

Phenomenon Of Wags: Sociological Analysis Of Sport

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I. Introduction

Sport plays a vital role in modern social life. It attracts the attention, time, resources, and energy of many millions of people around the world. Organized sport has the ability to shed light on many aspects of society such as education, health, media, economy, politics, families and communities, and to describe social processes such as socialization, globalization, and democratization.

Sport fills substantial columns of daily media coverage and has become an integral part of everyday routine of millions of people. Sports bring overflow of fans and audience in the stadiums debating over the best players and teams, sports occupy weekends and evenings of parents and children, sports generate massive revenue and commercial movement through bidding and betting, and are increasingly becoming object of public policy. A deeper understanding of sport as a social activity is therefore very essential. There is greater need today to use sociological perspective to understand sport as industry/market/field/social activity.

This article presents a brief review of prominent themes in sociology of sport. By analyzing the phenomenon of WAGs (term used to refer to wives and girlfriends of sportspeople), the article seeks to draw attention to how the field of sport is shaped by the gender regime.

Sociology of sports

Sociological study of sport has its firm beginning in the post-1960's period. Following the World War II, there was growing interest in sport from a sociological perspective in the West. By the 1960s, television was beginning to devote significant amounts of time to sport.

Professional leagues were developing and expanding, organized youth sport in communities and educational institutions were beginning to proliferate, and the Cold War was being fought at the Olympics and other international sports competitions. It is interesting to note that formation of professional bodies of sociological research of sport in this period involved insights from physical education. The International Committee for the Sociology of Sport (now named the International Sociology of Sport Association) was comprised of both sociologists and physical educators from East and West Germany, France, Switzerland, Finland, England, the Soviet Union, Poland, the United States, and Japan. Annual conferences were organized and substantial research published by this Association since 1966.

Along with physical education, sociology of sport is constituted by interdisciplinary inputs from other mainstream social science disciplines such as political science, economics, social psychology, cultural anthropology, history, geography, and religious studies. The early studies were mainly concerned about identifying the functions of sport and recreation and to determine how sport functioned to socialize individuals to set goals, maintain discipline, manage aggression, and adapt to change. As suggested by Kenyon & Loy (1965), the functionalist approach to sport coincided mutually with the 'social development' objectives of physical education. The view that sport reflects society was an important starting point for early sociology of sport. In post 1970's period, sociology of sport witnessed a shift towards 'critical studies' which was of course the result of the evident shift in mainstream sociology.

Rather than passively mirroring society, sport was now understood as actively helping to maintain power hierarchy in an inequitable society.

John Hargreaves' noteworthy work 'Sport, power and culture: a social and historical analysis of popular sport in Britain' (1986) firmly pointed out to the need to place sport in the context of power dynamics and cultural relations.

As pointed out by Washington and Karen (2001), increased number of studies in post 1990's are driven by two concerns of social stratification (in terms of gender, race/ethnicity and class) and the institutional/organizational context of sport drawing on the two fields of cultural studies and social history. Though the popular public perception looks at sport as increasingly accessible means of upward social mobility, sociological studies have interrogated the links between sport, class, race and ethnicity. Sociological perspective

has highlighted the need to understand the political economy governing sport in terms of administration, production of equipment, management of personnel etc. Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and social capital have enriched the understanding of relationship between social class and sports participation. Sociological perspective helps in explaining racial disparities, exclusion and tokenism in sport. Recent studies have brought practices of institutional racism to the forefront (Carrington 1998, Hartman 2000). John Hoberman's book 'Darwin's Athletes' (1997) analysed the process of a kind of 'cultural fixation' of black athletes strongly nurtured through media. He argued that celebration of participation of blacks in sports sustains traditional black stereotypes and underrates their intellectual achievements.

Recent studies have focused on the role of media and transaction of mediated sports. As stated by Washington and Karen,

'One of the most frequently discussed topics in sports sociology concerns the meaning of sports for social identity..... a number of recent studies have explored directly the effects of mediated sports on social identity, particularly national identity' (2001: 202).

The link between sports and globalization is another significant theme being explored in recent studies. Interestingly, more than the claims of globalization homogenizing everything, these studies have closely examined the local contexts in which sports is played and consumed.

Gender and sports

Since this article is about understanding the 'WAGs' phenomenon, a detail review of studies interrogating the link between gender and sport is essential.

Formation of modern sport in 19th century was accompanied by gendering of the practice of sport through ideological domination of masculinity. Patriarchal norms and gender relations segregating men as physically strong and competitive and women as fragile and domestic have significantly informed formation of sport as an institution. Mainstream sport could be termed as male-stream sport since they are dominated by the idea of male supremacy. The combination of skill, force and athletic superiority in athletic competition is regarded as a 'defining feature of masculine identity' (Theberg 2000: 323).

Women's participation is marginalized to 'soft' sports such as swimming/gymnastics/netball. Though women's participation in even 'male-oriented' sports like soccer/boxing is increasing since 2000, gender discrimination is still very rampant. Radhika Gupta's recent study (2021) of Indian cricket has shown how women's cricket is positioned as an "outsider" – not "true" cricket like the men's game in the sport world in spite of increasing popularity of women's cricket.

Women's participation at varied levels such as management, coaching and playing is still much lesser in comparison with male participation. Recent studies have shown how women get inferior facilities, lesser recruiting and coaching budgets and receive marginalized promotional funds.

Research also shows how the hegemonic construction of masculinity and femininity has resulted in 'othering' and 'infantilizing' of women athletes. Appearance of women athletes is given more importance and they are expected to maintain their 'femininity'. Female athletes are often stereotyped as sex symbols, while a more muscular body is perceived to be unnatural (Burnett 2001: 73).

Since 2000 onwards gender equity in sport and recreation is being strongly advocated by international forums and public policy initiatives. But the struggle for greater equality for women in sport is intrinsically linked with the wider socio-economic and political institutions and everyday practices. The link between gender and sport can be better understood only with a reference to the context of power, social construction and cultural consumption.

One of the significant elements of everyday cultural consumption that builds gender-based sports images is related to media coverage. Descriptions of women's sports in media point to prominent coverage of non-athlete aspects of women's lives. With the increasing usage and power of new media, involvement and a kind of interference of audience has substantially increased. One of the consequences of the new mediated sport is a trend of giving more visibility to personal, non-athlete aspects of lives of sportspeople. Conventional gender images are used in today's mediated sports in which a fan's interest in individual players may supersede interest in the team or the game, when a box score or a web report or a Twitt seems to create a pseudo-social relationship between the viewer and the athlete. The phenomenon of WAGs is one such example of drawing glamour and visibility through objectification of non- athlete women.

The phenomenon of 'WAGs'

The term 'WAGs' (wives and girlfriends) is often used to refer to the partners of sportspeople. The term came into being when the then manager of the England football team, Sven-Göran Eriksson, made the decision to allow players' wives and girlfriends travel with them to the 2006 FIFA world cup in Germany. England crashed out of the World Cup during the quarter finals, but the WAGs made major headlines. The women got huge attention to the point that former England manager Fabio Capello later 'banned' partners from

visiting their other halves during training. People were interested about what these women were wearing and where they were going out, more than the England team's football. This phenomenon in a way reordered the team. From then on, the term "WAG" has been firmly planted in the British spoken language. The Oxford English Dictionary incorporated it in 2011. WAGs provided a new wave of celebrities to the popular tabloids to fill their pages. It was a great way to create rivalries and a new breed of celebrity.

The field of football was the first to witness the impact of WAGs phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, the partners of players were blamed for the team's exit in the quarter final. These women have issued multiple complaints of being harassed and blamed by the media for their partners' performances.

Another major sport to face the impact of this phenomenon was Formula 1. Interest in personal lives of WAGs has been heightened with the hit Netflix documentary series 'Drive To Survive' which has huge audience outside of the arena of car racing. Several popular internet pages have also been found providing personal and private details about the lives of these Formula 1 WAGs.

The third major field experiencing the brunt is cricket. As a result, an unnecessary and regressive blame game has been targeted towards the partners of cricketers to the extent of harassment. Candice Warner, wife of cricketer David Warner had revealed how she was ill-treated by a member of the crowd in Adelaide while walking to meet her husband. The Australian cricket board had to offer her protection for the remaining matches. She had to face plenty of bad remarks since her husband was involved in a ball-tampering scandal during Australia's tour of South Africa.

The WAGs phenomenon has become a significant part of sport culture in recent years. While their partners are in the spotlight for representing various sports, the media and fans have a growing interest in their lives and their impact on the athlete's performance.

The media often focuses on their fashion choices, social lives, and relationships, which can lead to increased exposure and scrutiny. One of the key factors that make WAGs appealing to the public is the glamor associated with their lifestyle. They are often seen at exclusive events and parties, wearing designer clothes and jewelry, and are featured in high-end fashion magazines. This aspect of their lives has led to some criticism that their role is merely decorative, rather than based on their own achievements or contributions. They are also scrutinized for their relationships with their athlete partners. The media often focuses on the romantic lives of sportspeople, and their partners are not immune to the scrutiny. The public is often curious about the dynamics of the relationship and may speculate about the impact of the relationship on the athlete's performance.

The media attention surrounding WAGs has been a controversial topic, with some arguing that it objectifies and demeans women, while others argue that it is a natural by-product of the fame and attention that comes with being involved in professional sport. One of the primary issues with the media's focus on them is that it can overshadow the accomplishments of the athletes themselves. Many high-profile athletes have worked tirelessly to achieve success in their respective sport, but the media's fixation on their personal lives overshadows their achievements. Moreover, the constant scrutiny and attention on the personal lives can also be detrimental to their mental health and well-being. They are often subjected to relentless criticism and speculation about their relationships, appearance, and public behaviour, which can take a toll on their self-esteem and emotional state.

It is important to note that the portrayal of WAGs in the media has gradually evolved over time. While they were initially presented as nothing more than arm candy for their athlete partners, there has been a shift towards portraying them as independent, accomplished women who have their own identities and goals. While it can be problematic in some ways, it has also provided opportunities for WAGs to showcase their talents and interests.

WAGs are often subjected to intense scrutiny and criticism from the media and the public, which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and insecurity. They are constantly being judged on their appearance, behaviour, and personal life, which can create a sense of pressure to always present a flawless and perfect image. This pressure can be especially challenging for those who may not have chosen a life in the public eye and may not be equipped to handle the level of attention and scrutiny that comes with being associated with a high-profile athlete.

In India, cricket has a fan following and media hype way more than any other sport. Attention and investments flow more into it, leaving fewer opportunities for other sports like hockey, archery, football and the rest. Until recently, sports in India, was synonymous with cricket. Most media attention is focused on the lives of cricketers.

Consequently, the concept of WAGs has majorly touched the world of cricket. The meaning of WAGs in the case of India is the wives and girlfriends of cricketers.

Though the terminology of WAGs is fairly new to the Indian media, the instances of blaming wives of cricketers for their poor performance is not new. Media has over generations outrightly blamed wives of cricketers for perceived poor performance or faults of their husbands. Sharmila Tagore, actress and wife of former Indian captain Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi was blamed by her own family on an occasion where the

cricketer failed to fetch a catch. Sangeeta Bijlani, wife of former Indian captain Mohammed Azharuddin was brutally attacked by wild blames when he failed to perform in the semi - final of the 1996 ICC Cricket World Cup. This has incessantly continued thereafter with the likes of Anjali Tendulkar (wife of Sachin Tendulkar), Sakshi Singh Dhoni (wife of Mahendra Singh Dhoni), Hazel Keech (wife of Yuvraj Singh), most famously Anushka Sharma (wife of Virat Kohli) and most recently Athiya Shetty (wife of KL Rahul) facing the brunt of it. In the more recent times, with the onset of the digital and social media domain, there has been growing public interest in the personal lives of cricketers. Women like Anushka Sharma and Athiya Shetty have faced multiple breaches of privacy and merciless trolling and targeting in social media. It suggests that though the term WAGs is fairly new to India, the phenomenon surrounding it is long existing.

Sociological analysis of WAGs

The phenomenon of WAGs is not merely a popular trend but intrinsically connected with the mechanisms of the gender regime. As part of the popular culture, it reveals a great deal about relations of power and inequality. As noted above, sport has been widely acknowledged as a key institution contributing to the production, reproduction and sometimes also to contesting the gender inequality. The WAGs phenomenon certainly points to the male-dominated nature of sport. Sports, despite recent advances by women, is still largely organized by and for men. The gender gap in male/female sports shows how sportsmen draw high attention including interest in their private lives. In contrast, the focus on female athletes as mothers/wives is less and developing only since 2010. Furthermore, the media scrutiny subjected towards husbands and boyfriends of female athletes is a rarity.

WAGs shows the centrality of men in sports by conforming traditional roles of women as wife/girlfriend of sportsmen. In the recent times, the role of WAGs has been institutionalized in the society to the extent that it has transitioned into a full-fledged industry. WAGs as a popular cultural reference and system hugely supports the glamour industry and fuels extensive tabloid press coverage. It provides impetus to fields like fashion and entertainment in the public sphere. Increasingly they are becoming icons and role models for young women and blueprints for young men on what they should expect a wife/girlfriend to be. More than individual identity, the marital status of women is presented as more attractive and glamorous. The life of WAGs is projected as limited to fashion/appearance/entertainment.

Their individual achieved status or their own aspirational interests are rarely discussed. The images presented by WAGs to adolescent girls is worryingly restrictive in range. It perpetuates the myth that women's greatest accomplishments are achieved within the sphere of how they look and how many people's attention they are able to draw. While WAGs continue to exist as icons at the center, they provide a rather damaging blueprint of ideals for young girls and women.

II. Conclusion

Looking at WAGs from sociological perspective thus reveals how the field of sport is becoming increasingly mediated and how mediated sports has increasing socialization effects. It also sheds light on how sport is governed by male-centric values and how gender norms of the non-athlete world shape the world of sport in substantial manner.

The purpose of this article is to highlight sociological themes for further deeper analysis. Popular notions such as west-based WAGs are better assets for glamour and fashion industry than Asian and African WAGs reflect international media's bias for the West. The fact that WAGs based in developing countries enjoy far less public support and media attention points out to closer connect between sport and the cultural-geopolitical context. The trend of choosing WAGs as glamour icons only from the upper elite class also shows how the notion is deeply embedded in social hierarchy. The link between globalization and sport can be better understood through sociological study of WAGs. Sociological analysis of WAGs would provide enriching insights to understand the intersectionality in the patterns of class, race, ethnicity and gender inequality in society.

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