

The Women's Premier League - A Paradigm Shift in Indian 'Women's Cricket'

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Abstract

The beginning of the Women's Premier League (WPL), which started its first season in March 2023, is significant for Indian cricket. The WPL is dismantling the social construct of masculinity in cricket, deconstructing a cultural belief that cricket is a men's game and opening up the game for women in India and beyond. The WPL mirrors the Indian Premier League (IPL), and its creation as a formal league marks a significant step towards increasing visibility, investment, and professionalism for female cricketers. This article charts the development of the WPL and its integration into women's cricket, with particular reference to the Indian women's team, specifically their powerful images during the 2017 ICC Women's World Cup - one of the most defining moments in women's cricket. Analysis will examine the economic hinterlands and sponsoring landscapes surrounding marketers for leagues of this nature. While observing the behaviors that may promote a commercially viable market with audience absorption, positive advances have been made till now. However, much remains to be done in addressing the infrastructure deficit, the gender disparity in funding, and the inadequate availability of development routes. Future research may want to adopt a longitudinal approach to tracing these pathways, as well as WPL sustainability models, over time and examining the longer-term benefits in support of grassroots development, considering contextual factors pertinent to women's participation in cricket and the economic sustainability of women's sport. We recommend that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to better understand the impact of grassroots development interventions on gender equity for women in cricket, the financial sustainability of women's sport, and increasing levels of participation. It may also be helpful to evaluate the sociocultural barriers faced by female cricket players and identify the policy levers that can inform different approaches to creating an inclusive path for the growth of women's cricket in India.

Keywords: *Women's Cricket, Women's Premier League (WPL), Cricket Economy, Gender Disparity, Sports Sponsorship, Development Challenges*

Introduction

The IPL professional Twenty20 Cricket League in India has amassed worldwide attention throughout these years and has become a representation of elite cricket in the sport of cricket. The Twenty20 Challenge, organized by the BCCI, serves as a platform for the inclusion of women in the women's IPL. The Women's T20 Challenge began in 2018 as a series of exhibition matches featuring

some of the world's top female cricketers. The Women's T20 Challenge was well received by both players and fans, and has now put the presence of women's teams in the IPL at the forefront for the future.

The Women's IPL auction on December 21, 2021, was a historic moment in women's cricket. A total of 43 players were available, and eight teams competed to secure the best players. The players were split into three categories: overseas players, Indian players, and uncapped players. The highest bid in this category went to the 18-year-old Jeremiah Rodrigues, whom the Rajasthan Royals picked up for INR 2.8 crore.

The WPL will have the largest impact in helping to elevate women's cricket to the next level, an area that is evolving both socially and economically. The men's IPL is an established sport, and the WPL presents several new promotional opportunities for companies to leverage, such as brand development and generating revenue from this fledgling sport. New awareness and investment in women's cricket will be crucial to growth and demonstrating its viability in the Indian cricket market. The 2018 Women's T20 Challenge and the WPL, as of 2023, have established a footprint for women's cricket in India. The WPL is not just another tournament; it represents a shift in general awareness, acceptance, and indeed a change for women's cricket. The correction is supported by this article's claim that WPL signals a major change for women's cricket in India. The WPL offers numerous opportunities for the women's game, including sponsorship that helps simulate career opportunities, as it provides the proper infrastructure and adequate training conditions. In addition, WPL provides domestic players with a new opportunity, as they will have the chance to play alongside international players, which nurtures and develops young talent.

Along with providing potential scope for further improvement, WPL provides them with exposure to engage with national and international teams. This, in turn, will ensure the establishment of a talented group and thereby ensure the sport's future. In short, WPL supports the Indian Women's cricket economy. WPL envisages its ability to provide economic support, create job opportunities, and establish future talent. On top of placement and propping up the current growth of the game. The ladies in the cricket team focus on reaching their potential, which creates a more professional atmosphere for women's cricket players towards the game. There is a transition away from drawn-out bowlers and defensive batting, and the game displays a more attacking style of bowling and batting, which correlates with a higher number of runs and increased excitement.

Methodology

Research Design

The study is a qualitative investigation that primarily employs descriptive analysis to examine the past, present, and future of women's cricket in India, drawing on developments within the WPL. The purpose of this research was to identify the social, economic, and infrastructure contexts that emerged from the body of knowledge established in the literature and documents associated with women's cricket. I sought to meet the research objectives via the review of secondary data, the identification of case studies, and through the interpretive synthesis of the literature and existing reports pertaining to women's cricket in association with the WPL.

The Approach

The methodology was aspirational and analytical. The method involved a document analysis of women's cricket and the WPL, which included reports, news articles, and documents published by sporting organizations related to women's cricket. The review aimed to identify any trends and develop an understanding of the nature of growth, impact, and challenges that women's cricket (from 2018 and the WPL, and beyond) is facing in India. The information for this research was obtained

from a number of secondary data sources, including Official reports and publications from the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and the Women's Premier League (WPL) communications. The reports and articles from media outlets, academic journals, and reputable news sources that cover the development of women's cricket and the WPL, as well as their impact. Academic papers, journals, and research articles examining gender bias, infrastructure references, and affordability in India's sports. Data and statistics are obtained from various sources, including statistics, sponsorship figures, viewership, and valuation reports provided by companies and firms to assess market analysis. Interviews and statements from stakeholders that are publicly available.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed qualitatively, focusing on themes related to game development, economic impact, social impact, and barriers or developmental challenges. A comparative analysis was undertaken to track and monitor progression over time, as well as to highlight differences and identify future opportunities for development.

Impact of Women's Cricket League

Game Development

Women can enhance their abilities and growth through the tournament, which also provides the team with access to regional and global teams. This creates the foundation for future prospects and young talent, opening the door for the sport's growth. The development of a sustainable "women's cricket" economy in India is one obvious and quantifiable result of the WPL. Along with the upside is the opportunity for young talent, as they see money and sponsorship being added to women's cricket. More money invested in women's cricket equates to more opportunities, and therefore, new challenges for the sport and a stronger talent pipeline movement. The former is indicative of the progression of women's cricket as it becomes professionalized, demonstrating clarity and attention to detail in playing style. For instance, what this WPL provides is an opportunity to demonstrate these skills for fans, helping them develop their engagement, understanding, and appreciation, as well as their talent, in the women's space.

Impact on the economy

Considering the broader framework of the Cricket economy, WPL influences 'Women's Cricket' specifically and sports at large. Even investors and sponsors are showing interest in supporting and promoting women's cricket, thereby opening up new avenues for investment. Commercial sports opportunities have also begun to emerge due to the overwhelming popularity of women's cricket. Above all, WPL could provide more job opportunities and employment possibilities in various fields such as promotion and management. Skilled and experienced individuals will be in greater demand for marketing, operations, and logistics as investment in these fields increases. Moreover, the equal pay implemented had an impact in the sports field as well. Australia, New Zealand, and England implemented the policy following India, and it had a significant impact on these nations.

Along with the contributions of WPL, the brand itself is expected to be well-received by top brands, driven by the increasing demand for 'women's cricket' and the accomplishments of the Indian Women's Cricket team. Through a tournament, these brands would gain public attention as they get a rare opportunity to support sports. WPL provides opportunities for sponsors to support teams, players, or even sponsor the entire competition, which, in a sense, is a new source of income for sports and helps in its progress and development. Brands consider the interests and demands of the female fan base to safeguard the interests of fans within a particular demographic. This helps them collaborate with women athletes in terms of marketing their goods and services, which includes advertising campaigns, engaging female fans, and associating with organisations that support women's development. They

target female fans utilizing both sponsorship and the celebrity of the female athlete. They utilize female athletes from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and demographics to give a more relatable endorsement to female fans. This promotes diversity and inclusion, motivating more women to participate in the sporting arena. Additionally, brands that strive for popularity take female fan involvement to a new level, aiming to provide female fans with special experiences in the hopes of fostering loyalty. The aim of these experiences, which aim to raise the status of female fans, is to provide meet-and-greets, programs with real players, or behind-the-scenes experiences to make them feel loyal and involved. The BCCI believes the WPL will transform women's cricket into a profitable sport. We see this change as the sale of five WPL Teams - Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Lucknow, sold for Rs 4,670 crore. It is worth noting that each team was sold for an average of Rs 930 crores, compared to Rs 500 crores, which was the amount for which the eight IPL teams were sold in 2008. However, there has always been a sizable fan following for men's cricket. The survey estimates that 20 million people watch women's cricket on average in India, and that figure rises to 500 million during the IPL.

Social Impact

The WPL is expected to have a cultural impact on India by changing the perception of women's sports, beyond the cricket ground. The triumph of the event will encourage more women to follow their aspirations in the sports industry by challenging conventional gender norms and dispelling gender prejudices. It might change how the game is played, viewed, and valued in the nation and open the door to a future for it that is more equal and inclusive. The business is confident that the media rights to the WPL, which it acquired for Rs 951 crore over a five-year period, will prove to be a priceless asset. WPL is projected to accomplish the bigger task of collecting audiences for different mobile apps, and advertiser interest has also been quite high. Karan Taurani, Senior Vice President of Elara Capital, states that this investment can only yield significant returns over the long run if women's cricket gains widespread popularity. WPL intends to expand its target demographic to promote its brands to women. In the medium to long run, return on capital invested will only increase if it receives widespread acceptance and if media rights revenue has a multiplier effect during the upcoming cricket auction round. The return on capital employed can only improve in the medium to long term if there is widespread uptake and if increased media rights revenue leads to a multiplier effect across the next round of auctions in 2028.

The WPL is more than just a cricket tournament - it is a cultural moment with the power to change mindsets and shift women's sports in India. As the sport grows and becomes more visible, we will see more women playing cricket, which will help break down gender stereotypes and challenge a crucial gender constraint. The WPL can help change the world and change the frame of reference from which we view cricket, and with that, the manner in which cricket is played, consumed, valued, collectively accepted, and given equitable space in society. WPL also opens up business opportunities that enable revenue generation through media rights, mobile apps, and advertising partnerships. However, this all depends on the market acceptance of women cricketers and their acceptance by fans.

Developmental Challenges in Women's Cricket

Deficiency in Infrastructure and Facilities

The biggest issue for women cricketers is the inadequate infrastructure and facilities available to them. Women's cricket consistently suffers from its underdevelopment and lower developmental priority compared to men's cricket. Due to insufficient infrastructure and a lack of resources, the development of the women's cricket team has its limitations. BCCI is not providing women cricketers with opportunities for training, which does not provide them with what they need to compete at the same level as men. Although BCCI has done better in recent years. Now there is a formal department for women's cricket, which demonstrates that the BCCI is allocating and investing resources in women's cricket.

Gender Bias

The women's cricket team of our country also faces the challenge of gender bias. Female cricket is often regarded as less than and inferior, and does not receive the same level of respect and support as the 'men's cricket' team. As a result, there are fewer resources available and fewer opportunities for women cricketers, thereby restricting their growth. The BCCI has taken various steps to support the women's cricket team. To support the women's cricket team, the BCCI has organized domestic tournaments for women and now pays women who participate in the Women's T20 Challenge the same salary as their male counterparts. The BCCI attempted to promote development in women's cricket through various campaigns and initiatives.

Limited Media Exposure

A further challenge faced by women cricketers in India is a lack of media coverage and exposure. The media definitely gives more coverage to the 'men's cricket' matches and the medium of men's cricket, than that of 'women's cricket.' So, in a sense, 'women's cricket', tends to get marginalized in the coverage, because 'women's cricket' tends to be invisible because of the male cricket. The BCCI has attempted to change that or at least mitigate it, and close or reduce that gap to make 'women's cricket' accessible and raise its profile. To achieve this, they created a site for 'women's cricket' and began television presentations for women's matches. That changed the perception of women's cricket and made those matches accessible to their supporters.

Lack of Sponsorship and Commercial Support

The women's cricket team faces challenges, which include insufficient commercial support and sponsorship. The women's cricket team has less commercial appeal to sponsors compared to the men's team, making it difficult for female cricketers to secure more lucrative sponsorship deals. BCCI has taken steps to enhance the sponsorship and commercial support for the women's cricket team. The women's T20 challenge, which was organized by the BCCI, provided women's teams with an opportunity to connect to different brands that support 'women's cricket'.

Findings

Contribution of WPL to the Development of the Game

The impact of the WPL on talent and cricket is very apparent. The emergence of the more aggressive and entertaining approach to the game has improved the game itself and increased its popularity. It is a competitive player development vehicle, and young players are aspiring to a higher level of play than they would have historically.

Financial Implications and Future Outlook

The level of investment and valuations of the WPL teams demonstrate some recognition in women's cricket as a commercial venture. The growing interest in sponsorship and media rights revenue reflects an optimistic outlook ahead, as long as we can continue to grow the audience and commercial attraction.

Cultural and Social Change

Overall, the WPL is acting as a social agenda that is creating new gender norms and social equality. It is establishing systemic norms that enable women to occupy a space of acceptance and visibility. It can also create new presence and norms for valuing women's sports, which may have a positive impact on the entire sports industry.

Infrastructure and Development Challenges

Ongoing persistent infrastructure shortages are limiting the ability to ramp up women's cricket. Once the gaps are filled with ongoing and sustainable investment, the progress and development of women's cricket can be maintained, especially in rural and under-invested parts of the country. Improving facilities will help develop pipelines to get more women to play cricket.

Gender Bias and Media Coverage

Gender bias is a large barrier with women as they are less covered and they are also less supported. Incremental structures are necessary to expand the coverage and marketisation of female athletes to broader audiences, thereby increasing awareness of women's cricket and benefiting from sponsorship opportunities.

Sponsorship and Commercial Support

While one may establish a base case for sponsorship based on the success of the WPL, lasting commercial support needs to be developed to ensure ongoing success. To potentially build a female customer base for commercial support, possibly a little narrowly, through targeted marketing or inclusive campaigns may bolster brand affiliation and increase revenue.

Recommendations

Policy recommendations urge equitable compensation for women's cricketers--salary, match and sponsorship fees, and performance incentives that strive for excellence and youth involvement--and a fully-developed strategy that clearly identifies pathways, youth academies, identification processes and measurable timelines, and targets which include elementary and college physical education programs guiding women's cricket accessed through government involvement, to drive engagement and enthusiasm for commercial sport at an early age; an elite, generic development plan developed through grass-roots participation should provide directions that include building modern gender-neutral training facilities, upgrade existing facilities for International overcoming visibility & accessibility issues through travel and accommodation provision, programming support through talent identification youth and school programming. In regards to commercialisation, this would involve directed sponsorship for women's cricket to make an affordable proposition for the brands, to use CSR provisions to align the sponsorship with social ills, and raise promotion through digital media, including behind-the-scenes content and conversation with fans, developers, athletes, and stakeholders; sponsoring sportsmen long-term; and investing in analytics for viewer demographic and patterns to hone marketing practices and view potential sponsors to develop women's commercial sport.

Conclusion

The development of Indian women's cricket represents a positive change towards greater recognition, professionalism, and competitiveness on the global stage. The recent successes in World Cups and Asia Cups, as well as the establishment of the Women's Premier League (WPL), have inevitably enhanced the profile of women's cricket, while also pointing towards a higher standard and greater opportunities and platforms for female cricketers to develop and inspire a future generation. Nonetheless, Indian women's cricket remains significantly constrained—particularly in terms of commercial investment, infrastructure, and visibility—which hinders its full potential. Without a commitment and investment in world-class facilities and visibility, there will be no game development. The viability of the WPL as a pipeline to an international framework and player development is an option, but it will require some changes to the structure and advocacy to create those changes. The

study also has limitations. The data is limited and somewhat sporadic, particularly regarding the differences in visibility among various geographies in women's cricket (both emerging and established countries), as well as considering the ever-evolving landscape surrounding women's cricket. Future research on the longitudinal effects of leagues, such as the WPL, is also important, as are socio-economic factors surrounding female participation in cricket. The visionary phenomena that have emerged in observable and accessible forms cannot reach their full potential or achieve permanence without providing robust support or investing strategically, so that women's cricket in India can be actively involved and focused as a potential vehicle towards ultimately achieving productive distance or distinction, or purpose within the global sport.

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