

# FACTOR AFFECTING YOUNG GIRLS PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS: NARRATIVES FROM YOUNG WOMEN IN ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN

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## Abstract

*This study examines a neglected aspect of gender equality debate-what factors influence young girls' participation in sports. It examines the social, cultural, and institutional factors that discourage young girls' participation in sports and physical activities. The data for the study comes from 11 rural and 12 urban young women who were studying in two public sector co-education universities of Islamabad, Pakistan. The overall sample size of 23 young women (aged 19-25 years) was obtained by employing the theoretical sampling technique. In-depth qualitative interviews, using interview guides, were conducted with respondents. Thematic analysis was carried out for identifying patterns and themes from the data. The overall conclusion that we reach from the study findings is: lack of adequate playing facilities in educational institutions as well as at the community level makes it difficult for young girls to engage in sports and physical activities. The study findings also suggest that cultural discourses, i.e., women's engagement in sports make them less feminine which in turn reduces their potentiality for marriage, are among the key barriers that discourage young women's participation in sports. Similarly, purda (veiling women from men's gaze or keeping them invisible in the public space) limits young girls' participation in sports to indoor games. Thus, girls reproduce a traditional dominant form of femininity through their choice of and participation in selected sports and physical activities*

**Keywords:** Cultural discourse; Gaze; Gender equality; Purda; Thematic analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

Sport is part and parcel of almost every culture. Like other aspects of social life, sport is a gendered field. "The issue of gender equality in sport" is historically rooted (Deshpande, 2016). Studies have identified significant differences between females' and males' participation in sports (Henderson, 2014; H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016). Studies reveal that more males than females participate in competitive professional and leisure sports and physical activities (Laar et al., 2019; H. Ullah, 2013). Girls/women's participation in sports decreases as soon as they reach puberty. According to Pharo (2012) girls' participation rate in sports is decreasing rather than increasing when they leave secondary school or enter into higher secondary schools/colleges. Lack of sports facilities and physical education in schools and no or limited opportunities at the community level limit the opportunities for girls to play sports (H. Ullah, 2012).

Feminists, keeping in view the persistent gender inequalities in sport, have focused on sport as one of the key areas in which traditional gender stereotypes have been examined and challenged (Sahil & Dhauta, 2018; Woolum, 1998). It will not be a sweeping statement to argue that, in the last five decades, gender has become an important category of analysis in the sociology of sport and physical fitness. In the developed countries, research studies (see Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006; Wilde, 2007) have unpacked that sport is a gendered activity-boys and men are encouraged to participate in a wide range of sports as compared to young girls and women (H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016). Studies also revealed that more boys/men than girls/women take part in organized sport. Similarly, coaching and administration of organized competitive sport are dominated by males (Maitland, 2012). Studies have revealed a range of factors and barriers (economic status of the family, unconducive cultural environment, lack of infrastructure and religion) that prevent and discourage young girls/women from participation in sports and physical activities

outside the home (Johnson, 2017; Shores et al., 2007; H. Ullah, 2013)

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of sports for good physical, mental and emotional health, sports opportunities for girls and women in general and girls and women from the rural areas, in particular, are very limited in Pakistan (H. Ullah, 2013). Similarly, participation in sports for girls and women from lower socio-economic backgrounds is an alien thing. In Pakistan, irrespective of age and ethnic background, females play less sport than their male counterparts. In the rural areas of Pakistan, women's participation in sport is rare. In exclusive girl schools and colleges, girls/women play selected sports i.e. badminton or playing football or volleyball. There are no organized sports opportunities for young women at the community level (H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016). Factors such as biological differences between men and women were/are one of the key factors that perpetuate the gender gap in sport participation (Deshpande, 2016; H. Ullah, 2013; R. Ullah et al., 2020). It is believed that sport demands physical strength and, therefore, is the prerogative of men only.

Keeping in view the importance of sports and physical activities and the limited opportunities available to women in Pakistan, we deem it necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers to girls/women's participation in sport and physical activities in Pakistan. The main aim of the study is to unpack some of the social and cultural factors that prevent young women from participating in sport and physical activities. Another aim of the study is to start a debate on the importance of women's engagement in sports and physical activities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was carried out in two public sector co-education universities in Islamabad- the capital of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The study was conducted in line with qualitative research cannons. Qualitative research is the best approach to answer-why

women do or do not play sports and engage in physical activities. The data for the paper comes from 23 in-depth interviews with young women (university students, aged 19 to 25). Thus the sample size of the study was 23 young women from two public sector co-education universities in Islamabad. 11 of the respondents belonged to rural areas whereas 12 were from urban areas. The sample size was achieved with the help of theoretical sampling technique. Theoretical sampling technique is a sampling strategy often used in qualitative research, which occurs as the data collection progresses. Employing theoretical sampling technique, we identified a small handful of respondents and interviewed them using an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions. The interview guide helped to identify factors affecting young girls' participation in sports but also unpacked reasons that compelled young girls to drop out of sport and physical activity as they reached puberty. The data were analyzed in accordance with the principles of qualitative data analysis. Thematic analysis was carried out on the collected data. We followed all the phases of thematic analysis techniques. For instance, at the very outset of analysis, we transcribed the data. We read the transcribed data again and again to familiarize ourselves with the collected data. We generated initial codes and searched for broader themes. We read the themes rigorously and defined specific themes. Lastly, we produce the report. The overall conclusion that we reached from the study is: deeply rooted beliefs about women's physiology, lack of conducive environment for women's sports, gendered socialization, and the association of morality with girls were revealed by data to be the main factors affecting young women's participation in sports. The analysis led us to argue that sports, in this study locale, is one of the crucial sites for the reproduction of gender inequalities and gender hierarchies in Pakistani society.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Sport, despite some progress at the national level, remains a gendered field and site. In Pakistan, girls' and young women's participation in sports and physical activities outside of home has been discouraged for multiple and complex reasons. We, in this study, attempted to explore social, cultural, and structural factors affecting young women's participation in sports. The study findings suggest that girls do play some sports (badminton, skipping, volley ball, etc.) in their childhood (before the age of 10) but stopped playing sports as soon as they reach puberty. Similarly, urban girls participate in active sports more than rural girls. The overall finding is that young girls have fewer opportunities to play sports than young boys have. Many different social, cultural, and structural factors i.e., lack of conducive socio-cultural environment and physical infrastructure in educational institutions, community, and wider society were reported to be the key factors that discourage young girls' participation in sports. Some of the common themes that are drawn from the field data are presented and discussed in the forthcoming section.

### **Socio-cultural Barriers to Women Participation in Sports**

Except for four respondents, all our respondents were unanimous in stating that an unconducive socio-cultural environment and patriarchal values were key barriers to women's participation in sports. Several of our participants noted that unconducive cultural environment, no permission to go out unaccompanied, not to be seen by strange men, association of honor with women-as key barriers to women's participation in sports. Some participants argued: "our culture is very strict. It does not allow young women to go out and play sports. Girls who dare to go out and play sports are not appreciated or liked by their families and larger community. There is no encouragement for girls to participate in outdoor sports". Another respondent expressed her opinion by asserting: "we all know that our [females] participation in sports, particularly in outdoor games, is strictly forbidden. There are several factors (gendered morality,

stereotypical belief in physiological differences between men and women) that affect women's participation in sports". One participant from the urban area stated: "in my childhood and school life, I used to play cricket, badminton and even football with my brothers, cousins, and friends. As I grew up and turned 10, my family stopped me from playing sports outside home. I was told that it is not good for me". The data show that majority of girls played some sports in their childhood and stopped playing sports as they grew up. These responses communicate a vivid message that the socio-cultural environment is not secure and friendly for young girls to participate in sports outside home. Unsafe neighborhoods and environments compel families to ban young women from playing outdoor sports.

Referring to men's control on women and children, some of our participants mentioned that they were not allowed by their brothers and fathers to play outdoor sports, especially crickets, tennis, hockey, etc. Several respondents asserted that their families strictly advised them to stay away from playing sports. One of the respondents argued: "My father and brother strictly restricted me from participation in outdoor sports and physical activities". Another respondent said 'her brother did not allow her to play even indoor game at home". One participant, coming from a rural background, opined: "My father and brother do not allow me and my sister to play sports. We are not allowed even to play indoor sports. She further argued that our society labels sporty girls as *besharam*-having no shame. One of the common reasons shared by the respondents was that society considers girls' participation in outdoor sports immoral and vulgar. These discourses cement and reinforce the existing stereotypes and conventional belief-women are inherently different from men and must not engage in sports like men do (see Marciniak, 2015; Schultz, 2014). Sport is seen as a manly activity. The labels *besharam*, vulgar and immoral are dominant discourses and powerful techniques employed by men to support their hegemony in sports and in the wider society.

### **Lack of Exclusive Playgrounds and Recreation Facilities for Young Girls/Women**

Young girls and women may not participate in outdoor sports if they do not have access to adequate segregated sport facilities at the community level. Lack of adequate (culturally safe and accessible) sports infrastructure is one of the potential barriers to young girls' participation in sports (Laar et al., 2019; H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016). Several of our respondents asserted that they want to play sports but there is no privacy and safe playgrounds and sports complex for girls and women. One of the respondents stated: "we are living in an Islamic society in which maintaining *purda* is expected by our families, communities, and the larger society. We do not have safe and accessible sports infrastructure where we can play and do exercise as per our cultural standards". The lack of sports and recreation infrastructures halts young girls' inclusion and participation in sports. One participant argued that she used to play sports in her school days. She said: "I played badminton, tennis and even cricket in school. Nevertheless, I stopped playing it when I entered the age bracket of 8-10 years. My family was right to stop me from playing outside home as there is no conducive environment and place to play sports after school time for grown-up girls". This suggests that girls stop participation in sports outside their educational institutions due to a lack of governmental and community investment in sports for girls. One of the respondents stated: "I loved to play cricket and football in my childhood. I used to play these games with my brothers...however, I was told not to join the group of boys for playing it". The data show that majority of girls/women in the study locale liked games and sports but did not have the desired environment and infrastructures to engage in sports and physical activities. These responses suggest that girls' participation in sport requires adequate safe and accessible sports infrastructure and facilities.

Further findings suggest that some girls had the opportunity to play indoor games both in their educational institutions and after returning home from studies. This, however, can be seen with reference to family background and geographical and residential location of the respondents. Studies, both in the global North and Global South, have revealed that metropolitan cities/urban areas and upper-class parents provide more support and opportunities to their girls/women to participate in outdoor sports as compared to smaller cities/rural areas and poor parents (Cott, 1987; Curtis & McPherson, 1987; Laar et al., 2019; H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016).

### **Deeply Embedded Domestic Ideology as Barrier to Girls' Participation in Sports**

The deeply embedded domestic ideology or the cult of domesticity are among the key barriers that limit and discourage girls/women to participate in outdoor sports and physical activities. Allowing girls/women to engage in outdoor sports challenge the cult of domesticity and domestic ideology (H. Ullah, 2013). Several of our respondents pointed to their engagement in domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.) as a barrier to their participation in sports. They revealed that their parents allow them to participate in sports. Nevertheless, family responsibilities and other work burdens leave no time and energy in them to play sports or go for physical exercise. One of the respondents argued: "I played cricket in school days but have stopped it because of my busy university life and family responsibilities". Another respondent expressed an almost similar opinion by asserting that "I played various games when I was not married. When I got married, I have no time for playing games". Another respondent stated: "I play sports till class 9<sup>th</sup>. I stopped playing sports as I have to help my mother with house chores, go to *Madrassa* for learning the Holy Book-The Quran. I also had to teach my younger siblings in my free time". The above responses reveal that some girls were allowed by their parents to participate in sports but they shouldered domestic chores and responsibilities at a very early



age which prevented them from participating in sports. The data show that the deeply embedded domestic ideology and the association of domestic chores with girls and women as their natural and moral responsibilities prevented them from engaging in sports in physical activities.

### **Gender, Socialization, and Participation in Sports**

“Socialization is powerful and profoundly affects us all” (Henslin et al., 2015). Gender socialization is also significant in channeling boys’ and girls’ behaviors and developing their taste for sports. By expecting different behaviors and attitudes from boys and girls because they are male or female, family and school nudge boys into sports and girls away from sports. Gender socialization lays the foundation and guidelines for boys and girls with vivid standards of what is appropriate for them, including sports. The socialization of children in Pakistan is dominantly carried out on sex lines. It is this gender socialization process that nudges boys and girls to learn that what sports are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ and what sports are appropriate for them or not. The lack of interest in sports among some participants of this study may be attributed to the gender socialization in our society. The study’s findings suggest that gender socialization profoundly affected girls’ and women’s interest in sports. Many of the study respondents revealed that they had no interest in sports and never played any sports in their lives. They believed that sports is manly activity and not good for girls/women. One of the respondents stated: “I belong to a family in which sports for females is a taboos. I have no interest and zeal to play sport. I think sports are for boys and girls cannot play sports very well”. Another respondent argued: “I have never played any sport in my life. I firmly believe that sports and games are men’s activities and girls/women have nothing to do with sports. Girls can fulfill their health requirement by walking”. Several respondents told that our society communicates strong messages to female children that sports are not for them.

The analysis of field data shows multiple and complex ways in which girls'/women's bodies are disciplined. Gender socialization constructs girls in such a manner that they become willing participants in disciplinary processes and willingly practice and believe that sport is boys' and men's prerogative (Ullah & Skelton, 2016). One of the study's respondents argued: "we received the message, both in our families and schools, that sports affect girls' reproductive capacity and health. We were told that playing sports may affect our marriage chances". The following excerpt from an interview further explains the phenomenon.

Since our childhood, we have been told persistently by parents and school teachers that ataboorts are not suitable for girls. Girls should not play all sports as some of them such as high jump, football, cricket, etc. may-affect their reproductive health and their chances of marriage. Due to this fear we never participated in sports and physical exercise.

This excerpt communicates a powerful message that outdoor sports are not approved for girls and women. These beliefs are so deeply embedded and reinforced by the education institutions that textbooks are full of images that show only boys in outdoor games and sports (Ullah & Skelton, 2016). The analysis shows that girls socialize with no taste and love for sports and physical activities. These findings are in line with the findings of Deshpande's study. Deshpande (2016) concluded that the majority of girls believe and think outdoor sports-cricket, football, and hockey- to be manly activities. Also see Appel and Kronberger (2012). Drawing on Foucault's concept of disciplinary process and power, it can be argued that the gender socialization discourses convert female bodies into docile bodies (H. Ullah, 2013). In short, sport is a crucial site for the reproduction of men's hegemony and patriarchal values (see Rowe, 1998).

These findings provide small-scale findings and preliminary evidence that can be used to initiate public debate and double the efforts of government and non-governmental organizations to enhance young girls' participation in sports by providing appropriate opportunities and facilities.

## CONCLUSION

This study found multiple barriers to young girls' participation in sports. The findings buttress the findings of previous studies which suggested that a number of barriers exist that prevent young girls' participation in sports and physical activities outside home (Laar et al., 2019; Shores et al., 2007; H. Ullah & Skelton, 2016). These barriers, however, can be summarized into four categories: first, sport is believed to be masculine and men's prerogative. This belief is transmitted and legitimized by the family institution with powerful discourses that girls and women are not meant to play sports and their bodies should not be muscular. This traditional and stereotypical belief is further cemented with the false connection of sports with girls' marital future (playing sports spoil girls' virginity by breaking the hymen. It brings a potential impairment to female fertility). The second biggest barrier is the lack of sex-segregated playgrounds and sports areas in the wider society and community. Young girls cannot participate in organized outdoor sports due to a lack of adequate, safe, and accessible sporting facilities at the community level or in their close vicinity. The third key barrier is the lack of knowledge about the benefits of sports for mental, physical, emotional, and social health. Last but not the least, the engagement of young girls and women in domestic chores (cleaning, caring for the elder and children, and cooking) does not leave them with sufficient time and energy to play sports. These barriers make it difficult to encourage young girls and women to participate in sports in general and outdoor sports in particular. A thoroughly worked out legislation that allows sports for all and appropriate physical infrastructure with culturally approved privacy and a safe environment may help to

reduce and lower the barriers to young girls' participation in sports.

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