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P(ISSN) : 3007-0031

E(ISSN) : 3007-004X



GENDER, CULTURE AND FEMALE SPORTS PARTICIPATION IN PAKISTAN

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Publisher : EDUCATION GENIUS SOLUTIONS

Review Type: Double Blind Peer Review

ABSTRACT

This study explores the cultural beliefs influencing female university athletes' participation in sports in Pakistan. Using a qualitative exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 athletes participating in the All-Pakistan Intervarsity Sports Championship. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: cultural and religious influences, family and societal attitudes, institutional support and barriers, and personal motivations and coping strategies. Findings indicate that while cultural norms and religious interpretations often restrict female participation, athletes also find empowerment through reinterpreting religious values and building resilience in supportive peer networks. Institutional barriers such as limited facilities and gendered policies were identified, alongside mixed levels of family support. Despite these challenges, personal drive and a strong sense of athletic identity emerged as crucial factors in overcoming obstacles. This research provides insights into the unique experiences of female athletes in conservative contexts and highlights the need for context-sensitive policies to promote gender equity in sports.

Keywords: Female athletes, cultural beliefs, sports participation, gender equity & institutional barriers

Introduction

Sports participation among female university athletes in Pakistan remains a complex and culturally contested issue, shaped by deeply rooted societal norms, religious interpretations, and institutional structures. Despite growing global recognition of gender equality in sports, Pakistani women continue to face significant socio-cultural barriers that limit their participation (Khan et al., 2024; Raza et al., 2022). Existing literature highlights how family expectations, religious doctrines, and educational policies intersect to either constrain or enable female athletes (Laar et al., 2019; Manzoor et al., 2023). For instance, Aljayyousi et al. (2019) emphasize the role of familial and cultural pressures in discouraging Muslim women from engaging in physical activities, while Towobola (2023) notes similar trends in Nigeria, suggesting broader regional patterns.

In Pakistan, religious and cultural conservatism often dictates appropriate sporting behavior for women, influencing dress codes, mobility, and access to training facilities (Ge et al., 2022; Laar et al., 2022). Studies such as those by Ahmed Laar et al. (2022) and Zaman et al. (2018) reveal that while some young women navigate these constraints through personal determination and institutional support, many others withdraw due to societal stigma. Comparative research, including Dagkas and Benn's (2006) work on Muslim women in Greece and Britain, further underscores how varying cultural contexts either restrict or empower female sports participation.

Despite these challenges, emerging research suggests that shifts in

attitudes particularly among educated, urban populations—are gradually creating spaces for female athletes (Naz et al., 2023; Marwat et al., 2014). However, as Dagkas et al. (2014) argue, systemic change requires addressing not just individual motivations but also structural inequities in sports policies. This study builds on these discussions by examining how cultural beliefs specifically shape the experiences of female university athletes in Pakistan, offering a localized perspective on a globally relevant issue. By analyzing the interplay of familial, religious, and institutional influences, this research aims to identify pathways for greater inclusivity in Pakistani sports culture.

Rational

Despite growing recognition of gender equality in sports globally, female university athletes in Pakistan continue to face significant socio-cultural, religious, and institutional barriers that limit their participation. While existing studies have examined general constraints on women's sports involvement (Laar et al., 2019; Manzoor et al., 2023), there remains a critical gap in understanding how cultural beliefs specifically shape the experiences of Pakistan's female student-athletes. This study is urgently needed because prior research has either focused on Western/Middle Eastern contexts (Dagkas & Benn, 2006) or failed to address the unique intersection of traditional values and modern educational settings in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2024). By employing in-depth interviews with university athletes, this research will provide nuanced insights into how young women navigate restrictive norms, familial pressures, and institutional limitations (Ge et al., 2022; Ahmed Laar et al., 2022). The findings will contribute to both academic discourse and practical interventions, offering evidence-based recommendations to policymakers and educational institutions for fostering more inclusive sports environments, while simultaneously addressing SDGs related to gender equality and health (Naz et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2022). This investigation is particularly timely as Pakistan witnesses' gradual social shifts, making it crucial to document how cultural transformations are impacting - or failing to impact - women's sports participation at the university level.

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Research Methodology

Study Design

This research was supported with a qualitative exploratory design using semi-structured interviews to explore how cultural beliefs shape female university athletes' participation in sports in Pakistan. A qualitative approach was selected to capture rich, nuanced narratives of participants' lived experiences, societal constraints, and personal motivations that are often overlooked by quantitative methods.

Participants of the Study

The study involved 40 female athletes competing in the All-

Pakistan Intervarsity Sports Championship, held at the Pakistan Sports Board Complex from January 19-22, 2025. Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation across diverse cultural regions, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The sample included 12 table tennis players, 14 volleyball players, and 14 athletes from track and field events. All participants were actively enrolled in Pakistani universities and engaged in intervarsity competition, meeting the inclusion criteria of willingness to discuss cultural influences on their sports participation.

Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide was developed through an extensive literature review and validated through a two-stage process. Initially, three experts two in sports sociology and one in qualitative research evaluated the guide for clarity and relevance. This was followed by pilot testing with five athletes (excluded from the main study), which led to refinements in question phrasing and flow. The final guide focused on four core themes: cultural and religious influences, family and societal attitudes, institutional support and barriers, and personal motivations and coping strategies.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted during the championship event, following approvals from the Pakistan Sports Board and university sports coordinators. Written informed consent was obtained, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Face-to-face interviews lasting 30-45 minutes were held in private settings at the venue. Interviews were audio-recorded, and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues. Participant anonymity was maintained using coded identifiers (e.g., TT-01), and ethical safeguards allowed participants to skip questions or exit the study at any point.

Data Analysis Plan

Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, was used to analyze the data. The process began with verbatim transcription of audio recordings, followed by repeated readings to identify patterns and meanings. Initial open coding generated specific categories (e.g., "parental disapproval"), which were then clustered into broader themes (e.g., "Gendered Cultural Norms"). To enhance validity, five participants were engaged in member checking, and triangulation was conducted using field notes and relevant literature.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Rigor was ensured through multiple strategies. Credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement with participants and member checking. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the study context and participant backgrounds. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail of coding decisions, while confirmability was strengthened through

researcher reflexivity and efforts to minimize bias. These methodological safeguards ensured the reliability and validity of the study.

Expected Outcomes

This study is expected to contribute in three key areas: offering a deeper understanding of how cultural beliefs influence female sports participation in Pakistan; generating evidence-based recommendations for universities and sports federations to foster inclusivity; and providing comparative insights across sports disciplines and cultural regions. Ultimately, the research aims to inform both academic discourse and practical interventions supporting female athletes in socially conservative environments.

Findings

This chapter presents the thematic findings derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 40 female university athletes from across Pakistan. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework. Four major themes emerged from the data, aligned with the interview guide: (1) Cultural and Religious Influences, (2) Family and Societal Attitudes, (3) Institutional Support and Barriers, and (4) Personal Motivations and Coping Strategies. Each theme is discussed with representative quotes and interpretations.

Cultural and Religious Influences

Gender Norms and Mobility Restrictions

Participants widely reported that cultural expectations around gender roles often limited their ability to train or compete freely. Many described needing to balance athletic aspirations with societal expectations of modesty and submissiveness.

"In our region, girls are expected to stay at home. When I play in public, people say I'm becoming too bold." (VB-03, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)

Religious interpretations also influenced participation, though perspectives varied. Some found strength and identity in religious observance, while others experienced restrictions.

Religion as Both Barrier and Motivation

While certain interpretations of Islam were seen as restrictive, others framed their participation within religious values.

"Wearing hijab never stopped me. I feel empowered, not ashamed, to represent my university like this." (ATH-07, Punjab)

This duality suggests that religious identity is not inherently oppositional to sports participation it can be reinterpreted to support athletic engagement.

Family and Societal Attitudes

Mixed Support from Families

Family attitudes were among the most critical enablers or barriers. While some parents, particularly fathers, encouraged participation, others discouraged it due to societal pressures.

"My father travels with me to events. But my mother still worries about what people will say." (TT-01, Gilgit-Baltistan)

This tension reflected a broader negotiation between private support and public scrutiny.

Community Scrutiny and Social Policing

Female athletes often faced community gossip, judgment, and subtle forms of social exclusion.

"In our town, they say girls who play sports become like boys. We lose our 'honor' somehow." (VB-10, Balochistan)

These narratives highlight how cultural expectations extend beyond the family into broader community discourses.

Institutional Support and Barriers

Uneven Access to Facilities and Coaching

Participants frequently expressed frustration over limited access to quality facilities, trained coaches (especially female), and financial support compared to male athletes.

"Our boys' team trains in a gym. We practice in an empty classroom." (ATH-12, Sindh)

Even when resources were available, they were often distributed inequitably, or offered symbolically rather than functionally.

Superficial Support from Universities

Though universities publicly support women's participation, the practical commitment often fell short.

"They want us to win medals, but they don't invest in our preparation." (TT-06, Punjab)

This institutional ambivalence reflects the tension between promoting gender inclusion and reinforcing status quo norms.

Personal Motivations and Coping Strategies

Internal Drive and Athletic Identity

Despite external constraints, participants expressed strong internal motivation and a clear athletic identity.

"Sport gives me strength. It's where I find myself—where I'm not just someone's daughter or sister." (VB-07, AJK)

Sport was described as a space for personal empowerment and self-expression, often in contrast to restrictive environments.

Collective Resilience and Peer Support

Support from teammates and fellow athletes emerged as a powerful coping strategy.

"When things get hard, we remind each other why we started. We've built our own family here." (ATH-02, Balochistan)

These female athletes created micro-communities of resistance, enabling them to thrive despite institutional and cultural challenges.

Summary of Key Findings

The analysis revealed that female university athletes in Pakistan navigate a complex interplay of cultural, religious, familial, and institutional factors. Cultural and religious norms both hinder and, at times, empower participation. Family attitudes and community perceptions significantly influence athletes' confidence and freedom. Institutional support remains inconsistent and symbolic, while personal motivation and collective resilience serve as

powerful enablers. These findings not only deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of female athletes in conservative societies but also highlight actionable areas for institutional and policy-level intervention.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the socio-cultural factors influencing female university athletes' participation in sports in Pakistan. The primary findings indicate that cultural norms, religious beliefs, family support, and institutional barriers are the key determinants shaping female sports participation. Despite these challenges, female athletes in Pakistan exhibit resilience and agency, adapting to or resisting restrictive cultural and religious expectations to pursue sports. These findings align with previous research while also revealing unique insights specific to the Pakistani context.

One of the main findings is the significant role of cultural and religious beliefs in shaping female athletes' participation. Religious interpretations and cultural expectations often restrict women's involvement in physical activities, especially in conservative areas. This is consistent with the work of Raza et al. (2022), who highlighted that socio-cultural barrier, such as family pressure and religious interpretations, limit women's sports participation in educational settings. Similarly, Laar et al. (2019) and Ge et al. (2022) note that while religious beliefs are often perceived as obstacles, they can also provide a source of empowerment when reinterpreted to support athletic engagement. This dual role of religion underscores the complexity of women's experiences in sports.

Another important finding was the significant influence of family attitudes, particularly paternal support, on female athletes' participation. This supports the findings of Khan et al. (2024), who emphasized the role of family, especially fathers, in encouraging or restricting women's sports participation. This finding aligns with the idea that family dynamics, including both direct encouragement and resistance, are crucial in determining a woman's ability to engage in physical activities. However, while paternal support was identified as empowering, the study also found that societal perceptions of women in sports, influenced by traditional gender roles, remain a major barrier. Manzoor et al. (2023) similarly found that cultural attitudes in Pakistan discourage girls from engaging in physical activities, seeing them as incompatible with traditional female roles. Institutional barriers were another significant theme identified in this study. Female athletes faced challenges related to inadequate facilities, limited access to female coaches, and a lack of gender-sensitive policies in sports institutions. These findings echo the work of Laar et al. (2022), who noted that women's sports in Pakistan are underfunded and undervalued.

The lack of institutional support further hinders the development

of female athletes, highlighting the need for structural changes to ensure equal opportunities. Zaman et al. (2018) also reported similar findings, noting that the lack of institutional backing contributes to the exclusion of women from sports in Pakistan. However, despite these constraints, many female athletes demonstrated resilience by finding ways to navigate these barriers. Some adapted by redefining cultural and religious practices, such as altering dress codes to meet modesty requirements while engaging in sports. This finding aligns with the work of Ahmed Laar et al. (2022), who identified young women as change agents capable of challenging and reshaping societal norms through sports. These women demonstrate that while systemic barriers exist, there is room for agency and resistance, especially when cultural and religious beliefs are viewed as adaptable rather than restrictive.

The findings of this study highlight the intersectionality of cultural, religious, and institutional factors that shape female sports participation in Pakistan. These findings are consistent with much of the existing literature but offer new insights into how female athletes navigate these constraints. While the study affirms that cultural norms and institutional barriers remain significant, it also underscores the resilience of female athletes and the potential for policy reforms that address these challenges. Future research should focus on creating institutional frameworks that support women in sports and further explore the role of family and religion in fostering or inhibiting female sports participation.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex interplay of cultural beliefs, religious interpretations, familial attitudes, institutional structures, and personal resilience shaping female university athletes' participation in sports across Pakistan. While cultural norms and community expectations often act as significant barriers—limiting mobility, access, and societal acceptance—many athletes demonstrate remarkable determination and adaptability in navigating these challenges. Supportive family members, particularly fathers, and a reimagined religious identity serve as vital sources of encouragement. However, disparities in institutional support, such as unequal access to facilities and lack of female coaching staff, persist as systemic issues. Despite these obstacles, the participants' narratives highlight a strong sense of motivation, purpose, and resistance against gendered limitations, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive policies and inclusive practices to foster equitable participation for women in Pakistan's sports landscape.

Limitations And Future Directions

This study is limited by its focus on a specific event and sample of university-level female athletes, which may not fully capture the experiences of non-university or rural female athletes in Pakistan. Additionally, the use of self-reported data through interviews may introduce response bias. Future research should expand to include

diverse age groups, rural populations, and longitudinal approaches to track changes over time. Incorporating participatory methods like photo-elicitation and engaging with policymakers can further deepen understanding and support evidence-based interventions to enhance gender equity in sports.

Research Implications

The findings of this study have important research implications for advancing gender equity in sports within culturally restrictive settings. They highlight the need to move beyond Western-centric empowerment models by centering athletes' lived experiences and culturally grounded resilience strategies. Methodologically, the study underscores the value of qualitative, participatory approaches to uncover hidden forms of resistance and agency. Future research should adopt intersectional and context-sensitive frameworks to better understand how factors like class, region, and religion shape women's sports participation and to inform more inclusive and effective sports policies.

Acknowledgement

We sincerely thank all the participants for sharing their valuable experiences, and we are grateful to the Pakistan Sports Board, university coordinators, and our supervisor for their continuous support and guidance throughout this study.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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