



---

**MRS Awards 2020**  
International Research

**Finalist**  
**BBC World Service**

**Attitudes towards women's sports,  
sportswomen and women in India**

## SUMMARY

Research, at its best, not just improves business outcomes, but it makes a solid contribution to the society in which that business operates. The research for Indian Sportswoman of the Year (ISWOTY) managed to do exactly that.

The research project was complex and complicated, covering a country of more than a billion people, across 20 languages, divided up into 62 socio-cultural regions (SCRs). The fieldwork was conducted at a time of deep political unrest in the country, which made it doubly challenging that many of the questions asked were about topics that were often not discussed openly in Indian society. Importantly, rather than just investigate sports as an isolated field of activity, the research project investigated women's sports in the context of India's social, cultural and political environment.

The research had three key impacts: a) it changed the conversation around women's sports in India, by demonstrating the difference between perceived and actual attitudes of Indians; b) it enabled the BBCs Indian operations to 'own' a territory that chimed with the self-image of India as a country making huge progress and c) it furthered the BBCs stated commitment to diversity by influencing quality journalism about women and women's sports.

## SYNOPSIS

India, according to numerous indices, is one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman. Despite the odds, however, sportswomen in India have carved their way in sports like wrestling and boxing, long considered a male domain. The North Indian state of Haryana is known for its skewed gender ratio with 924 girls per 1000 boys, but this tiny state has produced several women Olympians. Of late, the Indian media has started to cover women's sports in some detail, especially since Indian sportswomen have often outshone their male counterparts to bring sporting glory to the country.

However, it was widely believed that the attitudes in India at large were still somewhat stuck in the past, with sportswomen perceived to be not as good as sportsmen and there still being an attitude gender gap when it came to women's sports.

With the backdrop of the first-ever BBC Indian Sportswomen of the Year Award initiative, we designed a study of unprecedented scope to better understand the attitudes and perceptions of Indians towards women's sports, sportswomen, and women in India. Kantar India was commissioned to conduct the fieldwork and co-design the study.

### The first research of its kind in India

A massive challenge for the research team was to ensure that the data would account for the complex socio-cultural diversity of the country: across 28 states, Indians practice more than 6 religions, belong to 2,000 ethnic groups and speak 22 official languages but more than 19,000 mother tongues and dialects. India is considered by many to be the largest religiously pluralistic and multi-ethnic country in the world and therefore extremely challenging country to conduct research that would be 'representative'. But on top of this, at the time of fieldwork (Feb-Mar 2020), the country was in turmoil given national protests against the government's proposed legislation seen as disenfranchising many minority groups.

The research objective was to understand societal gender issues, people's behaviour, attitudes and perceptions towards sports in general, but more specifically women in sports; and evaluate whether attitudes towards women in society correlate with attitudes towards women in sports. The business objectives were to use the research findings as a base for long-term editorial output and disrupt the narrative about women in India through positive and inspiring stories.

### The complexity and challenges of research in a country of a billion people

The fieldwork for this huge quantitative study, with interviewing conducted face to face, kicked off after an exhaustive review of the literature around gender, sports and gender in sports.

The questionnaire was broken down into 6 parts: gender equality, interest and participation in sports, sports viewing habits, awareness of women sports players, attitude to women's sports and discrimination; and included behavioural and attitudinal questions.

A staggering 10,181 face-to-face interviews were conducted in 14 states: Bihar, Odisha, Manipur, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan.

However, this still did not go far enough to make a study 'representative' enough to draw insights that are powerful and usable. The best way of understanding India is to think of it as a continent. This means that each of these individual states is like a self-contained country and even within each state there are innumerable socio-cultural differences. In order to account for that, we divided up each state into what's called socio-cultural regions (SCRs), which became our sampling units. This gave us 62 socio-cultural regions, on top of which the research design aimed to represent the selected states at the aggregate levels of state, urban/rural, town classes, and village classes. The final sample covered a population base of 720 million with a sampling error of 0.98%. The sampling methodology used was multistage stratified random sampling. Fieldwork was conducted in a wide spread of rural and urban locations and in different classes of towns and villages. We interviewed men and women, young and old across all socioeconomic classes.

Conducting a research study of this scale is always challenging as it requires a literal army of fieldworkers- many of whom are not educated beyond a secondary level. There were significant additional challenges in reaching smaller towns and rural areas in the midst of unrest owing to the recently announced Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens. Due to heightened audience sensitivities around answering questions and 'stranger danger', the team sometimes faced assault from locals, detention by the police and were sometimes prevented from entering the village. All of this required constant monitoring and recalibrating the fieldwork plans and sampling processes on the go. Note that all of this was happening within an extremely tight deadline –the project was given the green signal in the middle of December, with the results of the research to be announced on the 8th of March, at an awards ceremony which was expected to feature the Sports Minister of India.

### Outcomes and impact

The BBC organised events in several cities in the run-up to the main award ceremony to talking about the key findings of the research and broaden the conversation around Indian women in sports.

The research project established that, contrary to perceptions, there is a general trend towards increasing support for women's equality and their participation in the workforce; women's sports consumption is still a male domain but the broadcasting of women's sports has been able to get more women involved/engaged with sports; and attitudes that have the potential to be a barrier to women's participation in sports are expressed uniformly across gender.

The research was therefore widely covered in the Indian news media. Interestingly, while some of the media organisations chose to focus on the positive outcomes some of the organisations continued to focus on the negatives. But the very fact that there was a conversation about this topic in the news media was itself a testimony to the wide impact the research project- and the broader initiative – had in the country.

In a rather unusual but welcome recognition, the key findings of the research were presented at the Awards ceremony itself. Nominees invited to say a few words, immediately referenced the research just presented and its potential to inspire women around the country to engage in sports. Said nominee Manasi Joshi, "The total of 64% of people who do not pursue sports, I would like to tell those 64%, that sports have the power to change your life and the ability to completely to take situations head-on and you should see how it has helped my life. Pick up a sport; pick whichever sport that you love". After the event, the Minister for Sports in India tweeted: "The deep research for the event and extensive coverage of the show makes the initiative hugely successful and prestigious!" This was a notable achievement for the BBC's operations in India because the present government has not been the biggest fan of the BBC's impartial and unbiased news coverage. This tweet from the Minister led to a deeper conversation on social media about the initiative and the research, exposing the BBC to an audience group not necessarily till then consumers or supporters of the BBC. The research was formally released on the day of the awards, as a report published by the BBC.

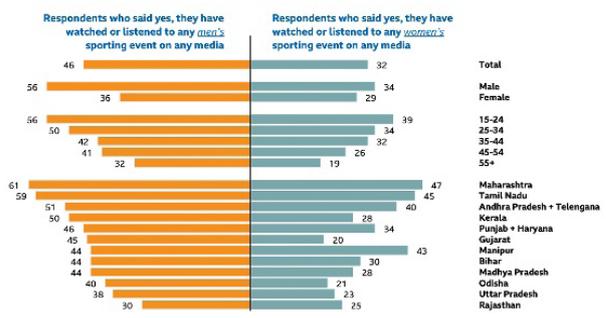
The research also informed a series of editorial programmes based on research findings. These included video documentaries, success and failure stories of Indian sportswomen, data journalism on women in sport, ground reports and more, with a view to provide a 360-degree view on Women in Indian sports.

Because the research was so broad and so deep, the journalists in India aim to keep drawing from the findings to create new stories that continue to keep women's sports in India at the forefront of the conversation.

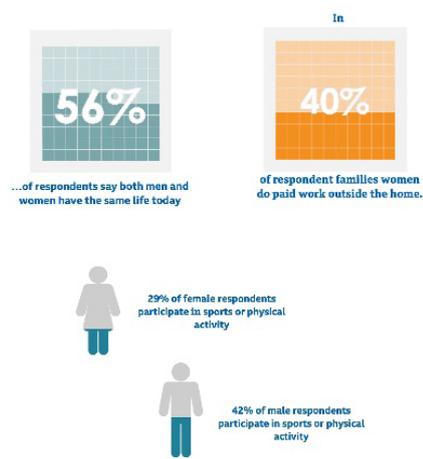
Given the quality of the research, the challenges overcome in conducting the research in such a difficult international environment, and the business and societal impact of the research, we believe the project is a deserving winner of the International Research category.

"The project has not only formed the basis of great ground journalism within the BBC on Indian Sportswomen, but has brought to light topics and issues not usually talked about in India. It has transformed the understanding of the topic for the sports fraternity." (Vandana Vijay, Head of Television Journalism, India, BBC World Service)

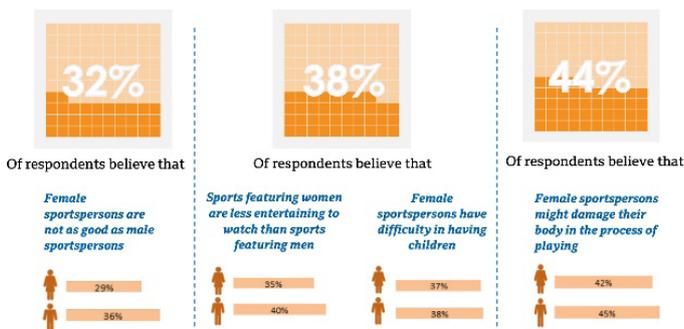
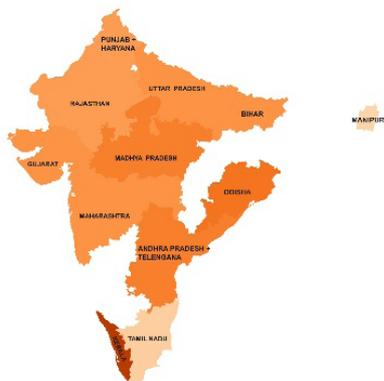
*"This research was the first of its kind in India. It gave us a compelling understanding of the area and a real impact amongst the Indian media, influencers and policy makers including the Sports Minister of India and top Indian Sportswomen"*  
(Rupa Jha, Head of Indian Languages, BBC World Service).



Base All - 10181  
 Q: Thinking about men's sports, have you watched or listened to any sporting event on TV, radio or any other digital platform, in part/highlights or in full in the last 6 months? It could be any sports like cricket, football, throwball, volleyball, athletics, shooting, etc.  
 Q: Thinking about men's sports, have you ever watched in person (i.e. not on TV or digital) but on the field or stadium) any sport at the professional level. It could be any sports like cricket, football, throwball, volleyball, athletics, shooting, etc.



The darker the colour, the more people agree with the statement: "A woman's place is at home"



Base All - 10181  
 Now I will read out certain statements. For each statement please tell me how much you agree or disagree on this scale