifts in policy frameworks governing gender and sport in India (Das & Konai, 2020).

The genesis of structured women's football can be traced to the 1970s, a period marking India's nascent engagement with international feminist movements and a slow reconfiguration of women's roles in public life (Chatterjee, 2019). Prior to this era, female participation in football was largely ephemeral, confined to informal schoolyard games and sporadic community matches lacking any formal competitive structure (Khayer et al., 2023). A seminal milestone was reached in 1975 with the establishment of the Women's Football Federation of India (WFFI), which provided the sport with its first dedicated administrative body, formal recognition, and a blueprint for national championships (Mullick & Gangadharan, 2018). This institutionalisation was crucial, creating initial pathways for talent identification and national representation, thereby challenging the pervasive notion of football as an exclusively male preserve (Dutta, 2021).



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The pioneering generation of players, including icons like Shanti Mullick, Chitra Gangadharan, and S. Lalitha, were instrumental in this foundational phase. Their demonstrated excellence on the field served as a powerful counter-narrative to prevailing gender norms, proving women's competitive capability and inspiring subsequent cohorts (Joseph & Varghese, 2022). However, the developmental trajectory has been markedly non-linear and geographically uneven. The 1990s, following the absorption of the WFFI into the All India Football Federation (AIFF), witnessed a period of stagnation where administrative focus disproportionately favoured men's football, leading to irregular national tournaments and fragmented talent development pipelines (AIFF, 2016).

The revival in the 21st century, punctuated by India's participation in SAFF and AFC tournaments, and crystallised by the launch of the Indian Women's League (IWL) in 2016, signalled a new era of professionalisation (AIFF, 2023). The IWL, in particular, has provided a vital platform for structured competition, visibility, and career pathways. Yet, this national-level progress has been fundamentally underpinned and often driven by distinct regional ecosystems where local socio-cultural contexts, community mobilisation, and grassroots initiatives have converged to foster talent (Nayak & Pradhan, 2021). Certain regions have emerged as prolific hubs, demonstrating that the growth of women's football is less a uniformly orchestrated national project and more a mosaic of regional successes with unique enabling environments.

This study focuses on four such critical regional hubs: Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala. Manipur, frequently hailed as the "cradle" of Indian women's football, boasts a deep-rooted culture of female participation, where the sport is entrenched in community life and has produced a disproportionate number of international stalwarts (Mullick & Gangadharan, 2018). West Bengal, with its historic urban football culture centered in Kolkata, has leveraged established club networks and scholastic tournaments to provide competitive rigor and exposure (Chatterjee, 2019). Odisha has distinguished itself through state-led interventions, employing football as a tool for social inclusion by systematically extending opportunities to tribal and coastal communities via academies and outreach programs (Nayak & Pradhan, 2021). Kerala has synergised its progressive social indices, particularly in female education and health, with structured sports programs, fostering participation across urban and rural settings (Joseph & Varghese, 2022).

An analytical examination of these hubs is imperative for several reasons. First, it elucidates the complex interplay between socio-cultural acceptance, economic factors, and institutional support mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder female sports participation (Das & Konai, 2020). Second, it highlights how grassroots structures—from village clubs to school competitions—act as the critical first touchpoint for talent identification and nurturing (Bala Devi et al., 2022). Third, a comparative regional analysis reveals divergent models of development, from community-driven (Manipur) to state-supported (Odisha) and hybrid club-based systems (West Bengal and Kerala), offering valuable templates for replication (Dutta, 2021).



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Furthermore, women's football in these contexts transcends athletic pursuit; it functions as a potent agent of social empowerment. For many young women, especially from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, the sport has enabled access to education through scholarships, fostered leadership skills, instilled discipline, and provided a vehicle for social mobility and self-determination (Khayer et al., 2023). It actively challenges patriarchal norms that traditionally restrict women's bodily autonomy and physical presence in public spaces (Dey & Choudhury, 2020).

Therefore, this study aims to dissect the historical and contemporary landscapes of women's football through the prism of these four regional hubs. By tracing their evolutionary paths, analysing their contributory mechanisms, and synthesising their shared challenges and unique successes, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the sport's transformative potential in India. The findings intend to offer evidence-based guidance to policymakers, sports administrators, and grassroots organisations for crafting strategies that promote gender equity, sustainable professionalisation, and holistic empowerment through the beautiful game.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To trace the historical evolution of women's football in India from its inception in the 1970s to the present professional era.
- To examine the role of regional hubs—Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala—in talent development, grassroots programs, and competitive opportunities.
- To analyze the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing women's participation in football across different regions.
- To identify achievements and challenges faced by women footballers in regional and national competitions.
- To provide recommendations for policymakers, sports administrators, and grassroots initiatives to promote sustainable growth and professionalization of women's football in India.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The academic and institutional discourse on women's football in India has grown in tandem with the sport's development, coalescing around several critical themes: historical trajectories, regional paradigms, socio-cultural determinants, and the ongoing challenges of professionalization. This body of work collectively establishes a foundation for understanding the sport's complex evolution and its intersection with gender dynamics in Indian society.

Historical and Institutional Foundations: Scholarly attention has consistently highlighted the 1970s as the formative decade for organized women's football, with the establishment of the Women's Football Federation of India (WFFI) in 1975 serving as a pivotal institutional catalyst (Mullick & Gangadharan, 2018; Khayer et al., 2023). Research underscores that prior to this,



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participation was largely informal and localized, lacking a cohesive national structure (Dutta, 2021). The subsequent administrative merger into the All India Football Federation (AIFF) and its consequences have been noted as a period of both integration and neglect, leading to erratic national championships until the revival initiatives of the early 2000s (AIFF, 2016; Majumdar, 2020).

Regional Hubs and Developmental Models: A significant strand of literature employs a regional lens to deconstruct the national narrative, identifying specific states as engines of growth. Manipur is extensively documented as the preeminent hub, with scholars attributing its success to a unique socio-cultural milieu that normalized female athleticism early on, supported by robust school and club-based ecosystems (Mullick & Gangadharan, 2018; Thapa, 2017; Yumnam, 2018). Conversely, studies on West Bengal detail a model driven by historic urban club culture and institutionalized school-college tournaments in Kolkata, which provided a structured, though often elitist, pathway for talent (Chatterjee, 2019; Sen, 2018). Research on Odisha reveals a distinct state-led, inclusive model, where football academies and outreach programs have been strategically used to engage tribal and coastal communities, linking sports participation with social mobility (Nayak & Pradhan, 2021; Singh, 2019). Kerala's experience is often analyzed through its synergy of high social development indicators, educational policy, and grassroots clubs, facilitating wider acceptance and participation (Joseph & Varghese, 2022; Nair, 2018).

Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Structural Barriers: The literature robustly examines the constraints hindering the sport's potential. Socio-cultural barriers, including entrenched patriarchal norms, familial resistance, and concerns over propriety, are identified as primary deterrents, particularly in non-hub regions (Das & Konai, 2020; Dey & Choudhury, 2020). Economically, studies point to a severe lack of financial security, manifested in scant sponsorship, minimal professional contracts, and a vast pay disparity compared to men's football (Bala Devi et al., 2022; Tripathi, 2022). Structural and institutional challenges are equally emphasized, encompassing dire infrastructural gaps in training facilities, especially in rural areas, inconsistent coaching quality, and negligible media representation, which perpetuates a cycle of invisibility and underinvestment (Gupta, 2019; Patwardhan, 2022; Zac, 2019).

Empowerment and Professionalization: On a positive note, a growing corpus of work frames women's football as a potent vehicle for empowerment. Studies document its role in fostering confidence, leadership, educational access via scholarships, and challenging restrictive gender roles, especially for athletes from marginalized backgrounds (Khayer et al., 2023; UN Women, 2020). The launch of the Indian Women's League (IWL) in 2016 is widely cited as the cornerstone of contemporary professionalization efforts. AIFF reports (2016-2023) and subsequent analyses track its role in providing a regular competitive calendar, enhancing visibility, and creating nascent career pathways, though its reach and financial sustainability remain subjects of critical inquiry (AIFF, 2023; Sharma, 2021).



Mritunjoy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

Gaps and Future Directions: While existing literature effectively maps the historical and regional contours, it often treats each hub in isolation. There is a comparative deficit in analytical studies that systematically contrast the governance models, funding mechanisms, and socio-cultural catalysts across these successful regions to derive transferable best practices. Furthermore, while challenges are well-catalogued, there is limited empirical research proposing integrated, multi-stakeholder solutions that link grassroots development with sustainable professional outcomes.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design based on a comprehensive analysis of secondary data. The objective is to construct an analytical narrative of the historical evolution and regional development of women's football in India. Data was systematically collated from a diverse range of documented sources to ensure triangulation and thematic depth.

The primary sources of data include peer-reviewed academic literature from journals in sports studies, sociology, and gender studies, published between 2010-2023. Official institutional reports from the All India Football Federation (AIFF), particularly the annual reports and Indian Women's League (IWL) reviews from 2016-2023, provided critical data on competitive structures and policy directions. Historical records, including archival documents and retrospective articles on the Women's Football Federation of India (WFFI), were consulted to trace the sport's foundational timeline. Furthermore, regional case studies, media analyses, and documented profiles of state football associations (particularly from Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala) offered granular insights into local contexts.

Data analysis followed a thematic regional analysis framework. The compiled information was organized, coded, and analyzed thematically across the four selected regions. The analysis focused on comparing and contrasting key themes: (1) historical milestones and trajectories, (2) institutional and grassroots support mechanisms, (3) socio-cultural factors influencing participation, and (4) documented outcomes and persistent challenges. This comparative approach allowed for the identification of unique regional development models, shared national barriers, and the synthesis of cross-cutting patterns that define the ecosystem of women's football in India.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

• HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN INDIA:

The formal development of women's football in India began in the 1970s, a period marked by gradual social acceptance of women in public life and participation in organized sports. Early competitions were largely confined to schools, colleges, and community clubs, with limited infrastructure, coaching, or institutional support. Despite these challenges, pioneering players such as Shanti Mullick, Chitra Gangadharan, and S. Lalitha demonstrated exceptional skill and commitment, inspiring future generations and laying the foundation for competitive women's football in India.

During the 1980s, several regional hubs, particularly Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala, emerged as centers of development. Grassroots initiatives, school tournaments, and local club



Mritunjoy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

leagues provided opportunities for talent identification, while socio-cultural factors in these regions, such as community support and relatively progressive attitudes toward female sports participation, facilitated growth. However, regional disparities persisted. Some states struggled due to administrative neglect, limited resources, and infrastructural inadequacies, resulting in stagnation or uneven development of women's football.

The 1990s represented a period of decline for women's football at the national level. Following the integration of the Women's Football Federation of India (WFFI) into the All India Football Federation (AIFF), administrative attention shifted predominantly toward men's football. National championships were irregular, and pathways for talent development weakened, highlighting the need for structured intervention.

The revival in the 2000s marked a turning point, with state associations and grassroots programs focusing on systematic training, regional leagues, and youth talent identification. Participation in international tournaments such as the SAFF Women's Championship and AFC Women's Asian Cup qualifiers provided exposure to competitive football. The launch of the Indian Women's League (IWL) in 2016 further professionalized the sport, offering structured competition, consistent fixtures, and platforms for national and international recognition.

Overall, the historical evolution of women's football in India reflects a journey of resilience, regional innovation, and gradual professionalization, underpinned by pioneering athletes, supportive communities, and policy interventions that continue to shape the future of the sport.

6. REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN INDIA

Women's football in India has evolved unevenly across different regions. While national-level initiatives provided formal recognition and competitive pathways, the growth of the sport heavily relied on regional hubs where community support, cultural acceptance, and local initiatives shaped opportunities for women. Among these, Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala stand out for their consistent contributions to the sport.

• MANIPUR:

Historical Evolution:

Manipur is often described as the cradle of women's football in India. The sport gained momentum in the late 1970s when schools and local clubs actively promoted female participation. Unlike other regions, football in Manipur was socially accepted for girls early on, which allowed a sustained tradition of female footballers. By the 1980s, players from Manipur were regularly representing India at international competitions.

Regional Contributions:

Grassroots Programs: Community clubs and school tournaments identified and nurtured young talent.

State-Level Leagues: Competitions organized by the Manipur Football Association provided a pipeline for national selection.



Mritunjoy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

Notable Players: Stars such as Bala Devi, India's all-time leading goal scorer, and Oinam Bembem Devi, the "Durga of Indian Football," emerged from Manipur.

Socio-Cultural Impact:

- Football in Manipur became a vehicle for gender empowerment, breaking patriarchal norms and enabling young women to pursue sports professionally.
- Neighboring Northeastern states were inspired to develop women's football programs, creating a regional football culture.
- Football also fostered leadership, confidence, and social mobility for women.

Achievements and Challenges:

- Manipur consistently produces national champions and international-level athletes.
- Challenges include limited financial support, inadequate infrastructure in remote areas, and difficulty sustaining long-term professional careers despite local talent.

• WEST BENGAL:

Historical Evolution:

West Bengal, the historical heart of Indian football, saw women's football gain momentum in Kolkata during the late 1970s and 1980s. While men's football dominated public attention, clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal gradually began supporting women's tournaments. Colleges and schools in Kolkata played a crucial role in providing competitive exposure to female athletes.

Regional Contributions:

- Institutional Support: The West Bengal Football Association integrated women's competitions into mainstream tournaments.
- Talent Identification: Structured school and college championships facilitated scouting and training.
- Clubs and Academies: Urban clubs in Kolkata created opportunities for young women to train professionally.

Socio-Cultural Impact:

- West Bengal's strong football culture allowed greater social acceptance of female players.
- Media coverage, although limited compared to men, was higher than in most other regions, helping normalize women's participation in football.
- Girls from urban areas found football to be a viable career path, fostering social mobility and recognition.

Achievements and Challenges:

- West Bengal teams have a history of national championship successes and have produced several notable players.
- Challenges include limited outreach to rural areas, inadequate infrastructure outside Kolkata, and fewer professional contracts compared to male counterparts.

• ODISHA:

Historical Evolution:



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Odisha began emphasizing women's football in the 1980s, coinciding with the rise of structured inter-district competitions and support from the state football association. The state's focus on sports infrastructure and youth programs provided a foundation for developing competitive female players.

Regional Contributions:

- **Football Academies:** Odisha established football academies that trained young girls systematically.
- **Community Programs:** Grassroots initiatives expanded opportunities for tribal and coastal populations.
- **State Representation:** Odisha regularly produces finalists in national championships, contributing players to the Indian national team.

Socio-Cultural Impact:

- Football has empowered tribal and marginalized girls, enabling them to pursue sports professionally.
- The sport encourages parental support and societal acceptance, fostering gender equality at both school and community levels.
- Participation in football has created pathways for education, scholarships, and career development for girls from economically weaker backgrounds.

Achievements and Challenges:

- Odisha is recognized for consistent national-level performance.
- Challenges include rural infrastructural gaps, reliance on government funding, and limited professional league exposure compared to metropolitan regions.

• KERALA

Historical Evolution:

Kerala's women's football emerged in the 1980s through school and college tournaments, gradually developing into state-level competitions. Urban centers like Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram became hubs for female players, supported by clubs and local associations.

Regional Contributions:

- **Urban Clubs:** Provided structured leagues, coaching, and competitive exposure.
- **Scholarships and Training Programs:** State initiatives supported education and athletic training simultaneously.
- **Participation in National Championships:** Kerala consistently contributes players to national-level competitions.

Socio-Cultural Impact:

- Kerala's progressive stance on female education and sports facilitated acceptance of football as a legitimate pursuit for girls.
- Football has become a tool for empowerment, enabling girls from both urban and rural areas to challenge societal expectations.



Mritunjoy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

- Community support has fostered leadership, discipline, and confidence among female athletes.

Achievements and Challenges:

- Kerala consistently performs well in national championships and develops skilled players.
- Challenges include limited professional opportunities, lower media attention, and regional disparity in sports infrastructure compared to states like Manipur and West Bengal.
- **INSIGHTFUL SYNTHESIS:**

Across these four regions, certain patterns emerge:

1. Community and Cultural Acceptance: The regions that embraced women's participation culturally—like Manipur and Kerala—produced sustained talent.
2. Institutional Support: West Bengal and Odisha's structured state and district programs enabled systematic talent development.
3. Grassroots Development: Clubs, schools, and academies were crucial in all four regions for scouting and nurturing young players.
4. Socio-Economic Empowerment: Participation in football created avenues for education, scholarships, and careers, especially for girls from marginalized backgrounds.
5. Challenges: Common across all regions were financial constraints, infrastructure gaps, limited professional opportunities, and lower media coverage relative to men's football.

7. DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study reveal that the development of women's football in India is fundamentally a story of regional exceptionalism rather than systemic national integration. As corroborated by the literature, hubs like Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala have succeeded not primarily due to top-down AIFF policy, but through the confluence of localized socio-cultural permissiveness, community-level institutional entrepreneurship, and the strategic exploitation of existing sports or educational infrastructures (Mullick & Gangadharan, 2018; Joseph & Varghese, 2022). This creates a paradoxical landscape: islands of high performance and empowerment exist within a sea of national neglect, leading to a talent pipeline that is both geographically concentrated and vulnerable.

The analysis underscores that football functions as a contested site for gender transgression and social mobility. In regions like Manipur and Odisha, the sport provides a legitimate and respected avenue for women, particularly from tribal and marginalized communities, to negotiate public space, access education via scholarships, and redefine traditional gender scripts (Nayak & Pradhan, 2021; Thapa, 2017). This aligns with global frameworks positioning sport as a tool for "Generation Equality" (UN Women, 2020). However, this empowerment is precarious, contingent on continued athletic performance in an ecosystem with severely underdeveloped post-career pathways and professional structures.

The launch of the IWL represents a critical institutional intervention for professionalization but exposes a core tension. While it provides a national platform, its sustainability and ability to



Mritunjy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

deepen the talent pool are hampered by the very regional disparities it seeks to transcend. The league's reliance on existing hubs for talent and the chronic deficits in media capital, corporate sponsorship, and grassroots infrastructure elsewhere perpetuate a cycle of uneven development (Bala Devi et al., 2022; Patwardhan, 2022). Therefore, the future trajectory hinges on whether policy can systematize and replicate the enabling conditions of the regional hubs through targeted investment, knowledge transfer, and a robust gender-inclusive sports policy, moving beyond a model of accidental excellence to one of engineered equity.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ Conclusion

Based on the analytical study of regional hubs, the following conclusions are drawn:

- I. **Regional Disparity Defines Development:** The growth of women's football in India is intrinsically linked to specific geographic hubs—Manipur, West Bengal, Odisha, and Kerala. Success in these regions stems not from a uniform national policy but from unique, localized ecosystems combining cultural acceptance, community investment, and institutional support.
- II. **Football as a Site of Social Transformation:** In these hubs, the sport has proven to be a powerful vehicle for gender empowerment and social mobility. It challenges patriarchal norms, fosters leadership and confidence, and provides tangible pathways to education and recognition, particularly for girls from marginalized and tribal communities.
- III. **The Professionalization-Participation Paradox:** While the launch of the Indian Women's League (IWL) marks a significant step towards professionalization, it has not yet resolved fundamental structural issues. The league's ecosystem remains fragile, characterized by severe financial constraints, inadequate media visibility, and limited career longevity, which collectively risk disincentivizing broad-based participation despite the creation of a top-tier platform.
- IV. **Systemic Barriers Persist Nationally:** Beyond the successful hubs, the sport confronts enduring, nationwide barriers. These include deep-seated socio-cultural resistance, critical gaps in rural and semi-urban infrastructure, a scarcity of qualified female coaches, and a vast inequity in resource allocation and media coverage compared to men's football.
- V. **Pathway to Sustainable Growth Requires Integrated Strategy:** The future of women's football depends on moving from a model of accidental regional excellence to one of engineered national equity. This necessitates a dual strategy: vertically strengthening the professional pyramid (IWL, contracts, post-career plans) and horizontally replicating the enabling conditions of the hubs through targeted grassroots programs, inclusive policy, and cross-regional knowledge transfer.

In essence, women's football in India stands at a critical juncture, possessing demonstrated transformative potential but requiring a concerted, systematic effort to overcome systemic challenges and ensure its growth is inclusive, sustainable, and truly national in scope.



Mritunjy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

➤ **Recommendations**

1. **Strengthen Grassroots Programs:** Expand school and community-based football programs across urban and rural areas, focusing on underrepresented regions.
2. **Enhance Professional Opportunities:** Expand the IWL, ensure fair remuneration, and provide structured pathways from state to international levels.
3. **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in training facilities, medical support, and stadiums in rural and remote areas.
4. **Socio-Cultural Advocacy:** Conduct awareness campaigns to challenge gender norms, engage families, and promote female role models.
5. **Coaching and Mentorship:** Train female coaches, establish mentorship programs linking experienced players with young talent.
6. **Media and Sponsorship Promotion:** Increase media coverage, secure sponsorships, and leverage social media to showcase achievements.
7. **Policy and Institutional Support:** Implement national and state-level policies prioritizing women's football, ensuring consistent funding, monitoring, and collaboration between associations and educational institutions.

9. AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

The writers affirm that they have no connections to, or engagement with, any group or body That provides financial or non-financial assistance for the topics or resources covered in this Manuscript.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, And/or publication of this article.

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Mritunjy Das, Sarbeswar Konai, Priya Samanta and Saikot Chatterjee (2026). *Empowering Women through Football: an Analytical Study of Regional Hubs in India*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Reviews*, 5(2), 117-130.

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