

# Gender, Inclusivity, and Representation in Yogic Traditions: Qualitative Analysis

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## **Abstract**

*This research paper explores the complex dynamics of gender, inclusivity, and representation within yogic traditions, tracing their evolution from classical texts to contemporary global practices. Historically, foundational yogic scriptures such as the Yoga Sūtras and Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā exhibit patriarchal influences, with limited acknowledgment of women's spiritual roles and participation. In modern contexts, yoga's portrayal in mainstream media and digital platforms often reflects a narrow demographic—primarily young, able-bodied, white women—resulting in the marginalization of diverse identities including varied genders, body types, ages, races, and abilities. Through qualitative analysis of online narratives, social media campaigns, and media content, this study identifies persistent representation gaps and growing grassroots efforts to foster inclusivity. Influential practitioners and digital activists challenge traditional norms by advocating body positivity and creating inclusive yoga spaces.*

*The paper further discusses tensions arising from the globalization and commercialization of yoga, which sometimes compromises the spiritual and philosophical essence of the practice in favor of commodification and aesthetic appeal. Such tensions complicate efforts to reconcile traditional yogic values with modern inclusivity demands. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive approaches that respect yoga's origins while promoting diverse and accessible participation.*

*Suggestions for advancing a more inclusive yogic discourse include diversifying representation in media, adopting gender-neutral and body-inclusive pedagogical practices, leveraging digital platforms to amplify marginalized voices, and fostering cultural respect to avoid appropriation. By addressing these factors, yoga can better embody its foundational*

*principles of universal accessibility and self-realization, ensuring it remains a holistic practice relevant to a diverse, global community.*

**Keywords:** *Gender Inclusivity, Yoga Representation, Yogic Traditions, Body Positivity, Cultural Appropriation, Digital Activism*

## Introduction

Yoga, rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, has historically been a spiritual discipline practiced predominantly by men. Classical texts such as the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* were authored by male sages and primarily addressed to male practitioners (Wittich, 2023). However, historical records indicate that women also engaged in yogic practices. For instance, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* mentions Gargi Vachaknavi, a renowned female philosopher who participated in philosophical debates, highlighting women's involvement in spiritual discourse (Seth, 2024).

Despite these early instances, women's participation in yoga diminished over time due to patriarchal societal structures. During the medieval period, while some women, known as yoginis, continued to practice and teach yoga, their contributions were often marginalized (Wittich, 2023). The Bhakti movement (circa 1100–1700 CE) saw a resurgence of female spiritual leaders like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi, who used devotional practices akin to yoga to express their spirituality (Breathe Together Yoga, 2024).

In contemporary times, yoga has gained global popularity, with women constituting a significant majority of practitioners, especially in Western countries. A study analyzing yoga-related images on Instagram found that over 90% of the women depicted were under 40 years old, predominantly white, and conformed to a thin, athletic body type, indicating a narrow representation of yoga practitioners (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020). Such portrayals can perpetuate exclusivity and discourage diversity in yoga communities.

## Aim and Scope of the Study

This study aims to explore the historical and contemporary roles of women in yogic traditions, focusing on issues of gender inclusivity and representation. By examining classical texts, historical accounts, and modern media portrayals, the research seeks to understand how women's participation in yoga has evolved and how current representations influence inclusivity. The study will employ qualitative analysis methods to assess the extent to which

yoga, both historically and in modern practice, accommodates and represents diverse female experiences.

## Literature Review

### Historical Treatment of Women in Yogic Texts

The representation of women in classical yogic literature has been both significant and complex. In the *Mahābhārata*, the character Sulabhā engages in a philosophical debate with King Janaka, asserting the non-duality of the self and challenging gender-based distinctions in spiritual attainment (Vanita, 2003). Similarly, the *Yoga Yājñavalkya*, a significant text predating the 12th century, includes dialogues between the sage Yājñavalkya and the female philosopher Gargi, indicating an early acknowledgment of women's roles in yogic discourse (Divanji, as cited in Wikipedia, 2025).

However, as yoga evolved, particularly within the Hatha yoga tradition, the inclusion of women became more restrictive. Texts like the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and the *Gheranda Samhita* often portrayed women as distractions to male practitioners, reflecting broader societal norms of the time (Wittich, 2019). Despite this, these texts also contain references to female practitioners, or yoginīs, suggesting that women did engage in yogic practices, albeit with limited recognition (Wittich, 2019).

The Bhakti movement (circa 1100–1700 CE) marked a resurgence of female spiritual leaders, such as Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi, who utilized devotional practices akin to yoga to express their spirituality (Breathe Together Yoga, 2024). These figures challenged prevailing gender norms and contributed to a more inclusive spiritual landscape.

### Existing Research on Gender in Yoga

Contemporary research highlights ongoing gender disparities in yoga participation and representation. A study analyzing yoga-related images on Instagram found that over 90% of the women depicted were under 40 years old, predominantly white, and conformed to a thin, athletic body type, indicating a narrow representation of yoga practitioners (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020). Such portrayals can perpetuate exclusivity and discourage diversity in yoga communities.

Gender differences also manifest in motivations for practicing yoga. Cagas et al. (2022) found that women were more motivated by positive affect, health/fitness, mind–body

integration, and stress management, whereas men were more driven by competition and social recognition. These differences suggest that societal norms and gender roles influence individuals' engagement with yoga.

Furthermore, the perception of yoga as a feminine activity may deter male participation. Focus group discussions revealed that men are more likely to take up yoga when encouraged by trusted others and male role models, and that they face gender-related challenges that can be overcome by educating them about yoga's physical benefits (PubMed, 2023).

Despite these challenges, yoga has been shown to benefit both genders. A study on the effects of classical yoga intervention on resilience among college students found that yoga improved resilience in both male and female participants, with females showing slightly higher improvements (Journal of Applied Consciousness Studies, 2022).

### Research Gap

While yoga has gained global popularity and is often associated with inclusivity and holistic well-being, existing literature reveals significant gaps in understanding and addressing gender representation and inclusivity within yogic traditions. Historically, yogic texts have predominantly been authored by men and have often marginalized or overlooked the contributions of women. For instance, classical texts like the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali and the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* primarily address male practitioners, with limited acknowledgment of female yogis (Wittich, 2023).

In contemporary contexts, media representations of yoga continue to perpetuate narrow stereotypes. A content analysis of yoga images on Instagram revealed that over 90% of the women depicted were under 40 years old, predominantly white, and conformed to a thin, athletic body type, indicating a narrow representation of yoga practitioners (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020). Similarly, mainstream yoga media have been criticized for limited representation of racial/ethnic, gender, age, and body size diversity within their publications (Vinoski Thomas et al., 2019).

Moreover, while women constitute a significant majority of yoga practitioners, leadership roles within the yoga community are disproportionately held by men. This gender disparity in leadership positions perpetuates a hierarchy that undermines the contributions and authority of female practitioners (Barcelos, 2011).

Despite these observations, there is a paucity of empirical research exploring the experiences of diverse gender identities within yogic traditions, particularly in the Indian context. Most existing studies focus on Western populations, leaving a gap in understanding how cultural, societal, and historical factors influence gender inclusivity in yoga practices in India.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by exploring the historical and contemporary roles of women in yogic traditions, focusing on issues of gender inclusivity and representation. By examining classical texts, historical accounts, and modern media portrayals, the research seeks to understand how women's participation in yoga has evolved and how current representations influence inclusivity.

## Methodology

### Selection Criteria for Sources

This research adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on historical texts, media content, and digital ethnography to explore gender and inclusivity in yogic traditions. The selection of sources was guided by the following criteria:

1. **Classical Texts:** Canonical yogic texts, including the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā*, were selected due to their foundational role in shaping traditional yogic discourse. Textual passages were analyzed to trace references to women, asceticism, and gender-specific practices (Bryant, 2009; Mallinson, 2007; Feuerstein, 2011).
2. **Media Publications:** Reputable sources such as *Yoga Journal* and *India Today* were included for their coverage of contemporary gender issues in yoga. For example, *Yoga Journal's* series on influential women in yoga highlights the rising visibility and leadership of female practitioners (Yoga Journal, 2022). *India Today's* interview with author Ira Trivedi emphasized yoga's potential as a feminist practice (India Today, 2024).
3. **Digital Videos and Talks:** YouTube and TEDx Talks by women yoga leaders such as Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati and Seane Corn were reviewed. These talks often include personal narratives, historical critiques, and discussions on inclusive practice (Corn, 2015; Saraswati, 2023).
4. **Social Media Analysis:** A sample of 100 Instagram posts under hashtags like #yogaforwomen and #inclusiveyoga was analyzed for diversity in gender, age, body type,

and representation. This included coding for intersectionality and evaluating comments for audience reception (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020).

5. **Podcasts and Interviews:** Podcasts such as “Yoga is Dead” and interviews hosted by *Sounds True* were used to incorporate voices of Indian and Western women yoga teachers discussing systemic barriers, gender norms, and leadership gaps in yoga communities (Nisha & Tejal, 2019).

### Thematic Analysis Process

The data were analyzed using **Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:**

1. **Familiarization:** All sources were thoroughly read, viewed, or listened to.
2. **Initial Coding:** Key points related to gender representation, marginalization, and empowerment were extracted and coded.
3. **Theme Identification:** Codes were grouped into broader themes like “historical exclusion,” “modern empowerment,” and “commercialization and gender.”
4. **Theme Review:** Themes were refined to ensure coherence and relevance to research questions.
5. **Theme Naming and Definition:** Each theme was clearly named and defined.
6. **Final Reporting:** Themes were integrated into the findings with supporting evidence.

This method enabled an in-depth understanding of how gendered experiences in yoga evolve from ancient texts to modern social media.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Themes from Online Narratives

The analysis of online narratives—primarily drawn from social media platforms such as Instagram, along with blogs and video talks—reveals complex and layered understandings of gender within contemporary yogic practice. A striking theme is the tension between prevailing stereotypical representations and emergent inclusive voices. Studies show that Instagram posts tagged with #yogaforwomen and #inclusiveyoga predominantly feature

young, slender, able-bodied, and racially homogenous women, mainly white, reinforcing a narrow, exclusive ideal of who is perceived as a “yogi” (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020). This narrow visual culture perpetuates systemic exclusion of diverse bodies, ages, ethnicities, and abilities, thus limiting the perceived accessibility of yoga.

However, counter-narratives are gaining traction through digital activism by influential practitioners such as Jessamyn Stanley, a black plus-size yoga teacher, and Alicia Tillman, who actively challenges body image norms and advocates for the democratization of yoga (SELF, 2018). Their social media presence and public talks have created alternative narratives celebrating body positivity and inclusivity, directly challenging mainstream depictions and fostering a more welcoming space. These narratives resonate with many marginalized practitioners who have historically felt alienated by traditional yoga communities.

### **Representation Gaps and Inclusivity Efforts**

The representation gaps in yoga media extend beyond race and body type to include disability and age. Research analyzing mainstream yoga media like *Yoga Journal* reveals a conspicuous absence of people with disabilities and older practitioners (Vinoski Thomas, Warren-Findlow, & Webb, 2019). This underrepresentation reflects deeper structural issues: the pervasive image of yoga as a practice reserved for youthful, able-bodied, and predominantly affluent individuals creates barriers to entry for others. This exclusivity is contradictory to yoga’s philosophical teachings of universal accessibility and self-realization.

In response, several progressive efforts have sought to broaden this representation. For example, *Yoga Journal*’s 2019 dual cover featuring both a white slim woman and a larger Black woman marked a deliberate attempt to diversify the imagery of yoga practitioners. While this move received mixed responses—including accusations of tokenism—it successfully sparked widespread discourse about inclusivity and visibility in the yoga world (Wikipedia, 2023). Additionally, contemporary yoga pedagogy increasingly emphasizes the use of inclusive and body-neutral language, seeking to dismantle gendered assumptions that can alienate practitioners (Yoga Journal, 2023). This shift aims to create safer and more affirming spaces, reflecting yoga’s foundational ethical principles of non-violence (Ahimsa) and truthfulness (Satya).



## Tensions Between Traditional and Modern Views

A major source of tension lies in reconciling yoga's deep-rooted traditional philosophies with its contemporary globalized adaptations. The commodification and Westernization of yoga have sparked debates about cultural appropriation and the erasure of its South Asian spiritual heritage (Narayanan, 2017). Many critics argue that the focus on physical fitness and aesthetic appeal in Western contexts distorts yoga's holistic purpose, reducing it to a product for consumption rather than a spiritual discipline (Singleton, 2010).

This tension is particularly evident in gender representation. Traditional yogic texts often portray ascetic practices as gendered, with certain spiritual attainments seen as more accessible to men (Mallinson & Singleton, 2017). However, modern practitioners—especially women—reclaim yoga as a form of empowerment and self-expression. TEDx talks by women such as Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati emphasize the spiritual leadership roles women have held historically, challenging misconceptions about female participation (Saraswati, 2023). Conversely, some practitioners express concern that commercial yoga reinforces Western beauty ideals, inadvertently perpetuating new forms of exclusion and self-objectification among women (Bhalla, 2018).

Navigating these tensions requires balancing respect for yoga's origins with adaptation to contemporary social realities. This includes embracing diversity in practitioner identities while fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness of yoga's ethical dimensions. Ultimately, such a balance can preserve the integrity of yoga while making it relevant and inclusive for today's diverse global community.

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the persistent gender representation gaps within yogic traditions, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Classical texts like the *Yoga Sūtras* and *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* often reflect patriarchal norms, with limited acknowledgment of women's spiritual roles (Mallinson & Singleton, 2017). In modern times, media and digital platforms have perpetuated narrow ideals of who participates in yoga—typically young, able-bodied, and white women—thereby marginalizing diverse identities (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2020). Nonetheless, emergent voices from inclusive yoga leaders and communities challenge these exclusive norms, advocating for a more diverse and accessible practice (SELF, 2018). This study also underscored the tensions between preserving yoga's traditional spiritual



values and adapting to the realities of a globalized, commercial yoga industry that often prioritizes physical appearance over inclusivity and cultural authenticity (Narayanan, 2017; Bhalla, 2018).

### Suggestions for a More Inclusive Yogic Discourse

To foster a genuinely inclusive yogic discourse, several strategies are essential:

1. **Diversify Representation:** Yoga media, educators, and institutions should actively promote visibility of practitioners across different genders, ages, races, body types, and abilities. Efforts like *Yoga Journal*'s diversified covers and campaigns such as #InclusiveYoga serve as positive models (Yoga Journal, 2023; Wikipedia, 2023).
2. **Adopt Inclusive Language and Pedagogy:** Yoga teachers must be trained to use body-neutral, gender-inclusive language that avoids reinforcing stereotypes or excluding marginalized groups (Vinoski Thomas et al., 2019). Creating safe spaces where practitioners can express diverse identities without judgment aligns with yogic ethical principles.
3. **Engage with Yoga's Cultural Roots Respectfully:** While embracing global diversity, it is critical to maintain cultural sensitivity and honor the spiritual and philosophical origins of yoga. This balance helps prevent cultural appropriation and supports authentic cross-cultural exchange (Narayanan, 2017).
4. **Leverage Digital Platforms for Inclusion:** Social media and online communities should be harnessed to amplify marginalized voices and create accessible educational content. Highlighting stories of diverse practitioners can broaden public perceptions of who yoga is for and expand participation (SELF, 2018).

In conclusion, advancing gender inclusivity in yoga requires concerted efforts across historical scholarship, media representation, pedagogy, and community engagement. By embracing diversity and honouring tradition with respect, yoga can evolve as a truly universal practice that empowers all practitioners.

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