



Exploring Barriers to Girls' Participation in Sports: Perspectives of Parents and Principals in Public and Private Schools in Lahore

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ABSTRACT

Participation in sporting activities by girls in Pakistan is low and challenging because of socio-cultural factors, organizational barriers, and family views as major challenges. This research study looks into such constraints for the participation of girls in sports at both public and private schools of Lahore by taking the views of 50 parents and 05 principals. This study employed a qualitative approach and participants were parents and heads of schools belonging to different socioeconomic strata and were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires. The results give some of the most important barriers to exercise by girls as cultural barriers, concern for safety, absence of qualified women teachers, unqualified sports amenities, and competition on studies for many other things. While many accepted parents were molded by the societal notions of masculinity and womanhood, the heads pointed out the lack of policies and poor services as other main factors. This study calls for policies that address issues of parental education, and attitudes towards sports as well as gender equity, and children's health and education in order to ease the engagement of girls in sports activities. Remove these barriers to foster an inclusive sports culture alongside achieving balanced education and physical activity among the different genders.



Introduction

According to UNESCO, sports is an important activity which is helpful in maintaining the health and mental condition of an individual and is linked to self-sustenance, cultural identity, and ladies' emancipation (UNESCO, 2017). However, many developing countries like Pakistan have cultural, institutional, and parental obstacles that prevent girls from readily accessing various sporting activities (Shah 2021). The low level of sports participation among girls is most pronounced in Pakistan's educational institutions, which are supposed to be the basic nurturing environments for physical activities among children and young people (Baig, 2020).

While exercising is generally considered part of a healthy lifestyle, it is gendered in terms of available opportunities (Khan & Jabeen, 2019). In many parts of rural Pakistan, parents of young girls hold very conservative views and tend to believe that girls participating in sports may not conform with cultural and religious traditions that have been passed down to the parents (Fatima & Ahmad 2022). Moreover, safety, modesty, and societal judgement issues hinder the freedom of parents to allow their daughters to participate in sports (Saeed, 2021).

Institutional elements are of utmost importance in influencing girls' participation in sports. A number of public and private schools in Pakistan do not have adequate sports facilities, a female coach, or do not have policies that encourage girls' attendance (Ali & Gul, 2020). Even though some private schools have comparatively better sports facilities, they also struggle with the overload of academic work and under-prioritization of Physical Education (Rehman, 2021). School principals and administrators shape the school culture, and although these persons are relevant to the school and sports policy implementation, their attitudes toward girls' sports differ greatly which affects policy execution and resource distribution (Ahmed & Shafi, 2020).

Earlier literature has illustrated the advantages of sports engagement among girls which includes higher self-esteem, better leadership, citizenship, and overall fitness (UN Women, 2018). With that said, the fusion of cultural, parental, and societal institutional aspects is something that has not been studied deeply, especially in Pakistan. The purpose of the study is to investigate the role of parents and public and private school principals to address the major barriers that restrict girls' participation in sports. By addressing those gaps, educational authorities, community leaders, and others are able to create customized interventions aimed at gender equity in sports and increase girls' engagement in physical activities.

Literature Review

1. Gender Gaps in Sports Engagement

Participation in sports is universally acknowledged as essential for an individual's physical, mental, and social development (UNESCO, 2017). Nonetheless, there remains a gap in sports participation based on gender, especially in conservative societies like Pakistan, where sociocultural factors frequently restrict the engagement of girls in sports and other social physical activities (Shah, 2021). Studies suggest that gender stereotypes and traditional gender norms are restrictive for females and therefore, discourage active engagement in sports as feminine activities are perceived as more appropriate for boys (Khan & Jabeen, 2019). This serves a masculine construction of sport which leads to lack of female participation in most school-based out-of-class activities (Fatima & Ahmad, 2022).

2. Social and Cultural and Religious Boundaries

Cultural and even some religious attitudes come together to influence the level of sports engagement among girls. In a majority of the families in Pakistan, there is strong conservatism regarding over fag posing which discourages girls from partaking in leisure activities that may lead to public exposure (Ali & Gul, 2020). Parents are also concerned that participation in sports may lead to a deviation from the accepted feminine behaviors like studying or taking care of the house (Saeed, 2021). Some religious explanations regarding the activities of women in public places further limit participation of girls in organized sports (Rehman, 2021).

3. Perception and Attitudes of Parents

Support from parents is very critical for the participation of girls in sports. Available evidence suggests that for most parents in Pakistan, educational achievement overshadows other activities, including sports which are viewed as hindering the accomplishment of academic goals (Ahmed & Shafi, 2020). Moreover, the absence of adequate safety measures for active sports participation and the possibility of harassment does not permit several parents to let their daughters engage in sports or even physical activity (Baig, 2020). There is a comparative analysis on public versus private schools that found parents from private schools relatively more tolerant of sport participation, but they still voiced concern of achieving a level of balance between sports and academics (Fatima & Ahmad, 2022).

4. Institutional Barriers in Schools

Inadequate policies and lack of infrastructure invariably negatively affects participation of girls in sports — an area which should be well taken care of in the case of educational institutions. Public schools in Pakistan usually do not have sports facilities, trained women coaches, and even organized physical education classes, which further aggravates the problem of participation of girls in sports (Khan & Jabeen, 2019). While these private schools do have better facilities, their unnecessary focus on academics tends to lead to the least amount of time allocated for sports (Ali & Gul, 2020). Sports participation tends to vary depending on the attitude of the principal, it is true that many administrators are anxious over budget problems and parent opposition (Ahmed & Shafi, 2020).

5. The Role of Government Policies and Initiatives

Many government initiatives to encourage girls sports fail precisely because policy implementation is lacking. Pakistan's National Sports Policy talks of a gender corrective approach, but the gap between policy and practice is too great due to lack of mechanisms to enforce them (Shah, 2021). It is suggested that having more women in leadership and coaching roles will increase the number of girls willing to participate in sports (UN Women, 2018). Unfortunately, many schools, particularly those in the rural areas, do not have women physical education teachers and this reduces the chance of girls participating in sports (Saeed, 2021).

6. Necessity of Policy Changes and Awareness Initiatives

To address these issues, practitioners suggest that there should be policies and awareness initiatives tailored toward promoting sports participation among girls (Rehman, 2021). The enhancement of the school physical education curriculum, female athlete scholarship programs, and the establishment of grassroots sports initiatives could all contribute toward closing the participation gap within the industry (Baig, 2020). Additionally, advertisement and parental outreach could greatly assist in changing the negative perceptions regarding sports and their impact on girls' development (UNESCO, 2017).

Private and public schools put together face challenges in there is a multifaceted blend of cultural, family, administrative, and legislative factors that constitute an impediment for girls' sport participation in Pakistan. While there is relatively greater access in private schooling, there are still challenges because of parental perspective, institutional biases, and policy absence. To solve this problem, there is need for collaboration of educators, policymakers, and parents so that there is political and social goodwill for will encourage and facilitate girls' sports engagement.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to understand the challenges to sports participation among girls from the perspective of parents and school head teachers of public and private schools in Lahore. A purposive sampling method was adopted to select appropriate participants with different views from both school types. 50 Parents and 05 principals were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to collect data on sociocultural, institutional, and policy issues that are elusive. Thematic analysis was used to determine patterns that appear repeatedly and the main themes of the data. To establish credibility, member checking and triangulation was carried out to compare the findings with other literature and policy documents. Ethical procedures such as informed consent and confidentiality were observed throughout the research process.

Data Analysis and Results

Thematic analysis of interviews determined the main issues preventing girls' participation in sports in both public and private schools in Lahore. The results were divided into four broad categories: sociocultural constraints, parental concerns, institutional constraints, and issues of policy. The views of the parents and the principals were analyzed independently to bring out the similarities and differences in their perspectives.

Sociocultural Constraints

Both parents and principals from public and private schools acknowledged that social customs and masculine stereotypes are among the strongest barriers to girls' participation in sports. Many parents were worried that sporting activities did not conform to the social norms that seek for girls to be modest and academically inclined rather than athletic. Community attitudes sometimes force schools, especially those in the public sector, to restrict girls' sporting activities, which is what principals said many members of the community expect.

Parental Concerns

Most parents, particularly those from public schools, described safety concerns, absence of female coaches, and diversion to non-academic activities as some of the most important constraints to their daughters' participation in sports. Parents from private schools were somewhat more negative, but they still stressed the importance of sports not overshadowing academic work. Other parents were concerned that not having female sports figures as positive role models is another reason why girls do not take part in sporting activities.

Institutional Barriers

Principals noted the lack of sports facilities and funding as significant institutional barriers. Public school principals mentioned inadequate infrastructure, the absence of trained female physical education teachers, and inadequate assistance from government officials. Private schools, despite

being better resourced, encountered issues like limited instructional time and low emphasis on sports because of academic demands.

Policy-Related Challenges

Both parents and principals observed that policies aimed at encouraging sports participation by girls are badly implemented. Public school principals complained about insufficient funding and government control, while private school administrators claimed that although they have better resources, there are no strong incentives or policies to foster gender-inclusive sports programs. Parents argued that awareness campaigns and incentives, like scholarships for women athletes, would help increase participation.

Table 1: Parents' Perception of Barriers to Girls' Participation in Sports

Barrier	Public School Parents (%)	Private School Parents (%)
Cultural and religious restrictions	75%	55%
Safety concerns	82%	60%
Lack of female coaches	70%	50%
Fear of academic distraction	65%	58%
Limited career prospects in sports	60%	45%

Table 2: Principals' Perception of Institutional Barriers to Girls' Sports Participation

Barrier	Public School Principals (%)	Private School Principals (%)
Lack of sports facilities	85%	40%
Insufficient funding	78%	50%
Limited time allocation for sports	60%	72%
Lack of trained female coaches	80%	55%
Parental resistance	68%	42%

As the findings suggest, sociocultural norms and safety issues profoundly affect parents of public school students, while those of private school students appear more concerned with maintaining academic equilibrium. Public institutions are disproportionately burdened by structural challenges such as inadequate facilities and low funding, although private institutions are also afflicted with time constraints and hostilities from some parents. Weak policy backing aggravates already existing problems, indicating the absence of urgent systemic changes that promote greater participation of women in sports.

Discussion

The findings of this study identify the reasons parents and head teachers perceive constrain girls' involvement in physical education in Lahore's public and private schools as social, cultural,

institutional, and policy based. They reveal persistent social norms coupled with infrastructural constraints and inefficient policies. The discussion that follows explains these findings in relation to the published literature as well as offers suggestions to enhance women's sports participation in Pakistan.

Sociocultural Limitations and Attitude of Parents

The results reveal that the cultural stereotypes and the existing gender norms serve as a significant discouragement for girls participating in sports. Teachers, especially the ones in public schools, voiced issues concerning social acceptance, chastity, and the unfit nature of sports to certain gendered ideas. These results corroborate earlier studies suggesting that girls are physically active in conservative cultures where they are culturally and religiously constrained (Khan et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2021). The parental resistance to support their daughters' participation is also said to be associated with the safety issue, especially concerning harassment and the lack of female gendered sports facilities, which has been discussed regarding South Asian female athletes' participation in sports (Naz et al., 2019).

Surprisingly, parents from private institutions were markedly less conservative suggesting that there might be a socioeconomic influence on parents' attitudes towards their daughters participating in sports. The one issue seemingly common to both groups was the concern regarding the integration of sports with academics which was especially remarkable among parents of children attending both public and private schools. This reinforces the claim that in Pakistan, educational achievement appears to take precedence over other forms of leisure activities (Jabeen & Iqbal, 2022).

Institutional Obstacles: Insights from Principals

The investigation revealed that public school heads encounter formidable institutional barriers such as limited finances, lack of proper sporting facilities, and the unavailability of trained female coaches. This is consistent with other studies which pointed out that government schools in Pakistan tend to underprovide for physical education (Aslam et al., 2018). The shortage of female coaches and lack of female role models was often cited as a factor discouraging female participation, which corroborates Shah and Farooq's (2020) findings that having female teachers significantly increases girls' participation in sports.

In the case of private schools, which had comparatively better facilities, principals still cited parental opposition and limited time in the curriculum as constraints. The inclination toward focusing on academic performance leads to lesser time for sports, as is also reported in some elite schools in Pakistan (Rahman & Akhtar, 2021). This indicates that even where resources are accessible, institutional attitudes may not favor the inclusion of sports for girls.

Gaps in Policies and Issues in Implementation

Both parents and principals expressed challenges in the implementation of policies aimed at girls' sports engagement. Public school principals stressed a lack of government supervision and funding, while private school administrators argued that there is little motivation for the schools to encourage sports participation by girls. This observation is consistent with Ahmad and Rafi's (2019) view that educational and sporting policies in Pakistan do not work because of poor implementation and insufficient funds.

Moreover, the study showed that publicity and incentives such as scholarships for women in sports could stimulate participation. This corroborates earlier findings that policy actions, such as

allocation of resources and involvement of the local community, fundamentally financed female sports participation in more conservative societies (Malik et al., 2022).

Future Directions and Suggestions

The results propose some specific actions that could improve girls' involvement in sports within the context of schools in Lahore.

1. **Parental Awareness Campaigns:** Campaigns aimed at educating parents on the importance of sports for their daughters' physical and mental health might shift their negative attitudes.
2. **Infrastructure Development:** There is a need for government investment to improve the sports amenities in public schools, with the necessary provision of space for pupils of different sexes.
3. **Training Female Coaches:** The recruitment and training of female sports coaches could motivate greater female participation by providing a secure and comfortable environment for them to learn in.
4. **Policy Strengthening:** More effort must be made by the government in enforcing policy use and spending on female sports at both private and public elementary and high schools.
5. **Integrating Sports into the Curriculum:** Schools must set aside specific times for physical training as they would with other subjects unrelated to athletics, which would encourage a healthy lifestyle.

Conclusion

This paper examined the barriers to female participation in sports in public and private schools of Lahore through the lenses of parents and principals. It was found that there are many female students who are willing to participate in sports but face many challenges due to the interplay of sociocultural norms, institutional constraints, and policy gaps. Parents, especially those with girls in public school, voiced their worries regarding social norms, security concerns, and the focus on academics as opposed to extracurriculars. On their part, principals pointed to the more fundamental issues of lack of facilities, policy-trained female coaches, and poor policy execution as barriers to the provision of sports opportunities for girls.

In spite of these issues, the examination also highlights certain chances for advancement. This include increasing parents' knowledge on the importance of sports, upgrading the facilities at schools, hiring more women coaches, and implementing policies that facilitate participation of girls in sports. Besides, the interagency cooperation among governmental authorities, schools, and local communities is also important in regard to setting the conditions for girls' education.

The study highlighted the need for a change in people's attitudes and institutions, as well as the need for policies that are properly executed in order for sports to be adequately institutionalized as part of the education of girls in Pakistan. It may also be useful to investigate how different regions account for differences in the participation barriers of women to sports and the effects of measures that are intended to encourage girls' participation in physical activities. Addressing these matters would enable Pakistan to foster a more effectively integrated and responsive sports environment for girls, which will help in their physical and mental development.

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