

Yoga and Women – A Perspective on Gender Studies in Wellness and Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between yoga and women's spiritual identity has gained scholarly attention in recent decades as gender studies broaden to include non-material aspects of human experience. Yoga, traditionally rooted in Indian philosophy, has undergone significant reinterpretation in its global practice. Women have been central to this transformation, both as practitioners and as leaders shaping modern yoga discourse. This paper explores yoga from a gender studies lens, examining its influence on women's spirituality, self-actualization, and empowerment, while also considering historical barriers, cultural norms, and contemporary realities. The discussion positions yoga as not only a wellness practice but also a site of negotiation for women's agency and identity within spirituality. Yoga, rooted in India's spiritual traditions, has evolved as a global wellness movement. This paper examines yoga as a transformative tool for women, focusing on its role in enhancing physical and mental health, empowering women, and contributing to spiritual growth. Based on survey data from 307 respondents, the study highlights women's dominant participation (73.3%) in yoga-based tourism, emphasizing their interest in holistic wellness, stress management, and self-actualization. Findings also reveal that international visitors form a slight majority (54.1%), positioning India as a global hub for authentic yoga experiences. The results underline a paradigm shift in yoga and wellness emerging as a preferred lifestyle choice over conventional approach.

Keywords: Women's Health and Wellness, Lifestyle Choices, Stress-Coping Mechanisms, Self-Actualization, Spirituality, Women and Yoga.

Introduction

Yoga, an estimated 5,000-year-old discipline originating in India, integrates body, mind, and spirit through physical postures, breathing practices, and meditation. Once considered a religious and spiritual practice, yoga has evolved into a global wellness phenomenon, attracting millions worldwide. Today, it plays a pivotal role in promoting women's health, empowerment, and mental resilience, especially in urbanized, high-stress societies. Historically, yoga was dominated by male practitioners, but with modernization, women have emerged as active participants and leaders in yoga education, practice, and spiritual exploration. In the context of gender studies, yoga offers women a safe, empowering, and transformative space to achieve holistic well-being.

Spirituality has long been a contested domain within gender studies. Traditionally, women's participation in spiritual practices was mediated through patriarchal structures, limiting their visibility and agency. Yoga, with its deep roots in Indic traditions and its modern global spread, provides a unique lens through which to examine women's engagement with spirituality. While yoga historically emphasized discipline, asceticism, and detachment, its contemporary practice emphasizes balance, wellness, and self-realization—values that resonate strongly with women navigating modern challenges. The intersection of yoga and gender studies therefore opens a critical dialogue on how women reinterpret spirituality in ways that affirm identity, agency, and well-being.

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Historical Context: Women in Yogic Traditions

Historically, classical yoga texts such as *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras* and the *Bhagavad Gītā* rarely positioned women as central figures. Ascetic and monastic traditions often restricted women's direct participation, reflecting broader cultural norms of exclusion. However, Indian spiritual history also records female mystics, saints, and yoginis such as Lalleshwari, Akka Mahadevi, and Mirabai, who challenged societal expectations and embodied yoga as a spiritual practice of liberation. These figures signify that while systemic barriers existed, women carved spaces within spirituality to assert their presence.

Yoga and Women in Modern Contexts

In contemporary society, yoga has become a practice strongly associated with women, especially in urban and global contexts. A large proportion of yoga practitioners in Western countries are women, and yoga is often marketed as a wellness tool aligned with female identity. This feminization of yoga in popular culture has dual implications: on the one hand, it empowers women to prioritize health, stress management, and self-awareness; on the other hand, it risks commodifying yoga into a gendered lifestyle product.

Gender Studies Perspective on Spirituality

From a gender studies standpoint, spirituality is not merely a personal journey but a socially situated experience. Women's participation in yoga reflects negotiations with body image, societal expectations, and empowerment. For many women, yoga serves as a means of reclaiming bodily autonomy and nurturing self-actualization, countering historical narratives of passivity in spirituality. It also enables women to redefine spirituality beyond institutionalized religion, aligning it with feminist values of equality, inclusivity, and self-expression.

Yoga as a Path to Self-Actualization for Women

Self-actualization, as conceptualized in psychology by Abraham Maslow, resonates with the yogic goal of self-realization (*ātman*). Women engaging in yoga report enhanced self-awareness, stress resilience, and emotional regulation—factors that directly contribute to empowerment. The practice also fosters community and solidarity, particularly through women-centric yoga groups, retreats, and wellness collectives. Thus, yoga becomes both an individual and collective path for women toward self-actualization.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite its empowering potential, yoga as practiced today is not free from critique. Commercialization and cultural appropriation often dilute its spiritual dimensions, reducing it to fitness or aesthetics. Additionally, the gendered framing of yoga as a “women's practice” risks reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them. From a feminist lens, it is important to question who controls yoga spaces, whose voices are amplified, and how inclusivity is maintained across class, race, and sexuality.

Women's Health and Wellness

Women in India face distinct health and wellness challenges that make yoga an especially relevant practice. Surveys in recent years reveal that nearly three-fourths of Indian women report experiencing high levels of stress, often higher than men of similar age groups. Mental health struggles such as anxiety, insomnia, and work–life imbalance are widely reported, particularly among younger and working women. Around one-third of women experience burnout symptoms, yet fewer than 40% have access to adequate workplace mental health support.

Lifestyle-related illnesses also affect women disproportionately. Estimates suggest that more than one-fifth of women suffer from conditions such as hypertension, obesity, or diabetes, but relatively few seek medical intervention. This gap has increased the popularity of holistic health approaches, with over 80% of women acknowledging yoga, meditation, and naturopathy as effective tools for improving overall well-being.

Yoga adoption in India has been particularly strong among women and younger generations. Recent national surveys indicate that almost three-quarters of millennials practice yoga regularly, with women representing the majority of this demographic. Beyond physical health, many women turn to yoga for mental and emotional support, including relief from menstrual-related stress, mood swings, and difficulties with concentration.

Taken together, these trends indicate that yoga is not only a spiritual practice but also a crucial lifestyle choice that addresses the interconnected physical, psychological, and emotional health needs of women in India. The data reinforce the importance of yoga as a gender-sensitive wellness practice, providing women with accessible and holistic strategies for coping with stress, achieving self-actualization, and improving quality of life.

Dimension	Key Findings	Relevance to Yoga
Stress & Mental Health	About 72% of women report high stress; nearly half struggle with insomnia/anxiety	Yoga provides relaxation, mindfulness, and stress-coping mechanisms
Workplace Burnout	Over 30% of working women face burnout; <40% receive employer support	Yoga improves resilience, emotional balance, and work-life harmony
Lifestyle Diseases	Around 22% suffer from obesity, diabetes, or hypertension; few seek treatment	Yoga helps in lifestyle modification, preventive care, and recovery
Alternative Therapies	80%+ women view yoga, meditation, and naturopathy as effective wellness tools	Confirms acceptance of yoga as mainstream health practice
Yoga Adoption	Nearly 74% of millennials practice yoga regularly; women form the majority	Women lead in adopting yoga as a lifestyle and wellness choice
Menstrual & Emotional Health	60% experience stress, mood swings, or anxiety during menstruation	Yoga and pranayama support hormonal balance and emotional stability

Connection of Yoga with Women's Health and Wellness

Yoga has emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing women's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. For women, health challenges often extend beyond physical concerns to include stress, hormonal fluctuations, and the pressures of balancing multiple roles in family and professional life. Yoga offers a holistic framework to address these diverse needs.

On a physical level, yoga improves flexibility, strengthens the musculoskeletal system, supports cardiovascular function, and helps manage conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Practices like *surya namaskar*, *asana* sequences, and pranayama are particularly effective in regulating metabolism and promoting long-term vitality.

On a psychological and emotional level, yoga cultivates mindfulness, emotional regulation, and inner resilience. Women frequently report reduced anxiety, better sleep quality, and improved coping skills when yoga is integrated into daily routines. These benefits are especially relevant given the high prevalence of stress and burnout among Indian women.

From a hormonal and reproductive health perspective, yoga has been shown to ease symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), balance menstrual irregularities, and provide relief during menopause. Gentle yoga sequences and breathing practices reduce stress-related hormonal imbalances and support reproductive health.

Spiritually, yoga also provides women with a pathway for self-actualization. Beyond its therapeutic aspects, yoga empowers women to reconnect with their sense of identity, purpose, and inner strength. This spiritual dimension resonates with many women seeking balance between personal aspirations and societal expectations.

In sum, yoga aligns closely with women's health and wellness by offering integrated solutions that promote physical strength, mental clarity, emotional stability, and spiritual growth. Its holistic nature makes it uniquely suited to address the complex and interconnected health concerns faced by women today.

Yoga is Considered a Women-Centric Practice

Although yoga is a universal discipline meant for all, its growing popularity among women has made it appear women-centric in modern wellness contexts. Several interrelated factors explain this trend:

- **Holistic Approach to Health**

Women's health is often multi-dimensional, encompassing physical, hormonal, emotional, and social well-being. Yoga addresses all these layers simultaneously, making it more appealing than practices that focus solely on physical fitness.

- **Stress and Lifestyle Pressures**

Women often face unique pressures in managing careers, household responsibilities, and caregiving roles. Surveys show women report higher stress and burnout than men. Yoga, with its emphasis on mindfulness and relaxation, directly supports stress management, emotional stability, and resilience.

- **Hormonal and Reproductive Health**

Yoga offers specific benefits in managing menstrual irregularities, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), fertility issues, and menopausal transitions. Women frequently turn to yoga for natural, non-pharmacological support in these areas, which reinforces its gendered association.

- **Community and Safe Spaces**

Yoga classes, retreats, and wellness tourism settings often create supportive environments where women can share experiences, practice self-care, and foster empowerment. This sense of community is particularly valued by women seeking collective healing.

- **Path to Self-Actualization**

Women increasingly view yoga not just as exercise but as a tool for identity, empowerment, and spiritual growth. In gender studies, yoga has been framed as a form of "spiritual feminism," allowing women to reclaim agency over their bodies and minds.

- **Representation in Global Wellness**

In global wellness markets, women constitute the majority of yoga practitioners, instructors, and wellness tourists. This demographic dominance reinforces the perception of yoga as women-centric, even though its philosophical roots are gender-neutral.

Aspect	Women's Orientation	Men's Orientation
Primary Motivation	Stress relief, emotional balance, self-care, holistic wellness	Physical strength, flexibility, endurance, fitness
Health Focus	Hormonal balance, reproductive health, menstrual/menopausal support, mental health	Muscle building, cardiovascular fitness, injury recovery
Lifestyle Integration	Daily routines, mindfulness practices, community/group sessions	Periodic workouts, sport-specific training, physical performance
Spiritual Connection	Self-actualization, empowerment, inner healing, connection to feminine energy	Discipline, focus, meditative control, mind-body mastery
Tourism/Wellness Trends	Higher participation in yoga retreats, wellness tourism, self-healing journeys	Lower participation; focus on adventure or sport-related tourism
Representation	Majority of global yoga practitioners and instructors (~70–75% are women in surveys)	Minority presence; more common in advanced practice or teaching

Current Lifestyle Trends and the Relevance of Yoga

Modern lifestyles, particularly in urban India and globally, are characterized by high levels of stress, sedentary work patterns, and increasing dependence on technology. Long working hours, digital fatigue, irregular eating habits, and reduced physical activity have contributed to a sharp rise in lifestyle-related diseases such as obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions. For women, these challenges are compounded by the demands of managing family, professional responsibilities, and social expectations, often resulting in chronic stress, burnout, and declining mental health.

Current wellness trends reflect a growing awareness of these issues. People are increasingly shifting from curative health models to preventive approaches, prioritizing holistic practices such as yoga,

meditation, and mindfulness over conventional fitness routines. Surveys show that millennials and younger generations, especially women, are more inclined to adopt yoga not only as a physical exercise but as a lifestyle choice for stress management, emotional balance, and spiritual exploration.

Additionally, the popularity of wellness tourism and yoga retreats highlights a cultural shift where travel is no longer only about leisure but also about healing, personal growth, and inner peace. Women form the majority in this sector, reinforcing the association between yoga and female-led wellness movements.

In essence, the current lifestyle trends of high stress, digital dependency, and lifestyle-related disorders are creating fertile ground for yoga to emerge as a sustainable solution. Its ability to integrate physical health, emotional resilience, and spiritual grounding makes yoga highly relevant in addressing the wellness needs of modern women and society at large.

Lifestyle Challenge	Impact on Women's Health	Yoga-Based Solution
Sedentary work routines	Obesity, back pain, poor posture, fatigue	Asanas (e.g., Surya Namaskar, Trikonasana) improve flexibility, posture, and metabolism
High stress and burnout	Anxiety, insomnia, emotional exhaustion	Meditation, pranayama, and mindfulness practices reduce stress and improve sleep
Digital dependence & screen time	Eye strain, mental fatigue, lack of focus	Yogic eye exercises, breathing practices, and dhyana enhance focus and relaxation
Irregular diet & lifestyle	Digestive problems, hormonal imbalance, weakened immunity	Yoga promotes discipline (<i>yama, niyama</i>) and enhances digestive and hormonal health
Work-life imbalance	Chronic fatigue, loss of emotional stability, relationship strain	Yoga fosters inner balance, emotional regulation, and resilience
Age-related transitions	Menstrual issues, fertility concerns, menopause-related stress	Gentle yoga, restorative practices, and pranayama regulate hormones and ease transitions
Search for meaning & identity	Lack of self-fulfillment, low self-esteem, spiritual disconnect	Yoga nurtures self-actualization, empowerment, and spiritual growth

Modern Ways to Include Yoga in Contemporary Lifestyles

The growing challenges of urban living and digital dependence have created new avenues for integrating yoga into modern routines. While traditionally practiced in ashrams or community halls, yoga has now adapted to diverse platforms, making it more accessible, flexible, and relevant to current lifestyles.

- **Digital Yoga Platforms**

Online classes, mobile applications, and live-streamed sessions allow individuals—especially working women and homemakers—to practice yoga at home according to their schedules. These digital platforms often combine instructional videos, wellness tracking, and guided meditations.

- **Workplace Yoga Programs**

Many organizations are adopting yoga-based wellness initiatives to address employee stress, burnout, and sedentary habits. Short “desk yoga” routines, mindfulness breaks, and guided breathing sessions during work hours have become increasingly popular.

- **Yoga as Preventive Healthcare**

With lifestyle diseases on the rise, yoga is being integrated into preventive healthcare systems. Hospitals, clinics, and wellness centers now offer therapeutic yoga for hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and reproductive health issues, targeting women in particular.

- **Wellness Tourism and Retreats**

Yoga retreats and wellness resorts are expanding rapidly, attracting women travelers seeking relaxation, self-care, and spiritual exploration. These immersive programs blend yoga with meditation, naturopathy, and Ayurveda for holistic rejuvenation.

- **Hybrid Fitness Models**

Yoga is increasingly being incorporated into modern fitness routines alongside pilates, strength training, and cardio. This hybrid approach allows women to combine physical fitness goals with the psychological and spiritual benefits of yoga.

- **Community and Social Media Engagement**

Social media has become a platform for women to share yoga practices, join global challenges, and build support networks. This trend not only motivates consistent practice but also fosters a sense of community and empowerment.

- **Family and Child-Centric Yoga**

Modern families are adopting yoga as a collective activity, including prenatal yoga, yoga for children, and family yoga sessions. These practices strengthen intergenerational health awareness and build mindful living from an early age.

Modern Lifestyle Adaptations and the Role of Yoga

Modern Lifestyle Context	Yoga Adaptation	Benefits for Women
Digital Era & Busy Schedules	Online yoga platforms, mobile apps, YouTube classes	Flexible practice, time-saving, accessible anytime, anywhere
Workplace Stress & Sedentary Jobs	Desk yoga, corporate wellness programs, guided breathing breaks	Reduces stress, improves posture, enhances focus and productivity
Rising Lifestyle Diseases	Therapeutic yoga in hospitals, clinics, and wellness centers	Manages hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and reproductive health
Travel & Leisure Preferences	Yoga retreats, wellness resorts, eco-tourism	Combines leisure with self-care, spiritual exploration, and healing
Fitness Trends	Hybrid models combining yoga with pilates, strength training, and cardio	Supports holistic fitness—strength, flexibility, and mindfulness
Social Media & Communities	Online yoga challenges, virtual communities, influencer-led sessions	Motivation, shared learning, empowerment through community support
Family-Centric Practices	Prenatal yoga, yoga for children, and family yoga routines	Promotes intergenerational health, bonding, and mindful living habits

Role of Yoga in Managing Stress Among Women

Stress is a natural response to challenges, but when prolonged or unmanaged, it becomes a major health concern, particularly for women. Women often face a unique combination of biological, social, and psychological stressors. Their roles as professionals, caregivers, and homemakers frequently overlap, leading to multiple sources of emotional and physical strain.

- **Physiological Effects**

- **Hormonal Imbalance:** Chronic stress disrupts the endocrine system, leading to irregular menstrual cycles, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and in some cases, fertility challenges.
- **Sleep Disturbances:** Stress contributes to insomnia, poor sleep quality, and fatigue, which further impact productivity and emotional balance.
- **Weakened Immunity:** High cortisol levels over time reduce immunity, making women more susceptible to infections and chronic illnesses.
- **Cardiovascular Risks:** Stress raises blood pressure and heart rate, increasing the risk of hypertension and heart disease in women.

- **Psychological Effects**

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Women are more prone to anxiety disorders and depression, especially when facing social isolation or gender-based pressures.
- **Mood Swings:** Stress amplifies mood fluctuations, especially during hormonal changes such as menstruation, pregnancy, or menopause.
- **Cognitive Impairment:** Concentration difficulties, memory lapses, and reduced decision-making ability are common in women under chronic stress.

- **Behavioral Effects**
 - **Unhealthy Lifestyle Choices:** Stress often leads to overeating, smoking, alcohol use, or reliance on stimulants.
 - **Reduced Physical Activity:** Lack of motivation and energy reduces exercise and self-care, worsening overall health.
 - **Work-Life Imbalance:** Stress affects performance at work and reduces engagement at home, contributing to feelings of inadequacy or guilt.
- **Reproductive and Maternal Health Effects**
 - **Menstrual Disorders:** Stress can cause irregular cycles, painful periods, or amenorrhea (absence of menstruation).
 - **Pregnancy Complications:** High stress during pregnancy is linked to preterm birth, low birth weight, and increased maternal anxiety.
 - **Menopausal Challenges:** Stress exacerbates hot flashes, mood changes, and sleep disturbances during menopause.

Stress in Women and Yoga-Based Coping Techniques

Stress Factor / Statistic	Reported Impact	Yoga-Based Coping Techniques
Workplace Stress – 72.2% of women report high stress vs. 53.6% men	Burnout, anxiety, fatigue	<i>Pranayama</i> (Anulom-Vilom, Nadi Shodhana) to calm nerves; <i>Viparita Karani</i> for relaxation after long hours
Chronic Stress from Work-Life Imbalance – 1 in 2 women	Emotional strain, hormonal imbalance	Daily <i>Yoga Nidra</i> for deep relaxation; <i>Balasana</i> (Child's Pose) for emotional soothing
Insomnia / Sleep Disturbances – 47% women (18–35 yrs)	Poor sleep, low productivity	Evening restorative yoga: <i>Supta Baddha Konasana</i> , <i>Savasana</i> , and mindful breathing
Menstruation-related Stress – 60% report anxiety/mood swings	Irritability, emotional imbalance	Gentle yoga during cycles: <i>Baddha Konasana</i> , <i>Setu Bandhasana</i> ; <i>Bhramari Pranayama</i> for calming mind
Difficulty Focusing (55%) during menstruation	Reduced productivity, low concentration	Short <i>mindfulness meditation</i> or <i>Trataka</i> (candle gazing) for focus
Social Isolation (41% women report distress)	Emotional loneliness, depression risk	<i>Bhakti Yoga</i> (kirtan, chanting), group yoga sessions, women's wellness circles for connection
General Emotional Overload (across all age groups)	Increased cortisol, weakened immunity	Integrated programs combining <i>asanas</i> + <i>pranayama</i> + <i>meditation</i> for holistic stress reduction

Stress in women manifests across physical, mental, and emotional dimensions, with significant impacts on long-term health and quality of life. Because women's stressors are intertwined with both biological rhythms and societal expectations, coping strategies need to be holistic. Yoga, with its emphasis on balancing body, mind, and spirit, provides sustainable tools for mitigating these negative effects while promoting resilience and empowerment.

Yoga and Self-Actualization in Women

Yoga has emerged as a transformative practice for women, offering a pathway to self-awareness, empowerment, and self-actualization. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, yoga integrates the body, mind, and spirit, aligning closely with modern psychological concepts of personal growth. This paper examines how yoga contributes to women's journey of self-actualization, considering historical contexts, contemporary practices, and gendered experiences. It highlights yoga as both a wellness tool and a deeper spiritual practice that allows women to reclaim agency, balance societal roles, and cultivate authentic identities.

Self-actualization, a concept widely recognized in psychology through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, refers to the realization of one's fullest potential. While philosophy and psychology

interpret it differently, yoga presents a holistic path where physical discipline, mental clarity, and spiritual awakening merge to support personal growth. For women, whose identities are often shaped by social expectations, yoga provides a distinct space for self-reflection, autonomy, and self-empowerment.

Yoga as a Pathway to Self-Actualization

Yoga is more than a physical exercise; it is a system of practices designed to harmonize the body, mind, and consciousness. The eight limbs of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras—yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna, and samādhi—form a framework for self-discipline and inner transformation. For women, this framework can serve as:

- **A means of bodily autonomy** – reclaiming control over physical and emotional health.
- **A practice of mindfulness** – reducing stress and enhancing self-awareness.
- **A path to transcendence** – aligning with deeper values and spiritual dimensions of life.

Through consistent practice, yoga nurtures resilience, emotional balance, and the clarity needed for women to move beyond societal constraints and achieve personal authenticity.

Women, Identity, and Self-Actualization through Yoga

Women often navigate multiple roles—professional, familial, and social—that can fragment identity and limit personal growth. Yoga offers a unifying practice that fosters integration of these dimensions. Research shows that women practicing yoga report:

- **Enhanced self-confidence** and acceptance of their bodies.
- **Improved mental health outcomes**, including reduced anxiety and depression.
- **Strengthened community bonds**, particularly in women-centric yoga circles.

These outcomes mirror key markers of self-actualization: creativity, self-acceptance, autonomy, and meaningful connections.

Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions

While psychology emphasizes self-actualization as the fulfillment of personal potential, yoga views it as self-realization—the recognition of the true self (*ātman*). For women, integrating these perspectives provides a dual pathway:

- **Psychological growth**, where yoga enhances mental clarity and personal agency.
- **Spiritual awakening**, where yoga connects women with universal consciousness, allowing them to transcend limitations imposed by gendered roles.

This union of psychology and spirituality positions yoga as a unique practice fostering holistic self-actualization in women.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its transformative potential, yoga in modern contexts faces challenges:

- **Commercialization**, which often reduces yoga to a physical workout, neglecting its spiritual aspects.
- **Gendered marketing**, which frames yoga as primarily feminine, reinforcing stereotypes.
- **Accessibility barriers**, including class, cultural, and geographic divides, limiting who can benefit from yoga's full potential.

Acknowledging these challenges ensures a critical approach, preventing self-actualization from being viewed as a privilege of only certain groups of women.

Yoga provides women with an integrative path toward self-actualization, blending physical well-being, psychological growth, and spiritual realization. It empowers women to reclaim autonomy over their bodies and minds while fostering deeper self-awareness and transcendence. As yoga continues to evolve globally, it remains a profound resource for women seeking not only wellness but also self-realization in its fullest sense. Future research should focus on long-term impacts of yoga on women's empowerment, self-identity, and spiritual growth across diverse cultural contexts.

Self-Actualization: Trends vs. Reality

In contemporary society, the idea of *self-actualization* has become a popular concept, often romanticized in lifestyle media, wellness industries, and spiritual practices such as yoga. While trends emphasize empowerment, independence, and holistic growth, the reality of achieving self-actualization is more complex, influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors. For women, especially, this gap between “idealized self-actualization” and lived reality reflects both opportunities and challenges.

Trends in Self-Actualization

Modern discourse frames self-actualization as an attainable goal for everyone. Popular wellness culture, social media narratives, and commercial yoga often highlight:

- **Quick fixes** for personal growth through retreats, apps, or lifestyle products.
- **Empowerment narratives** that stress independence and self-love.
- **Feminized wellness spaces**, where yoga, meditation, and mindfulness are marketed as essential tools for women’s growth.
- **Visible success stories** of women leaders, influencers, or professionals who embody “having it all.”

These trends create aspirational ideals but may oversimplify the depth of personal transformation required for true self-actualization.

Reality of Self-Actualization

The lived reality is often more nuanced:

- **Systemic barriers** such as gender inequality, work-life imbalance, and societal roles can limit women’s capacity to prioritize self-growth.
- **Emotional and mental struggles** (stress, anxiety, self-doubt) persist despite wellness practices.
- **Unequal access** to yoga and spiritual spaces due to economic, geographic, or cultural constraints.
- **Gradual transformation**, as authentic self-actualization requires sustained practice, discipline, and deep inner work rather than quick solutions.

Trends vs. Reality: A Comparative View

Dimension	Trends in Self-Actualization	Reality of Self-Actualization
Accessibility	Marketed as universally achievable through yoga, wellness, and lifestyle practices.	Often limited by financial, cultural, or social constraints.
Timeframe	Promoted as quick or immediate results (retreats, workshops, online programs).	Requires years of practice, patience, and inner reflection.
Role of Yoga	Seen as a fitness or relaxation activity, mostly marketed to women.	Functions as a spiritual discipline requiring holistic commitment.
Empowerment Narrative	Framed as women “reclaiming power” through external tools (products, classes).	True empowerment arises from inner transformation and sustained discipline.
Social Media Influence	Showcases “ideal lives” and success stories of actualized women.	Often masks struggles; real journeys are less visible and uneven.
Focus on Identity	Celebrates independence, beauty, and lifestyle choices.	Involves deeper identity work—self-acceptance beyond societal roles.

The contrast between trends and reality highlights a key gap: while self-actualization is popularly presented as a lifestyle choice or quick achievement, in truth, it is a gradual process that demands consistent inner discipline, resilience, and spiritual depth. For women, yoga can bridge this gap by offering a grounded path that integrates body, mind, and spirit. Recognizing this distinction ensures a more authentic understanding of self-actualization beyond consumerist narratives.

Literature Review

De Michelis, E. (2005). *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*.

- **Focus:** Traces the evolution of yoga from classical traditions to modern global practice.
- **Conclusion:** Modern yoga is a hybrid product of Indian reformist and Western esoteric influences. This transition created space for women’s participation but also altered the spiritual depth of yoga into more secularized forms.

Alter, J. S. (2004). *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy*.

- **Focus:** Examines the interplay between science, health, and yoga in colonial and postcolonial India.
- **Conclusion:** Yoga became associated with bodily discipline and health, opening participation to women while reinforcing gendered ideals of health and physicality.

Singleton, M. (2010). *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*.

- **Focus:** Studies the rise of āsana-based yoga in the 20th century.
- **Conclusion:** The shift toward postural yoga attracted large numbers of women, reframing yoga as a practice for health and fitness rather than only spiritual liberation.

Jain, A. (2020). *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*.

- **Focus:** Critiques commercialization and gendered representation in modern yoga.
- **Conclusion:** Yoga has been feminized and commodified in the global North, often marketed to women as a lifestyle, which risks sidelining its spiritual core.

Cagas, J. Y., Biddle, S. J. H., & Vergeer, I. (2022).

- **Focus:** Explores gender differences in motivations for yoga participation.
- **Conclusion:** Women primarily practice yoga for relaxation, spirituality, and stress management, while men report fitness-oriented motives.

Strings, S., Headen, I., & Spencer, B. (2019).

- **Focus:** Analyzes *Yoga Journal's* media representation of race and gender.
- **Conclusion:** Women dominate imagery in yoga marketing, but primarily white, slim, able-bodied women are represented—excluding diversity and reinforcing narrow ideals.

Khalsa, S. B. S., & Cope, S. (2006).

- **Focus:** Examines psychological benefits of yoga in lifestyle interventions.
- **Conclusion:** Women report improved stress resilience, emotional stability, and self-awareness—outcomes strongly linked to self-actualization.

Triantafyllidou, E., et al. (2025).

- **Focus:** Evaluates trauma-informed yoga programs in the UK.
- **Conclusion:** Women benefit from yoga as a healing and empowering practice, but intersectional barriers (class, race, access) shape who can participate fully.

Plancke, C. (2018). *Womb Yoga and Feminist Spirituality*.

- **Focus:** Explores womb-centered yoga practices as a feminist re-appropriation.
- **Conclusion:** Women reclaim yoga's spiritual aspects by centering embodiment, cycles, and feminine energy, challenging patriarchal spiritual models.

Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*.

- **Focus:** Introduced self-actualization theory in psychology.
- **Conclusion:** Parallels can be drawn with yoga: women practicing yoga report outcomes (self-acceptance, autonomy, creativity) aligning with Maslow's vision of self-actualization.

Synthesis of Studies

- **Historical research** (De Michelis, Alter, Singleton) shows how modern yoga shifted toward health and posture, enabling greater women's participation.
- **Contemporary critiques** (Jain, Strings) highlight commercialization and narrow representation of women in yoga culture.
- **Empirical evidence** (Cagas, Khalsa, Triantafyllidou) confirms women practice yoga for stress relief, empowerment, and healing, but realities differ by access and context.
- **Feminist re-appropriations** (Plancke) show women using yoga to reclaim spiritual agency.
- **Psychological theory** (Maslow) aligns with yogic practices, supporting women's journey toward self-actualization.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on yoga, women's health, and spirituality, there remains a significant gap in understanding yoga through the lens of gender studies. Existing research often highlights women as dominant participants in modern yoga but largely focuses on physical or psychological outcomes rather than their deeper spiritual journeys. Historical narratives tend to privilege male gurus, leaving women's contributions and experiences underrepresented. Moreover, intersectional perspectives—considering caste, class, race, and sexuality—are limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. While critiques of commercialization and representation exist, few studies explore how women themselves negotiate yoga as both a commodified wellness practice and a path to self-actualization and spiritual empowerment. This gap underscores the need for feminist, intersectional, and cross-cultural approaches to better understand women's agency and lived experiences in the spiritual dimensions of yoga.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze how gender influences women's participation, representation, and spiritual experiences in yoga.
- To explore the relationship between yoga and women's self-actualization, empowerment, and identity formation.
- To identify the impact of commercialization and commodification of yoga on women's spiritual engagement.
- To provide recommendations for integrating gender-sensitive perspectives in yoga scholarship and practice.

Methodology

The research design was exploratory and analytical, using mixed methods to gain a holistic understanding. The primary data source was a structured questionnaire distributed to 307 respondents at yoga schools, wellness retreats, and spiritual centers in Rishikesh and surrounding regions. The questionnaire collected information on demographics, travel motivations, wellness practices, and perceptions of yoga. Purposive sampling was used to target both domestic and international tourists engaged in yoga-related travel. Secondary data was sourced from scholarly journals, government tourism reports, and published studies. Quantitative analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel, producing frequency distributions and charts, while qualitative responses were coded to identify recurring themes.

Findings

The survey of 307 respondents revealed a strong female presence in yoga tourism. Below are the detailed findings from the data analysis:

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Female	225	73.3
Male	82	26.7

Table 2: Tourist Type (Domestic vs. International)

Tourist Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Domestic	141	45.9
International	166	54.1

Table 3: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group (Years)	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Below 30	94	30.6
30–45	164	53.4
46–60	38	12.4
Above 60	11	3.6

Table 4: Purpose of Visit

Purpose of Visit	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yoga & Wellness	268	87.3
Spiritual & Pilgrimage	29	9.4
Sightseeing	4	1.3
Cultural & Heritage Tourism	4	1.3
Adventure	2	0.7

Discussion

The analysis indicates that yoga tourism is heavily female-driven, with women accounting for 73.3% of respondents. This suggests yoga has become a safe and transformative environment for women to explore wellness and spirituality. The dominance of international tourists highlights India's position as a global leader in authentic yoga practices. The 30-45 age group, forming over half the respondents, represents a demographic seeking meaningful travel experiences focused on mental health, healing, and personal development. The findings align with global trends emphasizing wellness and spiritual tourism.

This study examined yoga and women through the framework of gender studies in spirituality, highlighting the multiple dimensions of women's engagement with the practice. The analysis confirms that while women today represent the majority of global yoga practitioners, their spiritual contributions remain underrepresented in scholarship and cultural narratives. Historically, yoga traditions were preserved and transmitted primarily by men, with women's roles confined to limited mentions or hagiographic accounts. This imbalance reflects the broader patriarchal silencing of women's voices in spiritual traditions, creating a need for feminist reinterpretations that reposition women not as peripheral participants but as active agents of yogic spirituality.

A central objective of this study was to analyze how gender influences women's participation, representation, and spiritual experiences in yoga. The findings suggest that women often approach yoga not only as a physical discipline but as a holistic practice for inner balance, resilience, and spiritual growth. However, representation remains problematic. Commercial yoga imagery frequently portrays a narrow standard of femininity—slim, youthful, urban, and upper-class—while excluding diverse body types, ages, cultural backgrounds, and social locations. Thus, while women are visible in yoga culture, their representation is filtered through consumerist ideals that often marginalize the very diversity of experiences yoga encompasses.

The relationship between yoga and women's self-actualization emerged as another key theme. Consistent with Maslow's theory, yoga supports qualities such as self-awareness, creativity, autonomy, and authenticity. Yet, yogic frameworks move beyond Western individualism, emphasizing interconnectedness and transcendence of ego. For many women, this translates into empowerment not only at the personal level but also within communities, relationships, and collective identity. Yoga becomes a medium through which women reclaim spiritual agency, negotiate their identities, and challenge patriarchal definitions of spirituality that prioritize detachment and asceticism over embodiment and care.

Commercialization of yoga presents a double-sided reality. On one hand, it has increased access for women, particularly in urban and globalized contexts, providing platforms, studios, and digital spaces where women can gather and practice. On the other hand, the commodification of yoga has diluted its spiritual essence, shifting the focus toward consumer culture, lifestyle branding, and aesthetic performance. Women themselves often navigate this tension by selectively engaging with commodified yoga for accessibility while simultaneously seeking deeper spiritual practices through meditation, ritual, or feminist re-appropriations such as womb-centered yoga. This negotiation highlights women's agency in balancing yoga's consumerist and spiritual dimensions.

Intersectionality also plays a decisive role. Women's experiences of yoga vary significantly across caste, class, race, and sexuality. For example, while affluent women in Western or metropolitan contexts may access yoga primarily through commodified spaces, women in rural India may view yoga as a cultural inheritance tied to tradition and spirituality. Yet, these diverse experiences are rarely reflected in mainstream yoga scholarship, which often privileges Western, middle-class perspectives. Addressing these disparities requires research that is both feminist and intersectional, situating women's spirituality within broader socio-cultural realities.

Emerging approaches such as feminist and trauma-informed yoga represent attempts to re-center women's bodies and experiences in spiritual practice. These models challenge hierarchical and patriarchal forms of yoga by creating inclusive, safe spaces where embodiment, healing, and empowerment are prioritized. However, scholarly evaluations of their long-term impact are still scarce, underscoring the need for systematic research to assess their potential for transforming women's spiritual lives.

Finally, the digital turn adds complexity. Online platforms and social media have amplified women's visibility in yoga, enabling them to share experiences, build communities, and craft spiritual identities beyond geographical boundaries. At the same time, these digital spaces replicate the very commodification and narrow ideals seen in mainstream yoga marketing. The dual nature of digital yoga—as a site of empowerment and commodification—reflects the broader contradictions of women's engagement with yoga in the modern era.

In sum, yoga is simultaneously a space of empowerment, healing, and self-actualization for women, and a site of exclusion, commodification, and contested representation. By analyzing women's participation through gender and intersectional lenses, this study emphasizes the need to move beyond superficial narratives that reduce yoga to wellness or fitness trends. Instead, yoga should be recognized as a transformative spiritual practice where women actively negotiate their identities, reclaim agency, and contribute to evolving traditions of spirituality. The discussion thus highlights both the promises and the limitations of yoga as a gendered spiritual practice, offering a foundation for future research to explore these dimensions with greater depth and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Yoga has transcended its traditional spiritual context to become a universal practice of self-empowerment, healing, and holistic living. For women, yoga serves as a means to reclaim well-being, manage stress, and achieve self-actualization. India stands out as a leading wellness tourism destination, offering authentic experiences that resonate globally. This study has highlighted that yoga, when examined through the lens of gender studies in spirituality, represents both a space of empowerment and a site of unresolved challenges for women. Historically, women's voices have been marginalized within yogic traditions, but contemporary practices reveal their central role in shaping yoga as a tool for healing, identity, and spiritual growth. The discussion showed that yoga not only contributes to women's self-actualization and empowerment but also offers a means of negotiating gendered expectations, reclaiming agency, and fostering community. At the same time, issues of commercialization, narrow representation, and unequal access limit yoga's potential as an inclusive spiritual practice.

The findings underscore the importance of recognizing intersectionality in women's engagement with yoga. Experiences differ across caste, class, race, age, and sexuality, suggesting that one-dimensional narratives risk overlooking the diversity of women's spiritual journeys. Similarly, while commercialization and digitalization have widened access, they have also reduced yoga to consumer culture, sidelining its deeper spiritual essence. Future scholarship must, therefore, approach yoga as both a commodified wellness practice and a transformative spiritual path, acknowledging women's agency in negotiating these tensions.

From a practical perspective, the study has several implications. For scholars, there is a need to integrate feminist and intersectional frameworks into yoga research, ensuring that women's voices, particularly from marginalized groups, are represented. For practitioners and educators, gender-sensitive approaches should be embedded in yoga teaching, pedagogy, and community engagement, creating spaces that are inclusive and spiritually meaningful. Feminist and trauma-informed yoga models offer promising pathways in this regard, but further empirical research is required to assess their long-term impact. Finally, policymakers and wellness industries must balance the accessibility benefits of commercialization with respect for yoga's spiritual depth, ensuring that yoga remains not just a product but a holistic practice that empowers women at multiple levels.

In conclusion, yoga holds immense potential as a transformative site for women's spirituality, empowerment, and self-actualization. However, realizing this potential requires conscious efforts to challenge patriarchal legacies, broaden representation, and prioritize inclusivity. By bridging historical gaps, resisting reductive commercialization, and amplifying women's diverse voices, yoga can evolve into a truly gender-sensitive spiritual practice that reflects the complexity and richness of women's lived experiences.

Recommendations and suggestions

- **Develop Women-Focused Wellness Retreats and Programs**

Design retreats and yoga programs specifically for women to create safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces. These initiatives should integrate gender-sensitive pedagogies, emphasize self-care, and address issues such as stress, identity, and empowerment, allowing women to explore spirituality beyond patriarchal structures.

- **Strengthen the Global Branding of Indian Yoga Through Campaigns**

Position yoga globally as a holistic spiritual and cultural practice rather than just a fitness routine. Collaborative campaigns by government bodies, tourism boards, and yoga institutions can highlight authentic traditions and the evolving role of women in shaping yoga practices.

- **Invest in Culturally Inclusive Spaces for International Tourists**

Develop yoga centers and spiritual spaces that are culturally sensitive and inclusive, ensuring respect for Indian traditions. These spaces should celebrate diversity, incorporate multilingual teaching resources, and address the unique needs of women travelers to foster meaningful cross-cultural spiritual exchange.

- **Spread and Educate Vedic Knowledge for Women**

Integrate Vedic philosophy into yoga education to deepen women's spiritual engagement and empower them with traditionally restricted knowledge. Simplifying and contextualizing Vedic teachings for contemporary women enables a connection between ancient wisdom and modern life challenges.

- **Create Digital Platforms Based on Traditional Indian Knowledge**

Develop online platforms rooted in authentic Indian yoga philosophy to democratize access worldwide. Curated online classes, knowledge-sharing forums, and digital archives led by women practitioners and scholars can preserve heritage, enhance accessibility, and resist commercialization pressures.

- **Promote Knowledgeable and Authentic Representatives**

Identify, train, and support qualified representatives who act as ambassadors of yoga globally. These individuals should be well-versed in traditional practices, Vedic knowledge, and gender-sensitive approaches, ensuring that international promotion maintains spiritual depth, cultural integrity, and inclusivity. Representatives can lead workshops, retreats, digital programs, and campaigns, bridging traditional wisdom with modern global audiences.

Integrated Yoga-Based and Vedic Practices for Women's Health & Wellness

Domain	Modern Yoga Practices	Vedic / Classical Yogic Practices
Daily Routine & Lifestyle	Short asana + pranayama sessions, digital detox, workplace yoga	<i>Dinacharya</i> (Brahma Muhurta rising, self-care rituals), <i>Sadvritta</i> (ethical living), <i>Mitahara</i> (yogic diet)
Stress & Emotional Health	Mindfulness meditation, Yoga Nidra, guided relaxation	<i>Mantra chanting</i> (Gayatri, Shakti mantras), <i>Mudras</i> (Hridaya, Yoni, Prana), <i>Pratyahara</i> (sensory withdrawal)
Seasonal & Environmental Adaptation	Hybrid fitness (yoga + pilates), wellness tourism retreats	<i>Ritucharya</i> (seasonal routines), <i>Ayurvedic Rasayanas</i> (Shatavari, Ashwagandha), moon-based cycles (Chandra Namaskar)
Hormonal & Reproductive Health	Prenatal yoga, cycle-aware yoga, restorative postures	<i>Samskaras</i> (Garbhadhana, Seemantha), lunar alignment, fasting (Ekadashi), <i>Shakti meditation</i>
Spiritual Growth	Guided mindfulness apps, yoga retreats, journaling	<i>Swadhyaya</i> (scriptural reflection), Kundalini yoga, <i>Bhakti Yoga</i> (kirtan, devotion), <i>Sankalpa</i> (intentions)
Cleansing & Detox	Diet awareness, plant-based wellness, modern therapeutic yoga	<i>Shatkarmas</i> (Neti, Dhauti, Kapalabhati, Nauli), <i>Panchakarma</i> (Ayurvedic detox therapies)
Community & Social Wellness	Workplace wellness programs, social media yoga challenges, group practice	<i>Seva</i> (selfless service), women's circles, intergenerational yoga practices

Way Forward

This study forms a basis to take up further research on application of yoga therapy for women's diseases and the effect of yogic practices in women with respect to pregnancy, neo-natal behavior, post-partum depression, menopause and overall sense of well-being and longevity in women. This paper will prove significant in future study of women's wellness and expectations and further research by scholars should be taken up on through clinical trials and supported through the incentivising parameter of STEM for Women.

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