

Sports Participation Barriers and Psychosocial Challenges: A Survey Study of Female Elite Athletes in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Background. It is well-documented that there are both social and cultural limitations that prevent women from engaging in sports. A complex combination of social constraints, religious resistance, cultural norms, male attitudes, coaching concerns, and parental worries limits women's participation in sports. Because these obstacles are interconnected and frequently reinforce one another, female athletes often encounter multiple difficulties simultaneously.

Objectives. The researchers outlined several objectives to understand the actual issues surrounding female participation in sports. These objectives included identifying parents' concerns, social limitations, cultural traits and traditions, religious restrictions, coaching and training challenges, and the behavior of male elite athletes toward female athletes concerning sports participation.

Methodology. A survey approach was used in this study to address the research objectives. A multistage sampling technique was used to select a sample that represented the population. A five-point Likert scale was used for data collection. The data were compiled and analyzed using various statistical tests, including regression, ANOVA, and Tukey's test. Each statistical method plays a specific role in the data analysis.

Results. The survey reveals that Societal Limitations are the strongest barrier to female elite athlete participation, followed by religious traditions, cultural norms, and male athletes' Attitudes towards females, which are also significant barriers to female sports participation. The results reveal that in our country, Pakistan, female athletes face major issues with coaching and physical training at the elite level. Parental concerns also influence the participation of female athletes at the elite level.

Keywords: Social constraint, Religious tradition, Cultural norms, Male attitudes, Coaching

INTRODUCTION

Sport has always been a gendered area, and the gender equality process is constrained because sport is a social construction used, in many cases, to define what it is to be 'masculine'; "it is linked with an ideal of masculinity." It is linked with the "masculine", i.e., such as strength, endurance, and speed, which are found primarily in competitive and confrontation contexts (Fink, 2008; Amin et al., 2023). This is thought to be due to the sociocultural origin of traditional sport, where activities are perceived as more masculine when they are characterized by force, endurance, and physical contact. As opposed to the masculine ones, which involve fine and focused movements, such as aesthetics, concentration, and flexibility (Plaza et al., 2017). There is also evidence for a substantial cultural bias in this relationship since it has been found that although it is common to distinguish sports as masculine or feminine with the focus on the primary features of the sport, the prevalence of sport participation among men or women in specific regions significantly impacts male and female (Matteo, 1988). Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020). Reinforces the importance of the participation of women and girls in sport, as well as the balance between men and women in leadership positions within sports organizations.

In all societies around the world, sports are an integral part of society and development, and participants participate without discrimination based on sex, cost, race, or religion. Sports provide equal opportunity and support males and females participating, although females are experiencing many barriers as a whole due to different societal norms and views in the world, especially in Muslim societies. The limited participation of Muslim women in sports relates to factors such as the state of origin, religion, traditions, parents, family, relatives, and support within the society. According to Khan, Y. et al (2012), stated and argued that female participation in sports is based on parental attitude, cultural and traditional observance, and some (guided) religious beliefs. The study also pointed out that the mentioned factors yield different attitudes and views of sports participation among their children.

Just as family is a main unit of any society, which may directly impact the complete development of related persons, it can be said that family has a positive relationship with sports participation. Parents provide the primary support network for their children for sports participation. Parents make a significant financial contribution to their children for sports participation. In addition to family, culture is also an important unit of any society. People of a society should conduct themselves as per the

present culture (which may include values) and the traditions of that society. The cultural customs of a society may determine the activities of the society's members.

On this subject, it has been noted in this current study that Sports participation is affected by cultural norms and traditions. According to Gwrewal and Kaplan (2006), cultural limitations restrict opportunities for female participation in sports. Cultural and folkloric limitations and spiritual and physical struggles create challenges for females' participation in sports. To make the argument, even though a common misperception is thinking that Islamic customs do not allow for sport participation, Islam not only encourages but is a proponent of sports and physical activities because they are tough and tiring and part of the natural way made by Allah for human welfare and prosperity. Knowing the significance of sports in religion, namely Islam, through the Holly Prophet Muhammad (SAW), said, "Have some fun and play, because indeed I dislike for harshness to be seen in your religion." Allama Shami (Shami, Vol. V.) expressed the same view, stating that practicing sports competitions would be prohibited in Islam, only if practice was contrary to principles set out in Islam. Similarly, in another study, Khan, S (2007) had an opinion that Islam does allow females to play sports, but it has its limitations and females are meant to be caged in four walls (p..7). Females should not be exposed and must be covered up while playing sports too," the author continued. Good performance in any sport is the result of a combination of the player's skill and the state of their techniques. A structured coaching program could simply raise the efficiency of athletes by optimizing their capacities. According to the researcher, Female coaching is absent in Pakistan. However, research by Barber (1998) found that female coaches with high qualifications in physical education are more likely to be highly trained in the knowledge of teaching skills of sport.

The level of sports participation among women is an important issue, and various problems faced by women in this area have been investigated in the country. Given this context, this research aimed to explore the challenges faced by female elite athletes in Pakistan. The researchers believe that there are many problems to address, but they focused specifically on the social and professional issues related to women's sports participation. These factors inspired the researchers to examine the difficulties encountered by female elite athletes in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

The following are the main objectives of the study

- 1.To identify parental concerns affecting female elite athletes' participation in sports.
- 2.To determine societal constraints hindering female participation in sports.
- 3.To analyze the influence of cultural norms and traditions on female participation in sports activities.
- 4.To examine religious constraints impacting female elite athletes' participation in sports.
- 5.To evaluate coaching and training barriers hindering female elite athletes' sports participation.
- 6.To assess male athletes' attitudes towards female elite athletes regarding their participation in sports.

Hypothesis of the Study

The following are the main null hypotheses of the study

- Ho₁: Parental concerns have no statistically significant negative effect on female elite athletes' sports participation.
- Ho₂: Societal constraints do not significantly hinder female participation in sports activities.
- Ho₃: Cultural norms and traditions are not significantly associated with reduced participation of females in sports activities.
- Ho₄: Islamic religious principles do not constitute a significant barrier to female participation in elite sports.
- Ho₅: Female elite athletes in Pakistan experience no significant systemic barriers in coaching and training quality.
- Ho₆: Male athletes' attitudes toward female elite athletes show no significant negativity regarding their sports participation.
- Ho₇: There are significant differences found between all six Predictors (Parental concerns, Societal constraints, Cultural norms, Religious norms, Coaching & Training, and Male athletes' attitude)

Literature Review

The present study found the majority of barriers Pakistani context to be societal restrictions, religious opposition, cultural norms in the context of sports, male attitudinal problems towards female athletes, coaching and training problems, and parents' concerns. It is important to understand these linked constructs for designing successful programs to promote female athletes' participation and development in a variety of cultural contexts.

It is well-documented that there are both social and cultural limitations that prevent women from engaging in sports. Female athletes in Qatar face many challenges, including those related to religion, family dynamics, and the evolving concept of gender roles (Harkness, 2012). It's not just Qatar facing these challenges; similar patterns can be seen across different cultures where traditional views on gender often hinder women's participation in public sports. The influence of cultural customs and traditions plays a major role in how women engage in sports. Research conducted on top female athletes in Pakistan highlights this point (Iffat et al, 2016). Cultural norms play a huge role in shaping both how women engage in sports and how they experience them overall. Women frequently find themselves juggling their sports dreams with what society expects of them. The issue of gender discrimination is deeply intertwined with how few women take part in sports, as achieving gender equality is crucial for both women's involvement and their success in global competitions (Meier et al, 2021).

Understanding how female athletes deal with cultural pressures has become clearer through the idea of everyday resistance. Each day, we see members of marginalized groups push back against dominant cultural expectations through simple acts, like joining in on sports activities (Isard et al, 2023). This shows how female athletes can push back against strict gender norms simply by participating in sports. Religious beliefs can create a tricky situation for women in sports, often mixing with cultural expectations that add even more hurdles for female athletes. The bans unfairly target Muslim women and girls who choose to wear religious head coverings while participating in sports, infringing upon their rights to equality, freedom of expression, and personal autonomy, as highlighted by Amnesty International in 2024. These restrictions rooted in religion highlight how

institutional policies can build systemic obstacles that hinder female athletes from competing while preserving their religious identity. The blend of sports involvement and religious beliefs brings about unique hurdles that athletes, along with their families and sporting bodies, must carefully manage. Family prohibitions have been a noted barrier to athletic participation for non-Muslim women in Western countries as well, indicating that religious and faith-based concerns transcend specific religious traditions and geographic boundaries. Research has shown that these barriers often manifest through dress code requirements, gender segregation expectations, and concerns about appropriate physical expression within religious frameworks.

The attitudes of male athletes toward their female counterparts significantly influence the sporting environment and can either facilitate or hinder female athletic development. Recent research examining exposure to women's sports has revealed important insights about changing attitudes. Results indicate that the intervention focused on the live action of women's sports rather than highlight footage, with many sports fans not even interested in watching women's sports (Melinda et al, 2006). This research provides evidence for what works and what doesn't in improving attitudes and increasing the likelihood that sports fans, including male athletes, will continue to engage with women's sports.

The gendered nature of sports environments creates complex dynamics where male athletes' perceptions can significantly impact female athletes' experiences. Female athletes did not have a gender preference, nor did they have any negative attitudes toward a strength coach. The women would be productive training with any qualified strength coach, whereas the men would prefer working with a male strength coach, no matter how qualified the female coach (Magnusen et al, 2009). This research reveals asymmetrical gender preferences that reflect broader societal attitudes about gender roles in sporting contexts.

The coaching environment presents unique challenges for female athletes, with research revealing significant gender-based differences in coaching relationships and effectiveness. Analysis showed a main effect for coach gender with female coaches being rated higher than male coaches for relationship quality and empathy, and a main effect for athlete gender with all coaches perceived as displaying a greater level of affective empathy when paired with a female athlete (Paula et al, 2018). The male coaches would ask, "Why are you crying about that?" because they might not have understood the females' feelings. According to Melissa et al. (2019), the female coach demonstrated greater gender awareness.

The significance of comprehending sex-related variations in coaching approaches has also been emphasized by research. Effective communication and rapport building with athletes are key tenets of coaching, with the majority of empirical evidence to date adopting an androcentric view of strength and conditioning (Nolan et al, 2024), suggesting the need for more gender-inclusive coaching methodologies that recognize the unique needs of female athletes.

The views of parents and the dynamics of the family have a significant impact on the growth and participation of female athletes. This qualitative study uses expectancy-value and life course theories to examine both the proximal and distal impact of parental influence on women's lifetime sport involvement (Marlene et al, 2008), highlighting the long-term significance of family support in female athletic careers.

Research has identified specific ways that parental concerns manifest as barriers to female athletic participation. Emerging evidence suggests that numerous factors related to structural, societal, and cultural characteristics may impact sport participation among athletes from global majority countries, including a lack of parental support, safe physical environments, and/or opportunities to play (Harkness, 2012). These concerns often show broader cultural worries about gender roles and the risks tied to female athletes. The dropout rates among female athletes highlight the need to address parental worries. By age 14, many girls quit sports at twice the rate of boys. Over 25 years of research have identified key factors that contribute to this troubling statistic (Women's Sports Foundation, 2019). Thus, maintaining girls' participation in athletics throughout crucial developmental years requires an awareness of and response to parental concerns. The impact of parental background on gender disparities in sport involvement has been demonstrated by cross-cultural research. Young people are huge fans of sports. Participating in sports has a positive impact on one's health and well-being (Frank & Francesco, 2024). However, depending on expectations related to the parents' home countries, family cultural values can either encourage or discourage female participation.

Methodology

A survey approach was used in this study to address the research objectives. Surveys are useful for collecting information about social events and, thus, seem appropriate for investigating problems in sports communities. The study population consisted of all female elite athletes of Pakistan who participated in various sports at the national and international levels.

In the absence of a comprehensive registration system for these female elite athletes, carried out at national and federation levels, simple random sampling from the total population was not possible. Hence, the investigators used a multi-stage sampling strategy to increase their chances for representative sampling. The sampling procedure was divided into three stages. In the first phase, eight different sports (Track & Field, Volleyball, Handball, Martial Arts, Hockey, Cricket, Badminton, and Table Tennis) were identified, with each sport treated as a separate cluster using cluster sampling methodology. During the second phase, from each cluster (15 athletes) were conveniently selected, and all athletes within the chosen clusters were included using proportionate sampling techniques. This process yielded a sample of 120 female elite athletes representing diverse geographical regions across Pakistan and multiple sporting disciplines. In the final phase, convenience sampling was utilized to select 15 athletes from each chosen sport, ensuring practical feasibility while maintaining sample representativeness.

Data Collection Instrument

In survey research, questionnaires are the predominant method for data collection and provide a structured channel for asking questions to collect information. Content validity and theoretical grounding were accomplished by conducting a literature review of the construct in order to develop an extensive questionnaire for this study. The measurement was on a five-point Likert scale.

Questionnaires serve as the primary data collection tool in survey research, providing a structured format for gathering information through systematic questioning. For this study, a comprehensive questionnaire was developed using an extensive review of relevant literature to ensure content validity and theoretical grounding.

The instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale format, with responses ranging from “Strongly Agree” (5) to “Strongly Disagree” (1). This scaling strategy enables us to capture not only participants' attitudes and perceptions in a nuanced manner but also to support quantitative analysis of responses.

The 35-item questionnaire contained six dimensions of questions, which cover diverse aspects of difficulties common in female elite athletes. These categories are: parents' barrier (5 items), society restrictions (8 items), cultural restrictions (3 items), religious restrictions (3 items), the lack of coaching and training (2 items), and male athletes' perceptions of females' sports participation (3 items). This comprehensive structure ensures systematic examination of the multifaceted challenges affecting women's participation in elite sports within the Pakistani context.

Instrument Validation and Reliability

The Problems Faced by Female Elite Athletes (PFEEA) Scale was extensively validated for its psychometric robustness. Content validity was established by a systematic combination of results from previous research literature, current practice in sport psychology, and a comprehensive literature review during the process of generating the 35-item scale. Pilot tests were carried out to collect preliminary validation information and to test the performance of the instrument in the field. To test internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used, and the SPSS 27 statistical software was able to generate reliable estimates of reliability using the appropriate method. This validation was necessary to ensure that the scale is a valid measure of responses from elite women athletes' perceptions about the challenges and constraints related to their respective careers as sportswomen. After the validation of the PFEEA scale, the final scale was composed of 24 items, that is, it was shorter than the initial 35 items, which were reduced through psychometric analysis and a pilot study. The internal consistency reliability of the final instrument was high (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient = .87, providing adequate reliability and adequate inter-item correlation to the scale).

Data Collection Procedures

A final validated version of the PFEEA scale was applied to 120 female elite athletes drawn from eight different sports, ensuring representativeness for different sporting categories, and following the proportionality in the selection of participants of the target population. The investigator used various approaches to obtain the best participation and response. The primary source of data was through visiting the different national training centers for different sports. This direct method helped more easily gain the confidence of the respondents and clarify any doubts related to the questionnaires. Furthermore, some questionnaires were introduced to athletes by teachers and students to athletes who were not present during the visits.

A total of 103 (86.66%) responding formulations were received from 120 sent out, which is a very good response rate for a survey study. Four questionnaires were found to be invalid on the screening of data for incomplete answers and were discarded from the analysis. The final sample included 99 questionnaires for analysis, which gave a solid basis for statistical analysis and ensured the reliability of research findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were submitted to statistical analysis using a variety of techniques in order to accomplish the research objectives in a robust way. The analysis strategy involved three central statistical approaches that were each applied due to their different applicability in terms of research questions.

Relationships between variables and magnitude were analyzed using regression analysis how much the dependent variable is affected by the independent variable, which is actually issues pertaining to female elite athletes. This method allowed the detection of important predictors and estimation of their relative influence on the outcomes of interest. Comparison of means ANOVA Redundancy between 3 or more groups in the dataset, and for comparison of problem perceptions across groups and hierarchical levels of other categorical factors such as sports type, athlete demographics, or other grouping factors. If the ANOVA test was statistically significant, Tukey's HSD post hoc test was used for pairwise comparisons in order to determine differences among specific groups from one another.

The researcher adopted this multi-strand analytical approach to gain a nuanced understanding of the data and to facilitate a deep and rich interpretation of the issues for female elite athletes in Pakistan. The integration of these statistical analysis methods strengthens the scientific credibility and stability of the findings, considering the research data from different angles and aspects.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The information in this study was collected through a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose. Since the study focused on the issues faced by female elite athletes in Pakistan. The researcher visited many camps and contacted athletes to gather information about their participation in sports. In addition to these visits, the researcher also distributed questionnaires with the help of colleagues, teachers, and students. Ultimately, responses from 99 participants were used for data analysis.

The collected data was analysed and interpreted to support and promote female sports. For the analysis, simple statistical tools were used to ensure the results are easy to understand.

Table 1: Regression Analysis - Parental Concerns as Obstacle (H₀₁)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.395	(Constant)	2.258	0.115	-	19.635	0.000
R ²	0.156	Parental Concerns	0.250	0.043	0.395	5.775	0.000
F-statistic	33.348						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 33.348$, $p < 0.001$). Parental concerns explain 15.6% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.156$). The relationship is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis is rejected. Parental concerns do significantly act as an obstacle to the way of sports participation of elite female athletes, though the effect size is moderate.

Table 2: Regression Analysis - Societal Limitations (H₀₂)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.735	(Constant)	1.239	0.117	-	10.624	0.000
R ²	0.541	Societal Limitations	0.553	0.038	0.735	14.556	0.000
F-statistic	211.864						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model shows very strong statistical significance ($F = 211.864$, $p < 0.001$). Societal limitations explain 54.1% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.541$). This represents the strongest predictor among all variables tested. The null hypothesis is rejected. Societal limitations significantly hinder the sports participation of female elite athletes, with a large effect size indicating this is a major barrier.

Table 3: Regression Analysis - Cultural Norms and Traditions (H₀₃)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.687	(Constant)	1.649	0.102	-	16.148	0.000
R ²	0.472	Cultural Norms	0.445	0.035	0.687	12.694	0.000
F-statistic	161.134						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model is highly significant ($F = 161.134$, $p < 0.001$). Cultural norms and traditions explain 47.2% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.472$). This is the second-strongest predictor after societal limitations. The null hypothesis is rejected. Cultural norms and traditions do significantly control female participation in sports activities, representing a substantial barrier with a large effect size.

Table 4: Regression Analysis - Islamic Religious Opposition (H₀₄)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.709	(Constant)	1.438	0.111	-	12.920	0.000
R ²	0.503	Islamic Opposition	0.464	0.034	0.709	13.494	0.000
F-statistic	182.097						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model demonstrates very high statistical significance ($F = 182.097$, $p < 0.001$). Islamic religious factors explain 50.3% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.503$). This ranks as the third-strongest predictor among all variables. The null hypothesis is rejected. Islamic religious opposition significantly opposes female participation in sports activities, constituting a major barrier with a large effect size.

Table 5: Regression Analysis - Coaching and Training Problems (H₀₅)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.570	(Constant)	1.979	0.103	-	19.154	0.000
R ²	0.325	Coaching Problems	0.311	0.033	0.570	9.313	0.000
F-statistic	86.733						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model is statistically significant ($F = 86.733$, $p < 0.001$)

Coaching problems explain 32.5% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.325$). This represents a moderate-to-large effect size. The null hypothesis is rejected. Female athletes do significantly face coaching and training problems at the elite level, representing a meaningful barrier to participation.

Table 6: Regression Analysis - Male Athletes' Attitudes (H₀₆)

Model Summary	Value	Coefficients	B	Std. Error	Beta	t-value	Sig.
R	0.653	(Constant)	1.621	0.114	-	14.234	0.000
R ²	0.426	Male Attitudes	0.410	0.035	0.653	11.565	0.000
F-statistic	133.750						
Significance	0.000						

The regression model shows high statistical significance ($F = 133.750$, $p < 0.001$). Male athletes' attitudes explain 42.6% of the variance in sports participation ($R^2 = 0.426$). This indicates a large effect size for male peer influence. The null hypothesis is rejected. Male athletes' attitudes are not significantly positive towards female participation, and negative attitudes constitute a substantial barrier.

Table 7: ANOVA Analysis - Differences Between All Predictors

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	45.545	5	9.109	7.104	0.000
Within Groups	1392.442	1086	1.282	-	-
Total	1437.987	1091	-	-	-

The ANOVA test reveals significant differences between predictors ($F(5,1086) = 7.104$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that the six barriers do not have equal impact on sports participation. The effect size is moderate, suggesting meaningful practical differences between barriers. The null hypothesis is rejected. There are significant differences between the scores of all predictors, indicating that some barriers are more influential than others.

Table 8: Post-Hoc Analysis Summary - Tukey HSD Test Results
Significant Pairwise Differences ($p < 0.05$):

Comparison	Mean Difference	Significance	Interpretation
PO vs SL	-0.483	0.001	SL > PO
PO vs CNT	-0.389	0.014	CNT > PO
PO vs IR	-0.624	0.000	IR > PO
PO vs CB	-0.410	0.008	CB > PO
PO vs AMA	-0.586	0.000	AMA > PO

Key: PO = Parental Obstacles, SL = Societal Limitations, CNT = Cultural Norms & Traditions, IR = Islamic Resistance, CB = Coaching Barriers, AMA = Attitudes of Male Athletes. Parental obstacles (PO) significantly differ from ALL other predictors. Parental obstacles show the lowest impact compared to all other barriers. All other predictors (SL, CNT, IR, CB, AMA) do not significantly differ from each other. This creates two distinct groups: Parental obstacles (lower impact) vs. all other barriers (higher impact)

The post-hoc analysis reveals that while parental concerns are a significant barrier, they are significantly less impactful than societal limitations, cultural norms, religious opposition, coaching problems, and male attitudes. The latter five barriers form a homogeneous group of major obstacles to female sports participation.

Societal Limitations, Religious Opposition, Cultural Norms & Traditions, Male Athletes' Attitudes towards females, Coaching & Training Problems, and Parental Concerns

Conclusions

Barrier Strength Ranking was calculated by R^2 values. Societal Limitations with 54.1% variance explained as the Strongest barrier, Islamic Religious Opposition with 50.3%, the Cultural Norms & Traditions with 47.2%, the Male Athletes' Attitudes towards females were measured as 42.6%, the Coaching & Training Problems with 32.5%, and the Parental Concerns with 15.6% as the Weakest barrier.

All hypotheses were rejected, indicating that all tested factors significantly impede female elite athletes' sports participation. Social and cultural factors (societal limitations, religious opposition, cultural norms) emerge as the most powerful barriers. Parental concerns, while significant, have substantially less impact than other barriers. The combination of barriers creates a complex web of obstacles that collectively hinder female sports participation. Environmental and peer factors (male attitudes, coaching problems) also contribute significantly to participation barriers.

This analysis suggests that interventions targeting female sports participation should prioritize addressing societal attitudes, cultural norms, and religious interpretations, while also improving coaching infrastructure and peer support systems.

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