When the bell rings for games period, the boys rush onto the field in eager anticipation of enjoying a game. Most girls though, fall back, standing at the edge of the field, overwhelmed, not sure if they can ‘match up’. It doesn’t surprise the pros though.

“Girls study and do household chores; boys study and play,” says Preeti Arora, a junior-school sports teacher at a prominent school in Delhi. Preeti has been a referee at the Incheon Asiad and a junior-school physical education teacher. She says every year it is a challenge to explain to parents that their daughters need to just get onto the field and play recreationally. In her teacher. She says every year it is a challenge to explain to parents that their daughters need to just get onto the field and play recreationally. In her.

Worse, many feel their daughters will get ‘tanned’, loopying the very reason a girl is born, back to marriage and the ‘demand’ for fair brides. “At some point in his life, a boy will be told to get out of the house and play, but the way a girl is socialised, she receives approval for being home, for being quiet,” says Nupur Dhingra Paiva, a Delhi-based psychologist, and author of Love & Rage: The Inner Worlds of Children.

As girls enter puberty and some awkwardness creeps in, rather than dispelling it by encouraging them to go out and play, adults may reinforce the idea of staying out of a mixed-gender recreational play. It’s not just parents. Some schools, for instance, will send girls for a dance class and boys for games. Field events may see boys marching and girls dancing. “We give them dolls to play with, call them ‘Angel’, and they become dolls and believe they must act like angels,” says Preeti. “You’ll often see fathers taking their sons for a game. How many fathers have you seen take their daughters to play or even to watch a match?”

Ideas of how a girl should act or be, often stem from the patriarch, says Jhunu Behera, mother to Tripta Behera, a 16-year-old national-level football player. This trickles down with the rest of the family endorsing it, some — a brother, a grandmother — more vocally than the others.

Nupur teaches Infant Observation to MPhil students in Ambedkar University and girls dancing. “We give them dolls to play with, call them ‘Angel’, and they become dolls and believe they must act like angels,” says Preeti. “You’ll often see fathers taking their sons for a game. How many fathers have you seen take their daughters to play or even to watch a match?”

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Patriarchy on the playground?

Ahead of International Women’s Day, we discuss what it’ll take for parents, schools, and the social system, to bring more girls out to play.