

## **Socio-Cultural Barriers Influencing Female Participation in Sports in Rural South Punjab**

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### **Abstract**

Pakistani society is patriarchal in its structure. Gender discrimination is evident in every sphere of life. The situation is much worse when we explore it in sports activities. Females traditionally are known as weak as physical strength is concerned. Society in general and family in particular, never encourage their girls to participate in sports activities. If somehow the family agrees to allow girls to participate in sports, then the socio-cultural environment is a bigger hurdle in female sports participation. In the current study, the researchers try to explore the major causes or barriers which restrict girls to enter the world of sports. For this purpose, the researchers selected rural south Punjab and District Dera Ghazi Khan as its research location. The researchers conducted interviews with 20 female students who are studying in secondary schools of rural areas of Dera Ghazi Khan through semi-structured interviews. The results have shown that female students are not allowed to take part in sports activities by their parents. Social and physical environment, both are not encouraging for the female to participate in sports. Structural discriminations are also play a big role in restricting females from sports activities. There are no sports grounds for females in rural areas. As a result, there is nothing favorable for girls' participation in sports in rural areas of Dera Ghazi Khan. There is a need to change both, parents thinking and society's attitude to encounter this problem.

**Keywords:** gender, sports, socio-cultural barriers, perception of parent's attitude, female participation in sports

### **Introduction**

Sports activities are much important in the present scenario where the digital world has made all of us lazy and sedentary. Sport and physical activities are pivotal in gaining physical along with mental and emotional wellbeing (Khan, Jamil, Khan, Kareem & Imran, 2012). Gender discrimination can be seen in every aspect of life, but when we analyze the situation regarding sport participation, the picture is gloomier. Women, in the subcontinent especially in Pakistan, face extreme gender discrimination and they are not allowed to enter sports activities. The family role is very important, either to support or discourage girls, to participate in sport.

Unfortunately, families in Pakistan are not supportive of a girls' participation in sports activities (Abbasi, 2014). Man's attitude towards females is discriminatory and quite evident as well. However, unfortunately, patriarchy is so deep-rooted in our society that even women do not support women in making progress or going to break social taboos. Elder women in rural areas behave like men when it comes to supporting young girls to decide for their future (Shah & Baporikar, 2013). Religion and its explanation play a very important role as a determinant to participate in sports. There are different rules for males and females to take part in sports activities. Men have more freedom in

terms of participating in all sorts of sports activities, whereas women are allowed to take part in specific sports activities in specific conditions (Mirsafian, Dóczy, & Mohamadinejad, 2014). The social construction of ability is a vital factor influencing sports participation. Generally, a female is supposed to be weak as when physical strength is concerned and this social reality is constructed in a male dominant society. Females will have to change this reality and by creating another social reality that they are good at sports. This will help to undo previous thoughts regarding female suitability for sports activities (Clark, 2012). Traditional gender roles are internalized by female and they act in this way. Preferences of the female are to do domestic work and take care of their siblings. Culture is a more dominant factor even if the religion has given certain liberties to females, they cannot exercise these liberties. Gender segregated activities are natural for them and gender-integrated activities rather sports or others are unnatural for them (Walseth & Strandbu, 2014).

Rural women often live in a joint family system which are more restricted towards physical or sports activities for multiple reasons. Gender roles assign to her does not allow her to spare time for sports activities. Physical activities are considered culturally inappropriate and females are discouraged by their male counterparts to take part in sports activities (Abbasi, 2014). Gender is a key player in determining social roles for both males and females. In a traditionally patriarchal society, males are known for productive work, and females are supposed to do domestic and reproductive work. Males are breadwinners, so family and state invest in them and ignore female issues. Females are neglected in all aspects of life from economic wellbeing to social wellbeing. As a result, females have a low confidence level. This low self-confidence level is a hurdle to female sports participation (Ahmed & Ansari, 2011).

Culture and social environment are such powerful tools for determining male and female boundaries to practice specific acts which sometimes religion has overlooked. There is no harm for a female to take part in sports activities when religion is concerned. There are some sports where the dress code is a question mark in religion apart from those specific activities. However, females are encouraged to participate in sports activities to maintain their fitness level (Khan *et al.*, 2012). Parents and peers have a significant role in restricting or encouraging young girls in pursuing sports activities. Parents who themselves played some sports have a positive attitude towards daughter sports activities. They played with their daughters in the home as well as in the streets and sports grounds (Agergaard, 2016).

Sports activities are beneficial for both males and females in coping with psychological as well as physical problems. Young students' participation in a sports activity is not great in numbers. Certain psychological and sociocultural factors play an important role in encouraging the students to participate in sports activities. For female student psychological variables are very much important as these build a sports identity in them. If psychologically, females thought they are good at sports and their peers also encourage them, it will have a positive impact on their participation (Lau, Fox, & Cheung, 2004). Social and cultural factors are of great importance when sports activities are concerned. In our country, female sports participation is considered taboo in many areas. Cultural values and traditions often restrict female to wear a specific dress or go outside without a veil. Family members with girls are so conservative in their approach that they do not allow their daughters to be seen in the public sphere (Naseer, Javed, & Ahmad, 2019). The purpose of the current study is to explore the social and cultural barriers which hinder girls to participate in sports. This research expects that there are social and cultural hindrances for girls in the sports field. The patriarchal family system as well as government policies are the major barriers that restricted girls to participate in sports.

### **Operationalization of Key Concepts**

There are some key concepts which need to be operationalized to make it comprehensible in the context of the current study:

## **Socio-cultural Barriers**

For the current study, we used this term as a broader concept which covers barriers at the following levels:

- a. Family level and community level (social environment).
- b. Institutional and Government level (physical environment).

## **Parent's Attitude**

This term is used specifically to understand how the girls perceive their parent's attitudes towards their participation in sports.

## **Institutional or Government Facilities**

This term may not be considered as a social or cultural barrier as it deals with physical infrastructure and policies of Government regarding sports facilities. We used this concept as a social hindrance because the overall social system of our society is patriarchal. Government facilities and policies are male-centred, and females are ignored in many fields like in the sports field. Our society sees sports activities as a male member activity, and it discourages females to participate in sports.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows.

1. To explore the perceptions of parents towards girls' sports activities.
2. To investigate how social environments hinder girls to take part in sports activities.
3. To examine the facilities at the institutional level which can encourage girls to participate in sports.

## **Review of Literature**

Abbasi (2014) has reviewed different studies and found that women were having difficulties to perform physical activities due to their gender. He further briefed that unsafe social environment, social-cultural belief, and social isolation are the major socio-cultural barriers for a female to participate in sports or physical activities outside the house boundary. Females who come from rural areas of the world were more disadvantageous and were forced to remain in the house under cultural norms. Females also lacked the decision-making liberty and social support which further hindered their presence in sports activities. Agergaard (2016) has conducted a study to find out on religious culture and how Danish Muslim girls interpret it in practicing sports. He argues that it is the cultural explanation of religion which is an important factor to determine a girls' participation in sports. He extended his narrative that some girls were comfortable with the normal sports dress while others wanted to observe veil and full trouser for participation in outdoor sports. However, for South Asian societies, it is difficult to access the outer world for women and having the leisure of their own choice. Women are limited to remain inside the boundary wall of the house (Adeel, Yeh, & Zhang, 2016). Sawrikar and Muir (2010) has carried out a study on the Indian women and minority group women's participation in sports activities in Australia. These women were of the view that there is no harm in sports activities but participating in sports activities may deviate you from social and family obligations. Women's and girls, first responsibility is to take care of their domestic roles. Resource constraint such as finance and time is another important aspect which plays a significant role in determining women's presence in sports.

Hardin and Greer (2009) have concluded that gender role socialization and media coverage have impacted the social perception regarding girls' participation in sports. Society defines the gender roles for both sexes and from the early days, boys and girls are trained to develop gender-specific roles. For sports activities, girls are provided with the toys which are domestic chores related, caregiving activities, and soft activities that can be performed inside the boundary wall of the house while for boys, it is altogether different, they are trained in a way that they are supposed to be outside of the house and participate in sports that are hard and can be performed outside the house. Media plays the role of reinforcing social norms and contribute to the development of perception that sports activities are gendered specific, certain sports are for males and certain are for females. Tekin (2010) has elaborated that some females perceived that Islam prohibited females to take part in sports-related activities while the majority thought it is family pressure and parent's attitude that hindered female students to get involved in physical leisure activities. Female students are not truly knowledgeable about religious teachings and their perception regarding sports-based leisure activities are influenced by social and cultural practices rather than original religious sources like the Quran and Hadith. Kamarudin and Omar-Fauzee (2007) have argued that there are certain constraints for both sexes to take part in physical activities in Pakistan. Common factors are policy-related changes like lack of facilities, lack of awareness, and availability of appropriate physical infrastructures like playgrounds, gymnasium, and park while for female students, parents' attitude is a major factor which restrict them from sports along with lack of financial resources and time availability.

Mirsafian *et al.* (2014) have found in their research that Muslim women's participation in sports is less comparable to other religions. They also conclude that family and societal norms discourage female participation in sports. The role of media print and electronic both is pivotal in giving awareness and providing an ideal image of sports stars whom women can follow, but predominantly media covers only male-dominated sports events. Ali and Batool (2015) have argued that the media is pivotal in shaping the social identities of both genders. They found that the media gave more coverage to men at their cover pages and depicted a picture that men's work is hard, difficult, and significant in society. In contrast, women's work is not of any significant importance as they only do domestic chores. This stereotypical role development is a hurdle for a female to be visible in the outer world. Thus, their participation in physical or sports activities is almost nonexistent compared to their counterpart.

Evans (2006) has examined the school going girl's and boy's participation in physical education and sports. He analyzes and concludes that girls faced double pressure in pursuing sports or physical activities, they must maintain the feminine image of the body and perform as good as a masculine boy can. The role of space is indicated as an important factor in enabling girls to take part in sports. Gazing of boys makes the girls more nervous for two reasons, one to compete with the masculinity of boys and secondly to maintain a good beautiful feminine look. Manzoor, Khan, and Jabeen (2019) have conducted a research study to explore the socio-cultural barriers which hinder female student participation in sports in Sialkot, a district of Punjab, Pakistan. They examine social and cultural norms as an independent variable and sports participation as a dependent variable. Females are of the view that their social status, parent's attitude, availability of proper facilities for girls in the sports field, societal pressure to be inside the house and their socioeconomic condition have directly affected their participation in sports.

Sultana (2017) has concluded that parent and female students both agreed that sports activities are vital in maintaining a good healthy life. The female students want to take part in the physical activities and sports events of the school. There is a big difference in response when parents are asked about boys' and girls' participation in outdoor physical activities or sports events. Parents have a positive response towards the boys' participation and they are more conservative and negative about girls' participation in sports. Marwat, Zia-ul-Islam, Waseem, Khattak, and BiBi (2014) have elaborated in their study that in the Muslim world, sports are considered as male-dominated activity and women should avoid taking part in sports. They found that social, cultural, and religious norms of society discourage female participation in sports. Society restricts females to be inside the boundary

wall of the house and women should focus on their domestic responsibilities to make family life easy and comfortable.

## **Methodology**

The present study is a qualitative study and exploratory in terms of research purposes. The researchers used the interview as a tool for data collection. Through the semi-structured interview, the researchers interviewed 20 female students who were in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in secondary school. For this purpose, the researchers used a convenient sampling technique for sampling selection from rural areas of District Dera Ghazi Khan. Before the interview, the researchers briefed participants about the research study and sought their consent to participate as respondents. The researchers assured participants that their identity will not be shown anywhere, and information will be used only for the research purpose. Respondents' names, locations, and family identity are kept anonymous and confidential. South Punjab in general, and Dera Ghazi Khan in particular, is considered the most backward and conservative area. The patriarchal family system is a dominant feature of this society. The researchers tried to get appropriate information without breaking their traditional decorum.

## **Results and Findings**

### **Perceptions of Parents' Attitude towards Girls' Sports Participation**

This study is conducted to explore basic constraints in female students' sports participation in rural areas of Southern Punjab. During the process of analysis, the researchers have found that there are multiple cultural and social barriers which restrict female to participate in sports activities. Almost every participant responded that gender discrimination in each sphere of life is a visible and dominant element of our society. One of the students said *that she is not allowed to buy a digest or magazine of her own choice of how she can take part in sports activities on her own. She said that her parents would never permit her to play in front of people, mean mixed gatherings.* The participants have the opinion that their parents do not allow them for outdoor sports activities. They can play something inside the house boundary if they have some spare time. Usually, we spent most of the time studying and doing domestic work. In contrast, their brothers enjoy more freedom as they can play outside, and they are not responsible for domestic work.

### **Social Norms and Sports Participation**

Responding to questions regarding dress code and veil, the majority of participants replied that the veil is a hurdle in sports activities, though they thought they must obey cultural and religious teachings. One of the participants quoted that *the dress code for most of the games is considered inappropriate in our culture. My parents cannot and will not permit us to wear a sports dress. The perception of my relatives and neighbors is also vital in determining my participation in sports. We live in a society where our image is made by the perceptions of people who live around us. In case our parents allow us to go in the game, then our relative taunts our parents that what type of activities your daughters are doing. It is against our culture and noblemen do not allow their daughters to display their bodies to unknown people.*

### **Government Facilities and Environment**

When asked the questions on the name of any female cricketer, footballer, or hockey player, almost all students replied in negative. One participant quoted that *I could tell you the names of drama actors and can male cricketer, but I cannot have any idea about a good cricketer who is female.* It shows that there is a lack of motivational awareness among female students. The researchers asked how they see the government agencies' role in promoting sports activities among females. They responded they are

not satisfied with government institutions in this regard. A student quoted that *there is a sports ground for males in all educational institutions and parks. But space for female sports activities is limited. There are some gymnasiums for indoor activities, but outdoor sports activities the situation is not good.* The public sphere is a prohibited place for girls in many rural areas. Family members are convinced that the boundary wall of the house is the best place for the girls and being inside provides a guarantee to ensure the dignity of the family as well as the girls. The outside environment is not supportive of the girls, so exposing females to play outside in front of the crowd is not a wise decision for parents.

## **Discussion**

Our society is predominantly patriarchal. Gender discrimination is evident in all aspects of social life. The females of our society are far behind from their counterparts from the public to the private sphere. Males have the decision-making power and females have nothing to do with decision making. Even female cannot decide their future from education to leisure activities. Naseer, Shariff, & Javed (2016) have discussed in their study that the parent's role is very important in encouraging female students to participate in healthy sports activities. Peer group and classmates can make their confidence level high while veil and dress code are the factors which can hinder female students from sports activities. Harkness (2012) has concluded in his study that the traditional and patriarchal family system is a big hindrance for female athletes, though the number of female sports players is increasing in Qatar. For him, gender segregation is another vital factor which restricts female from sports activities.

Cooky (2009) has argued that social construction is a very important variable in determining the sports behavior of females. Society has created a reality that girls are not interested in sports, which is internalized to girls by social norms. Alamri (2015) has studied the problems of Muslim girls regarding sports participation in high schools. Religion is the main factor in determining female sports attitudes and cultural values have an influence for Muslim students in deciding which sports suit them and which is inappropriate for them. Xiong (2011) has found that Chinese urban women's participation in sports also has stratification. For him, different classes for example upper, middle, and lower class have different attitudes towards sports activities. In some families, the patriarchal system is so dominant that they cannot imagine taking part in sports activities. The situation in our society regarding patriarchy is much worse than in China. Our rural areas are very much conservative, and freedom of choice is limited for girls.

Scheerder, Taks, and Lagae (2007) in their research regarding teenage girls' participation in sports activities have found that parents' training and their attitude towards girls' sports activities are the main factors along with the school environment. In our society, parents' attitudes towards sports activities always been remained negative due to our socio-cultural system, it wants to see females restricted in boundary walls of the house. Dagkas, Benn, and Jawad (2011) study the factors that can improve Muslim female students' inclusion in physical activities. Parents' attitudes, dress code, and headscarf are major negative variables and hamper the process of inclusion for female students. Kubayi (2015) has argued that social norms, beliefs, values, and customs of African society are a major hindrance in rural areas of female sports participation. There is a need to change all these factors to improve female sports participation. Girls need motivation from parents and peers and from surrounding social environment to increase their confidence level for participating in sports activities.

Ullah and Skelton (2016) did a study to see gender hierarchies in sports. They analyze textbooks of KPK province. Gender stereotypes and gender discrimination are quite evident in both Urdu and English textbooks regarding sports activities. Males are represented as physically strong and participating in outdoor games. While the female is either underrepresented or visible only in indoor sports activities. Sarwar, Hussain, and Mehmood (2010) study physical education and its problems focusing on secondary level students in Gujranwala. They found that the overall attitude of concerned authorities towards physical education is not encouraging or positive. There are lack of grounds and other facilities regarding sports activities for both male and female students.

Naseer *et al.* (2016) in their study have found that gender inequality and dress code variable have a negative relationship with sports participation variable. Dress code always remains a big hurdle for female athletes. In certain sports where a female has to wear a short dress, people saw her as a model or sexual object rather than a sportsperson. Dress code is a much serious problem in rural areas female athletes, where the male of the society wants to see them in shuttlecock. The overall attitude of society towards female freedom of choice is much negative in rural areas. So, it is evident also in sports participation activities. Contrary to other studies, Dar (2016) has found that parents have a positive attitude towards sports activities of their daughter at the secondary school level. Parents are also convinced that physical activities have a very positive impact on their daughters' health, but there are other factors which are hindering females from participating in physical activities.

Johnston, Martinen, Frederick III, and Bhat (2019) study has shown that female students have positive intent towards sports participation. They want to see themselves in international sports activities and focusing on modern games. Traditional indoor activities have less importance to them. They want to make visible their participation in the sports arena. Bibi, Khan, and Khan (2016) have found that religious scholars' interpretation regarding female participation in sports is a major hurdle along with other cultural factors. Lack of knowledge of the teaching of religion and misinterpretation of religious teaching further deepens the problem. Male dominant societies tend to interpret different gender issues according to their gender lens. Indoor sports activities do not harm their case, but when females want to participate in outdoor sports activities, male does not allow them to participate as it is against their tradition. Economic resources and well-being also play a vital role in developing attitudes towards certain activities. In rural areas of Punjab, parents do not invest their money in the female, as they know the male investment is productive. Investing in the female is a fruitless thing for them, particularly in sports activities.

## Conclusion

There is a clear gender discrimination in the sports field in our society. The males are dominating the sports field as is the case in other fields. They enjoy government and family patronage while girls are deprived of participating in sports activities at both ends. The patriarchal family system is so rigid in its approach that it cannot see female prospering or enjoying the freedom of choice. There is also a correlation between sports and power. For men, if girls start to participate in a sport that means they are becoming powerful in society and can challenge societal norms in the future. They wanted to see females in a submissive and caregiving role. Authoritative and aggressive roles just suit men, not women. Females should be kept away from such types of activities. There is a need for restructuring family values as well as government policies to engage females in sports activities. The family should recognize females as full members as they considered the male members. Females need to be involved in leisure activities and for their physical well-being. It should be better for the government to encourage females to take part in sports by making grounds at each Tehsil level exclusively for females. It will help in eliminating gender disparity in sports.

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