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COMMENTARY ARTICLE

Policy Approaches to Women with Disabilities in Sport across Asia: Between Idealism and Realism

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In recent decades, sport has gained growing recognition as a means of empowerment for women with disabilities in Asia—physically, psychologically, and socially. Yet, the policymaking landscape in this area remains fragmented and inconsistent. A clear gap persists between strategic documents and the lived realities of women with disabilities (Thomas & Smith, 2008). This commentary critically examines current policy directions, highlights structural challenges, and explores cultural dynamics in Islamic contexts.

Policy Documents and Implementation Gaps

Several regional and international frameworks—such as the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” and Asia-specific disability empowerment plans—emphasize the importance of inclusive sport for women with disabilities (UNESCO, 2015; Asian Paralympic Committee, 2021). However, in many Asian countries, these policies are either weakly enforced or entirely symbolic. Lack of long-term political commitment, insufficient funding, and a shortage of qualified female coaches specializing in disability sport remain persistent obstacles (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). Moreover, most policies neglect to incorporate the direct voices and lived experiences of women with disabilities, limiting their relevance and sustainability. Current scholarship and policy reviews often concentrate on East Asia and West Asia, leaving Central and South Asia underexplored. These regions have large populations of women with disabilities whose opportunities in sport remain poorly documented. Expanding the geographical lens is critical to ensure that regional diversity and different socio-cultural barriers are captured in policy design.

Cultural Characteristics in Islamic Contexts

Islamic-majority societies across Asia are diverse, yet several recurring cultural patterns shape women’s opportunities for sport, especially for women with disabilities.

1. Religious and interpretive diversity – Islam is interpreted in various ways. While some communities emphasise conservative gender norms, others actively support women’s physical activity as compatible with religious values (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2013).



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2. Modesty norms and dress requirements – Expectations about clothing (e.g., hijab, modest sportswear) influence participation. The rise of sports hijabs and modest athletic apparel has expanded opportunities, but international sporting regulations still sometimes create barriers (Sahi, 2020).
3. Gendered social roles and family expectations – In many contexts, family approval and community perceptions of honour influence whether women can travel to and participate in sport, particularly for women with disabilities who may require assistance (Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2010).
4. Value of women-only and faith-sensitive spaces – Female-only facilities, coaches, and segregated sessions often encourage participation where mixed-gender sport is discouraged (Pfister, 2010).
5. Socioeconomic and geographic variation – Urban, middle-class women often have greater access to sport facilities, while rural women face compounded infrastructural and cultural barriers. National contexts (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey) require locally adapted policies (Benn et al., 2010).
6. Intersection of stigma – Women with disabilities often face overlapping discrimination due to gender, disability, and cultural perceptions of physical activity. This can lead to lower expectations of their participation (Pfister, 2010).
7. Faith-based advocacy and women’s agency – Feminist interpretations within Muslim contexts have successfully framed sport as a right grounded in religious values, creating culturally resonant justifications for participation (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

While existing literature often centers on women with physical impairments, women with intellectual disabilities remain particularly marginalized in sport policy and practice. Their challenges—such as communication barriers, lack of adapted training methods, and insufficiently trained coaches—differ significantly from those with physical disabilities. Failure to address these specific needs risks reinforcing exclusion within an already marginalized population.

The Role of Regional and International Bodies

Organizations such as the Asian Paralympic Committee, WHO, and UN Women have advanced the cause of sport for women with disabilities. However, many efforts remain project-based with limited structural continuity and impact (Asian Paralympic Committee, 2021; World Health Organization, 2022). Sustainable change requires long-term political will, consistent investment, and accountability mechanisms. Future programs must embed mechanisms to capture first-hand accounts and participatory input from women with different types of disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, ensuring that interventions move beyond symbolic gestures.

Learning from Promising National Practices

Japan and South Korea have implemented targeted measures for women with disabilities, such as specialized federations, talent identification, and financial incentives (Kim & Park, 2020). These examples show the value of tailored policy, although cultural adaptation is essential before replication in other contexts.

Policy Recommendations

1. Evidence-based policymaking involving women with disabilities at all stages.
2. Training and recruiting female professionals with disability-specific expertise.
3. Media advocacy to counter stereotypes and promote diverse role models.

4. Culturally sensitive program design in Islamic contexts — offering both mixed and women-only options, engaging religious leaders, and accommodating modest dress codes without compromising safety.
5. Sustained collaboration between governments, NGOs, and international organizations to secure resources and maintain accountability.

Conclusion

Inclusive sport policy for women with disabilities in Asia must address not only legislative and structural gaps but also deeply rooted cultural dynamics, particularly in Islamic contexts. When cultural sensitivity is paired with evidence-based planning and strong institutional support, sport can move from symbolic inclusion to genuine empowerment.

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