

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP – BREAKING BARRIERS & EMPOWERING CHANGE

A Study of P. T. Usha: From Indian Woman Athlete to the First Woman President of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA)

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Abstract

Women's leadership in sports administration has historically remained limited due to social barriers, gender discrimination, and lack of institutional support. However, several women have challenged these barriers and emerged as strong leaders in sports governance. One of the most remarkable examples in India is P. T. Usha, popularly known as the "Queen of Indian Track and Field." Her journey from being one of India's greatest athletes to becoming the first woman President of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) represents a major milestone in women's leadership in Indian sports. This paper explores her life, achievements, leadership qualities, and contribution toward empowering women in sports. It also examines how her leadership symbolizes a progressive shift in Indian sports administration and inspires future generations of women leaders.

Keywords: Women Leadership, P. T. Usha, Indian Olympic Association, Women Empowerment, Sports Administration

Introduction

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping institutions and creating opportunities for social transformation. In the field of sports, leadership has often been dominated by men, especially in administration and decision-making positions. Women athletes have achieved global recognition, but their participation in sports governance remains significantly low.

India has witnessed a remarkable transformation with the appointment of P. T. Usha as the first woman President of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) in 2022. Her election represents not only personal success but also a symbolic victory for women in leadership.

P. T. Usha's story is one of discipline, resilience, determination, and excellence. From winning medals at international competitions to guiding Indian sports policy, her leadership journey demonstrates how women can break barriers and lead institutional change.

This research paper focuses on her achievements and her role in strengthening women's leadership in Indian sports administration.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the life and sporting achievements of P. T. Usha
2. To examine her leadership journey from athlete to sports administrator
3. To analyze her role as the first woman President of IOA
4. To understand her contribution to women empowerment in Indian sports
5. To identify challenges faced by women leaders in sports governance

Research Methodology

This study is based on **secondary data** collected from books, journals, newspaper articles, official Olympic records, sports reports, and government publications.

Sources of Data

- Indian Olympic Association reports
- Sports Authority of India publications
- Newspaper reports
- Research journals on women leadership and sports management
- Biographical records of P. T. Usha

Research Type

Descriptive and analytical research method has been used for the study.

Literature Review

Several studies highlight the underrepresentation of women in sports leadership. Researchers suggest that despite success in athletic performance, women often face structural discrimination in decision-making roles.

Studies on women leadership show that representation at the top creates positive policy changes and inspires social acceptance. Leadership by former athletes often improves governance due to practical experience and field knowledge.

P. T. Usha has been widely recognized as a transformational figure whose leadership bridges the gap between athlete welfare and sports administration.

Profile of P. T. Usha

Early Life

Pilavullakandi Thekkeparambil Usha, popularly known as P. T. Usha, was born on 27 June 1964 in Kerala, India. She showed exceptional talent in athletics from a young age and was trained under coach O. M. Nambiar.

Athletic Achievements

She became one of India's greatest athletes and earned the title "Payyoli Express."

Major achievements include:

- Gold medals at Asian Championships
- 4 Gold and 1 Silver medal at the 1986 Asian Games
- Finalist in 400m hurdles at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics
- Missed Olympic bronze medal by just 1/100th of a second
- Arjun Award recipient
- Padma Shri awardee

Her success made her a national icon and inspired millions of young girls to pursue athletics.

Transition from Athlete to Leader

After retirement from competitive athletics, P. T. Usha focused on nurturing future talent by establishing the **Usha School of Athletics** in Kerala. She dedicated herself to training young athletes, especially girls from rural and economically weaker backgrounds.

Her experience as an athlete gave her deep understanding of the challenges faced by sportspersons in India, including poor infrastructure, lack of funding, and gender bias.

Her credibility, discipline, and public respect naturally positioned her as a strong candidate for sports leadership.

P. T. Usha as the First Woman President of IOA

In December 2022, P. T. Usha was elected as the **first woman President of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA)** in its 95-year history.

This was a historic achievement because:

- It broke male dominance in sports governance
- It increased women's representation at the highest level
- It reflected institutional acceptance of women leadership
- It gave athletes stronger representation in administration

Her election was seen as a major reform in Indian sports governance.

Leadership Qualities of P. T. Usha

1. Visionary Leadership

She understands long-term athlete development and prioritizes sustainable sports growth.

2. Discipline and Commitment

Her sports career reflects extraordinary discipline, which translates into administrative efficiency.

3. Athlete-Centered Governance

She promotes policies that focus on athlete welfare rather than political influence.

4. Women Empowerment

She actively supports female participation in sports and leadership.

5. Integrity and Credibility

Her reputation as an honest and dedicated sportsperson builds public trust.

Challenges Faced by Women in Sports Leadership

Despite progress, women still face many barriers:

- Gender stereotypes
- Male-dominated administrative systems
- Limited access to decision-making roles
- Lack of mentorship
- Institutional resistance
- Social expectations regarding family responsibilities

P. T. Usha's leadership proves that these barriers can be challenged through competence and persistence.

Impact on Women Empowerment

Her appointment has a broader social impact:

- Encourages girls to pursue sports professionally
- Inspires women to enter leadership roles
- Improves policy attention toward women athletes
- Creates gender-inclusive governance models
- Strengthens representation of athletes in administration

She serves as a role model for women across sectors beyond sports.

Findings

1. P. T. Usha's athletic excellence established her credibility for leadership
2. Her appointment as IOA President is a landmark event in Indian sports history
3. Women's representation in sports governance improves institutional diversity
4. Athlete-led administration can strengthen policy implementation
5. Her leadership inspires both sportswomen and future women administrators

Suggestions

1. More women should be included in sports federations and decision-making bodies
2. Leadership training programs should be introduced for former women athletes
3. Government should encourage gender-balanced sports governance
4. Sports institutions should create mentorship systems for women leaders
5. Media should highlight women leaders in sports administration

Conclusion

P. T. Usha's journey from a world-class athlete to the first woman President of the Indian Olympic Association is a powerful example of women breaking barriers and creating change. Her leadership reflects strength, credibility, and transformation.

She not only brought glory to India as an athlete but also created a historic legacy in sports governance. Her success proves that leadership is not defined by gender but by vision, dedication, and the courage to challenge tradition.

In the context of building a Smart India, empowering women leaders like P. T. Usha is essential for creating inclusive and progressive institutions. Her story remains a symbol of inspiration for generations to come.

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