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Challenges And Opportunities For Women Football Players in Soreng, Sikkim: A Narrative Review of Participation, Training, Infrastructure And Career Development

Babyla Bhutia

Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Education

Abstract: *Women's participation in football has increased considerably in India, with greater emphasis being placed on grassroots development, organized competitions, coaching, and opportunities for female athletes. Sikkim, with its strong football culture, has also witnessed growing participation of girls and women in the sport. Soreng district has emerged as an important area for football development through coaching programmes, sports infrastructure, girls' football initiatives, and women's competitions. However, women football players may continue to experience challenges related to regular participation, access to specialized coaching, infrastructure, financial support, geographical accessibility, education, and long-term career opportunities.*

The present paper is a narrative review examining the challenges and opportunities for women football players in Soreng, Sikkim, with particular focus on four areas: participation, training, infrastructure, and career development. Information from government initiatives, football development programmes, and available literature was reviewed and organized thematically. The review indicates that Soreng has several positive opportunities, including government-supported coaching programmes, development of sports facilities, the State Sports Academy for Girls, participation in national-level competitions, and the emergence of women's football leagues. At the same time, continued development requires regular competition, qualified coaching, athlete-support services, financial assistance, educational support, and clearer pathways towards higher-level and professional football. Strengthening collaboration between educational institutions, football clubs, government departments, and football associations can contribute significantly to the sustainable development of women's football in Soreng.

Keywords: Women's Football, Soreng, Sikkim, Participation, Coaching, Infrastructure, Career Development, Female Athletes.

1. **Introduction:** Football is one of the most popular sports in India and has traditionally received greater participation and visibility among men. However, women's football has gradually gained recognition through grassroots development programmes, school and college competitions, state-level leagues, national championships, and professional sporting opportunities. These developments have contributed to expanding women's participation in organized sports and strengthening gender inclusion in the sporting environment.

The development of women's football is important not only from a sporting perspective but also in terms of women's empowerment, physical fitness, education, leadership, and career development. Participation in organized sports provides girls and women with opportunities to develop discipline, teamwork, self-

confidence, leadership abilities, and decision-making skills. Furthermore, sports participation can contribute to social inclusion and create opportunities for women to challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

Sikkim has a strong football tradition, and football occupies an important position within the state's sporting culture. In recent years, initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation have created additional opportunities for female footballers. Soreng district has become particularly relevant in this context because of its football coaching programmes, sports infrastructure, and initiatives supporting girls' participation in football. The Government of Sikkim reported that the Under-13 girls' state football team received coaching at Jautar Stadium in Soreng district before representing the state in the Sub-Junior National Championship in 2024 (Government of Sikkim, 2024). This initiative demonstrates the importance of district-level training facilities in developing young female footballers.

Furthermore, the Sports and Youth Affairs Department of the Government of Sikkim, Soreng District, organized a Winter Football Coaching Camp during December 2025 and January 2026 in collaboration with Daramdin Khel Kudh Sang, Sombaria. The programme involved 104 footballers and focused on developing technical skills, physical fitness, discipline, teamwork, and sportsmanship (Government of Sikkim, 2026a). Such initiatives indicate the growing importance of grassroots football development in the district.

The emergence of women's football competitions has further strengthened opportunities for female players in Sikkim. In 2026, the Senior Women's Football League, organized by the Sikkim Football Association with support from Generali Central Insurance, provided a competitive platform for women footballers from Sikkim and neighbouring regions. Singling Sporting Club from Soreng district won the championship after defeating Gangtok Himalayan Sporting Club by 6–0 in the final held on 8 March 2026. The winning team received a trophy and a cash prize of ₹1 lakh (Sikkim Express, 2026; Generali Central Insurance, 2026). This achievement reflects the growing competitive presence of women's football in Soreng district.

Despite these positive developments, participation in football does not depend solely on the availability of competitions. Female footballers require access to quality coaching, adequate sports infrastructure, financial assistance, transportation facilities, educational support, family encouragement, and clear career pathways. Social attitudes, gender stereotypes, limited sponsorship, and inadequate opportunities for sustained competition may also influence women's participation and sporting development. Therefore, it is important to examine the challenges and opportunities surrounding women's football in Soreng district to understand its present status and identify strategies for its future development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global and national context: Women's football is expanding worldwide, although structural gaps remain. FIFA's 2023 Member Associations survey reported 16.6 million women and girls in organised football (24% growth since 2019) and 55,622 women's clubs globally, but only 5% of the 901,000 coaches and 9% of the 731,500 referees were women. Only 34% of top-tier women's competitions had a dedicated sponsor and 55% of associations had a club-licensing system in their top tier (FIFA, 2023). The 2018–2027 strategy explicitly targets dropout rates and clear pathways for girls to play, coach and administer the game (FIFA, 2018). Even in well-resourced systems, equality is incomplete: the English FA reported that 77% of schools offered girls the same football opportunities in PE as boys, while acknowledging that "the playing field is nowhere near level yet" (The FA, 2024).

In India, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) has set out goals for women's opportunities in its strategic plan (AIFF, 2019), the Vision 2047 roadmap (AIFF, 2023), a women's football strategy workshop and grassroots development work (AIFF, 2024). The Asian Football Confederation has likewise emphasised grassroots football as the foundation of long-term player development (AFC, 2024). The Press Information Bureau (2025) reported that sports infrastructure in Sikkim has expanded since 2022–23, that the number of

football leagues has increased roughly fivefold, and that ASMITA leagues have widened girls' access to the game. Taken together, these sources show rising national and regional support for women's football.

2.2 Sikkim and Soreng: Sikkim government sources document concrete measures at state and district level. The Sikkim U-13 girls' team used Jautar Stadium, Soreng, to prepare for the 2024 Sub-Junior National Championship (Government of Sikkim, 2024a). The Winter Football Coaching Camp 2025–26 at Soreng involved 104 footballers and focused on skills, fitness, discipline and teamwork (Government of Sikkim, 2026a). The State Sports Academy for Girls offers a regular training base, accommodation, education and athlete care, and the SFA's Senior Women's Football League gave senior players a competitive platform, with Singling Sporting Club of Soreng emerging as champions (Sikkim Express, 2026).

Soreng clubs have also succeeded in earlier editions. SSA Soreng won the 2023 Sikkim Women's Super League (Sikkim Herald, 2023), and the league has featured a Soreng Girls Academy side ("Sikkim Women's Football League," n.d.). The pathway from Soreng has reached beyond the state. Three of four Sikkimese girls signed by Thimphu-based Sunrise FC for Bhutan's Women's Super League in 2018 were products of the Soreng Girls Football Academy (NENow, 2018b). More recently, Simran Gurung, a product of the SFA's State Academy for Girls at Soreng, became the first girl from Sikkim to play for the senior India women's team (The Telegraph, n.d.). In October 2025, Paljor Stadium in Gangtok hosted an India–Nepal women's exhibition match before a capacity crowd, the first time the national team had played in Sikkim (AIFF Media Team, 2025). Private and community support has also contributed: former India captain Bhaichung Bhutia sponsored kits for the Sikkim women's team that trained at a camp in Soreng before the Senior Women's National Football Championship (NENow, n.d.).

2.3 Barriers identified in the wider literature: Research and media reporting from comparable contexts identify recurring barriers. A study of football development among women in West Bengal found a gap between national policy aspirations such as Vision 2047 and state-level practice, with uneven talent identification and incomplete records (Sarkar & Jha, 2026). Reporting from Kolkata describes girls facing a lack of playgrounds, family opposition and household duties; one player could not attend training without first preparing meals for seven people (The Hindu, 2026). In Bangladesh, the women's team qualified for the Asian Cup despite social stigma, family pressure and poverty, and the federation has set up more than 40 clubs to train girls from age nine (The Times of India, 2026; Young Post, 2026). Women athletes in Manipur have asked for better coaching, training and competition and warned that talent is lost where career paths are unclear (India Today NE, 2026). Media visibility can shift attitudes, as the portrayal of new young heroines in football suggests (The Telegraph, 2026).

In Sikkim itself, the 2005 report quoted the state coach as wanting improvements to logistics and noted a shortage of trained coaches at grassroots level (Reuters, 2005). Women's career trajectories show both possibility and difficulty: the story of Sushmita Lepcha, from Kalimpong, where girls' football barely existed, to the national team illustrates that progression is possible but rarely straightforward (AIFF Media Team, 2026). Sikkim Express (2024, 2026) has reported calls for more academies, better coaches and stronger financial support as the Sikkim women's team qualified for the 38th National Games.

2.4 Research gap: Most available material on Sikkim and Soreng comes from government releases, association updates and news reports rather than peer-reviewed studies. No district-level empirical study of women footballers in Soreng was identified. This review addresses that gap by consolidating available evidence on participation, training, infrastructure and career development.

3. Purpose and Objectives: The purpose of this narrative review is to examine the current situation of women's football in Soreng, Sikkim, and to identify the major challenges and opportunities for female players. The objectives are:

- To examine women's participation in football in Soreng.
- To identify major challenges affecting female football participation.
- To examine available training and coaching opportunities.
- To review the development and availability of football infrastructure.
- To identify competitive and career opportunities for women footballers.
- To suggest measures for the further development of women's football in Soreng.

4. Methodology

4.1 Review design: This study is a descriptive narrative review. No primary data were collected: no surveys, interviews or questionnaires were conducted. The review draws on government reports, football-development documents, policy guidelines, media reports and available academic literature.

4.2 Data sources: The following sources were searched and reviewed: (a) Google Scholar; (b) official websites and reports of the Government of Sikkim, including the Sports and Youth Affairs Department; (c) documents of the AIFF, the AFC and FIFA; (d) the Sikkim Football Association and Sikkim football news; (e) Khelo India and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports material and Press Information Bureau releases; and (f) news reports from Sikkim Express, The Hindu, The Telegraph, India Today NE, Young Post, The Times of India and regional outlets. Academic articles on women's football in India and South Asia were also consulted. Search terms were: women's football, Soreng, Sikkim, participation, coaching, infrastructure, career development, female athletes and grassroots football. Publications from 2019 to 2026 were mainly considered, with earlier regional reports included for historical context.

4.3 Data analysis: Thematic synthesis was used. Four main themes were developed: participation, training and coaching, infrastructure, and career development. Cross-cutting concerns, namely finance, education, family support, geographical accessibility and athlete welfare, were also noted.

4.4 Limitations: First, this is a narrative rather than a systematic review, so the search was not exhaustive. Second, findings depend on secondary sources that may be subject to bias, particularly promotional government and media reporting. Third, local data on Soreng are limited, and some observations are inferred from state-level or regional reports. Fourth, players, coaches and officials were not directly consulted, so the results reflect administrative and media narratives rather than players' lived experience.

5. Women's Football in Soreng: A Review of the Evidence

Football is a core part of Soreng's sporting life, and government-supported coaching has provided structured routes into the game. The key documented developments are summarised below:

Year	Development	Source
1976	Sikkim Football Association formed; Soreng District Football Association later affiliated	Sikkim Football Association (n.d.)
2005	State scheme to scout girls from rural schools and train them for the national women's championship	Reuters (2005)
2017	Soreng Girls Football Academy initiated	Sikkim Express (2018)

2018	Three Soreng Academy products signed by Sunrise FC (Thimphu) for the Bhutan Women's Super League	NENow (2018b)
2018	AFC Women's Football Day: about 300 girls across six locations, including Soreng	NENow (2018a)
2023	SSA Soreng wins the Sikkim Women's Super League	Sikkim Herald (2023)
2024	Sikkim U-13 girls train at Jautar Stadium before the Sub-Junior National Championship	Government of Sikkim (2024a)
2025	India–Nepal women's exhibition match at Paljor Stadium, Gangtok (1–1; Nepal won 3–0 on penalties)	AIFF Media Team (2025)
2025–26	Winter Football Coaching Camp at Soreng with 104 footballers	Government of Sikkim (2026a)
2026	Singling Sporting Club (Soreng) wins the Sikkim Senior Women's Football League	Sikkim Express (2026)

Foundational programmes such as the winter camp are entry points that allow young players to develop technical proficiency in an organised setting. The use of Jautar Stadium by the U-13 girls' team shows that Soreng's facilities can support preparation for national competition. The State Sports Academy for Girls provides a dedicated environment that addresses training continuity, secure accommodation and athlete care. At the senior level, the Sikkim Senior Women's Football League and Singling Sporting Club's 2026 title, following SSA Soreng's 2023 success, indicate sustained competitive strength in the district. The career of Simran Gurung demonstrates that the Soreng academy route can lead to the national senior team.

Global benchmarks help to place these achievements in context. Where FIFA reports that only 34% of top-tier women's competitions have a dedicated sponsor and only 5% of coaches are women (FIFA, 2023), Soreng's structured academy and league ecosystem is a strength, but it also faces the same commercial and coaching-workforce challenges.

6. Comprehensive Review of Women's Football in Soreng, Sikkim: Soreng features an established sporting environment, where football serves as a core component of the district's regular athletic engagements. Government-supported coaching programmes have consistently provided structured avenues for young footballers to receive professional guidance and fundamental instruction.

A prominent example includes the Winter Football Coaching Camp conducted during 2025–26, which successfully engaged 104 footballers, emphasizing football skills, physical fitness, discipline, and teamwork. Such foundational programmes serve as vital entry points, allowing young participants to cultivate technical proficiency within an organized sporting ecosystem.

Furthermore, the integration of girls in high-level developmental camps highlights the district's growing administrative focus. In 2024, the Sikkim U-13 girls' football team utilized Jautar Stadium in Soreng as a training base in preparation for the Sub-Junior National Championship. This deployment underscores the capability of Soreng's sporting infrastructure to facilitate competitive preparation at both state and national tiers.

Another institutional milestone is the establishment of the State Sports Academy for Girls, which offers a dedicated environment designed to mitigate barriers related to training continuity, secure accommodation, and holistic athlete care.

At the competitive level, the introduction and expansion of specialized women's tournaments have transformed the landscape. The Sikkim Senior Women's Football League has created a vital competitive platform for senior female athletes. The notable participation and triumphant performance of Singling Sporting Club from Soreng in the 2026 league edition validate the high caliber of local talent and illustrate that athletes from the district are fully capable of excelling on competitive regional stages.

7. Challenges Faced by Women Football Players

7.1 Participation and Retention: Increasing the number of girls who begin playing football is only one aspect of development; retaining players as they progress into adolescence and adulthood is equally important. Girls may discontinue participation because of academic responsibilities, family expectations, lack of regular competitions, financial limitations, or limited understanding of football as a possible career. Therefore, programmes should focus not only on introducing girls to football but also on creating an environment that encourages them to continue participating.

7.2 Training and Coaching: Regular and specialized training is essential for football development. Players require systematic development of technical skills, tactical understanding, fitness, strength, speed, agility, and psychological skills. Short-term coaching camps can provide valuable exposure, but long-term development requires continuous training throughout the year. Some important areas for further development include:

- Qualified football coaches;
- Specialized coaching for girls and women;
- Goalkeeper training;
- Strength and conditioning;
- Injury prevention;
- Sports nutrition;
- Recovery and fitness monitoring;
- Psychological support; and
- Regular performance assessment.

Increasing opportunities for women to become football coaches could also provide female players with additional career opportunities.

7.3 Infrastructure: Appropriate infrastructure is essential for the development of football. Facilities required for women's football include:

- Quality football grounds;
- Training equipment;
- Changing rooms;
- Clean toilets;
- Drinking-water facilities;

- Fitness facilities;
- Medical and first-aid support;
- Physiotherapy facilities;
- Safe accommodation; and
- Transportation facilities.

Soreng has benefited from continued sports-infrastructure development, including facilities associated with Jautar Stadium, indoor sports facilities, and the State Sports Academy for Girls. However, the effectiveness of infrastructure depends not only on its existence but also on its accessibility, maintenance, safety, and regular availability for female athletes.

7.4 Geographical and Transportation Challenges: Sikkim's mountainous geographical environment can create additional challenges for athletes who need to travel between different locations for training and competitions. Travel may require considerable time and financial resources. For younger female athletes, transportation can also become a concern for parents and families. Improved transportation support, accommodation facilities, and decentralised training centres could help reduce these barriers.

7.5 Financial Challenges: Football participation can involve expenses related to:

- Football boots and equipment;
- Training;
- Transportation;
- Competition fees;
- Accommodation;
- Nutrition; and
- Medical care.

For families with limited financial resources, these costs may discourage continued participation. Scholarships, sports incentives, equipment support, and travel assistance can therefore play an important role in retaining talented female players.

7.6 Education and Football: Young women footballers often need to balance sport with education. Education should not be viewed as an alternative to football; instead, schools and colleges can provide an environment in which academic and sporting development take place together. Flexible academic support, sports scholarships, inter-school competitions, and university-level football programmes can help athletes continue their education while pursuing football.

7.7 Limited Awareness of Career Pathways: One of the important challenges facing young footballers is uncertainty regarding what opportunities exist after school or college. Many young players may be aware of playing football but may have limited information about careers such as:

- Professional football;
- Coaching;

- Refereeing;
- Physical education;
- Sports management;
- Strength and conditioning;
- Sports administration; and
- Sports media.

Career guidance should therefore become part of athlete-development programmes.

8. Opportunities for Women Football Players

8.1 Government Support: Government involvement provides an important foundation for sports development in Soreng. Coaching camps, infrastructure development, and sports programmes can increase access to organized football. Continued government support can help establish sustainable programmes rather than relying only on occasional events.

8.2 State Sports Academy for Girls: The State Sports Academy for Girls represents an important opportunity for female athletes. A dedicated environment can potentially provide:

- Regular training;
- Accommodation;
- Education;
- Structured coaching;
- Competition preparation; and
- Athlete development.

Such an institution can serve as an important pathway for identifying and developing talented girls from different parts of Sikkim.

8.3 Women's Football Leagues: The development of women's football leagues provides players with regular competitive experience. The Sikkim Senior Women's Football League is particularly important because it provides an organized platform for senior female players. The success of Singling Sporting Club from Soreng in the 2026 competition demonstrates the potential of Soreng-based women's football. Regular leagues can also help identify talented players for higher-level teams.

8.4 National-Level Opportunities: Players who develop through district and state competitions can potentially progress to national championships and other higher-level competitions. Participation at the national level provides exposure to stronger opponents and can increase opportunities for selection and further development.

8.5 Professional Football: Women's football in India is becoming increasingly structured, with professional and semi-professional competitions providing opportunities for players to progress beyond state-level football. The continued development of women's leagues creates potential pathways from local football to higher-level clubs. For young footballers in Soreng, this means that participation at the grassroots level can potentially become the beginning of a longer sporting career.

8.6 Careers Beyond Playing: Football can also create careers beyond being a player. Women footballers can eventually develop careers as:

- Football coaches;
- Referees;
- Physical education teachers;
- Fitness trainers;
- Sports administrators;
- Sports event organizers;
- Sports journalists;
- Sports analysts; and
- Football development officers.

This broader career perspective is important because not every talented player will necessarily become a professional footballer.

Women's football in Soreng reflects emerging opportunities alongside continuing challenges. The district has organised coaching, girls' participation, developing infrastructure, a residential academy and competitive league success. Documented outcomes, including league titles, a senior India international and signings abroad, suggest that the system can produce elite talent.

Sustainability, however, requires more than infrastructure and short-term camps. Evidence from India and neighbouring countries indicates that empowerment through football is conditional on stable funding, supportive policy and social acceptance (Panicker & Reghunathan, 2026), and that gaps between national policy and local practice can undermine talent pathways (Sarkar & Jha, 2026). A successful system should offer continuous opportunities from childhood to adulthood. The following pathway is proposed.

Stage	Football development pathway
1	Grassroots football
2	School football
3	District-level training
4	Age-group competition
5	State-level football
6	National competition
7	Professional or university football
8	Coaching, refereeing and other sports careers

Such a pathway would help talented players understand how to progress from local participation to higher levels. Development should also be athlete-centred, combining technical training with nutrition, injury prevention, psychological support, education and career guidance. Because the evidence base is largely descriptive and media-derived, primary research with Soreng players, coaches, parents and officials is needed to test the themes identified here.

9. **Recommendations:** Based on the review, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Establish year-round football training programmes for girls and women.
- Increase the number of women's and girls' football competitions at district and state levels.
- Strengthen coaching education and encourage more qualified female football coaches.
- Improve access to football infrastructure and ensure that existing facilities are properly maintained and regularly available to women players.
- Provide financial assistance for talented players through scholarships, equipment support, and travel assistance.
- Strengthen school–club partnerships to identify young talent at an early age.
- Provide athlete-support services, including nutrition education, injury prevention, physiotherapy, and menstrual-health education.
- Develop career guidance programmes to inform players about professional football, coaching, refereeing, physical education, and other sports-related careers.
- Increase opportunities for national-level exposure through participation in national championships and recognized competitions.

Promote women's football through media and community programmes to increase visibility and encourage greater participation

Conclusion: Women's football in Soreng, Sikkim is developing within an increasingly supportive sporting environment. Government initiatives, coaching programmers', sports infrastructure, girls' football development, and women's competitions have created meaningful opportunities for female athletes.

The development of the State Sports Academy for Girls and the emergence of organized women's competitions are particularly significant milestones. The participation and success of Soreng-based football players and clubs demonstrate the potential that exists within the district.

At the same time, challenges relating to regular training, coaching, infrastructure accessibility, finance, transportation, education, and career development need continued attention. Sustainable women's football development requires a long-term approach that supports players not only as athletes but also as students, professionals, and future contributors to the sporting community.

Soreng therefore has the potential to develop a stronger women's football ecosystem by connecting grassroots participation with structured coaching, regular competition, education, and career opportunities. Greater collaboration between government departments, educational institutions, football clubs, coaches, families, and football associations can help create a sustainable pathway for women football players in the district.

Ultimately, the development of women's football in Soreng should focus on creating an environment in which girls can start playing, continue playing, compete confidently, and build meaningful careers through sport.

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