

photography TARA LAURE CLAIRE

# Ring

# Leaders

From the fields of Haryana to the training mats of Delhi, India's women wrestlers are taking to the canvas in search of Olympic glory. To succeed, they must fight back against a culture of sexual harassment that goes all the way to the country's ruling party







Previous spread, from left: Harshita, Ritika.  
This page, from left: Sheeza, Ritika, Sharda

text **AKANKSHA SINGH**

Shivani Pawar has short dark hair, dimples, and a tendency to answer questions with a smile. For someone whose life is so rigidly timetabled – she trains twice a day for three hours each session, with weight training and gym workouts interspersed – Pawar gives off an effortlessly laidback vibe. “Wrestling is an integral part of my life,” she explains. “It’s like breathing – I couldn’t give it up.” It’s cheesy, but she says it with such sincerity, you get the feeling it’s true.

At 24, Pawar has already been labelled “the new exciting talent to watch on India’s conveyor belt of elite wrestlers” by the Olympic Channel. Those elite wrestlers include Olympians Geeta Phogat, Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik. Unlike the majority of Indian women wrestlers, who hail from the state of Haryana, Pawar is from the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. In 2021, she went to Belgrade, Serbia, where she became the first Indian woman to win a silver medal at the U23 World Wrestling Championships. And now she has her sights set on the 2024 Olympics.

Today, Pawar is based in Delhi and trains at the Guru Premnath Akhada, an unassuming training centre and hostel where, if reports are to be believed, sporting taboos are regularly being busted as more up-and-coming women wrestlers make their way centre-stage. The gym has cyan walls, maroon mats along the base to prevent injuries and a wall-to-wall royal blue wrestling mat with two concentric orange rings. It will be slick with sweat in a matter of minutes, as wrestlers pair up for the evening’s training session. The warm sun shines in through a few grated windows, but everything is awash in harsh fluorescent light.

None of this matters to the wrestlers who train here, of course – least of all Pawar. “Straight after I finished ninth [grade], I took up sports seriously,” she says. “I had no interest in studying – all my focus was on [training].” As a child, Pawar worked with her parents on the family farm in Chhindwara, balancing studying with her love of sports. The village she’s from, Umreth, has no appetite for anything beyond its geographical boundaries, she says: “People [there] aren’t really focused on anything outside that – sports or anything else.”

“I had both speed and strength from working in the fields,” Pawar continues, “[but] there was no mat; there were no facilities there.” It wasn’t until she was scouted by a coach while playing football that she moved to

fighter started out young too, at 15, when her PE teacher suggested she try her hand at kickboxing. “My dream is to compete on the global stage, representing India with pride and becoming a recognised name in the [MMA] world,” she says. “I look forward to more Indian women achieving international success in MMA, representing the country on the global stage.”

Born and raised in Kalyan, Maharashtra, Poojary now lives in Bengaluru full-time and trains at the Indian Combat Sports Academy, a gym she describes as “a network [of fighters] who uplift and encourage one another – it’s been empowering to see more women joining the sport.” Like Pawar, her mother was nothing but supportive when Poojary embarked on her MMA ambitions. For the most part, the only doubts voiced by friends and family concerned the physical risks associated with MMA. “They worried about potential injuries and the toll it might take on my body,” she says. “[But] I explained my passion for the sport and, over time, some of them became more supportive, although others continue to have reservations. But there were no concerns about me being a woman and choosing this life.”

Is this surprising? The news cycle recently spiked with stories about Indian women wrestlers after 30 athletes protested against sexual harassment perpetrated by the Wrestling Federation of India’s president, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. (For context, Singh is a lawmaker in the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party.) Of the seven complainants, one was a minor. Despite Singh making the vile claim that the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and workplace sexual harassment laws have been “misused” against him, the Indian government made no effort to investigate the issue – something it had previously promised. Singh’s case is currently ongoing, with his counsel arguing that, “Checking pulse without sexual offence is not an offence.”

So – yes, “surprising” is perhaps the word. Because the story here is not about naive girls who mistook a pulse-check for harassment, despite what Singh’s counsel would have you believe; it’s about Indian sports’ #MeToo moment, led by a group of women wrestlers.

“I was so in awe of these women because I knew what they were standing up against,” explains veteran Indian sports journalist and commentator Sharda Ugra. “They actually challenged the establishment in this way – using television, using social media.” Ugra describes many stories of women in sports who feel the need to bypass the gaze of predatory coaches by “desexualising” their appearance. “They cut their hair so they don’t catch anyone’s

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the state capital, Bhopal, and started training as a wrestler in the Madhya Pradesh Khel Academy in 2013. “When I started I didn’t even know there were levels to this, I didn’t know there was the Olympics. At that time, I just wanted to leave home.”

Pawar’s parents were always supportive, albeit apprehensive, but their enthusiasm solidified when she started competing – and winning. “After I got a couple of medals, I learned that there was a life in this – a job, a career,” she says. “[Things] changed. I’ve been working, doing this full-time [in Delhi] since 2017.”

Reflecting on her decade of training as a competitive wrestler, Pawar says she wasn’t fazed by the lack of women in wrestling when she started. It didn’t even strike her that her idol as a child, Sushil Kumar, was a man: “I just wanted to achieve as much as he had,” she says. (A hotly debated figure now, owing to an ongoing murder trial, Kumar won two Olympic medals in wrestling – one in 2008 and one in 2012.) “I’ve never really thought of my gender as being a handicap. Perhaps if I had, I would never have left home.” It’s a tale most Indian women know well.

In Bengaluru, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, 23-year-old Ritika Poojary echoes these sentiments. The mixed martial arts (MMA)

eye, which is quite sick and sad. It is particularly troubling, she says, as this is happening “largely in sports where athletes come from rural backgrounds, from conservative homes.”

In India, sporting achievements are a golden ticket; there is little to no concept of sports as “leisure”. Since 2000, the growing presence of women across a variety of sports has upended assumptions. “It has changed public perception of what women are ‘allowed’ to do because sports [in India] are a source of livelihood,” says Ugra. “What has not been examined carefully is how women in Indian sports are a very different cultural entity in terms of how they navigate what is largely a patriarchal society to get to these positions.” It’s also why certain sports – including women’s wrestling – have gained such traction, as well as controversy. There’s a deep ‘guru’ culture here, one of obedience and almost subservience to your coach – the person who could be your ticket to a better life.

Ugra, who considers herself a realist rather than a pessimist, was never hopeful the wrestlers would get anywhere with their protest. “They were up against the government, essentially,” she says. Worse, she worries that parents of aspiring women athletes will caution their children against leaving home and joining a coaching centre.



If you've seen *Dangal*, a 2016 Bollywood movie about sisters Babita and Geeta Phogat, you likely know that, in India, a gold medal means more than it might elsewhere. But where Bollywood portrays these real-life events as the ultimate underdog story, packaging rags-to-riches stories with actors who have little experience of this life, the reality is bleaker: real life gets in the way. The gold medal isn't one victorious moment, it's training scenes with "Eye of the Tiger" on repeat.

But for Pawar, her gruelling daily training schedule isn't a ticket to something else or something bigger. It's about being a wrestler. Serbia was her first international stint, yet she saw none of it. "You're so tired, you only want to eat and sleep," she says. "There's no touring or sightseeing or any of that." Today, when she had time between sessions, she painted her nails a cool grey.

Asked whether 'real life' – or society's perceptions of it – will get in the way of her ambitions, Pawar says, "My parents never pressured me to get married." She calls her marriage a "love marriage" in lieu of an "arranged" one. Her husband, an accomplished wrestler, is also a coach at the Akhada.

"When I met him I made up my mind that I would get married – no dating, none of that." (Poojary, on the other hand, currently has no intention of getting married: "At this moment... my absolute dedication is towards pursuing and achieving my dream, and it takes the top spot in my priorities.")

Pawar has been married for four years, and her Instagram feed is brimming with beaming captions and photos about their partnership. What's more, when she visits her in-laws, her mother-in-law frequently runs with them and plays basketball. "They're a very sporty family," she says, smiling. "I love visiting them."

It's not the perception most people have of Indian women who have risen through the ranks of sporting achievement to train for the Olympics. It's not the stuff Bollywood movies are made of. But there's a quiet, understated resistance in all of this – one that's easily taken for granted. Women are not only *choosing* to become MMA fighters and wrestlers, they are winning medals with powerful support networks propping them up.

It's unclear if wrestling is changing what it means to be an Indian woman. But women like Pawar and Poojary are certainly expanding the definition of it.



This page, from left: Sharda, Ritika, Sheeza, Harshita  
Opposite page, from left: Harshita, Sheeza

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Sharda Ugra, sports journalist



Talent **RITIKA, HARSHITA, SHEEZA, SHARDA**, production **KAVITA BABBAR**,  
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