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Barriers To Participation In Physical Activities Faced By Female Students

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the key barriers that prevent female students from participating in physical activities, with a specific focus on social, cultural, family, and institutional factors. The researcher developed three main objectives and corresponding hypotheses based on the nature of the study. The research was conducted at Government Graduate College for Women, Narowal, with a total of 120 female students from the Sports Program participating in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect data, focusing on various types of barriers such as social, cultural, family-related, and institutional challenges. The results showed that most female students face significant barriers that make it difficult for them to participate in sports and exercise. These barriers include societal pressure, cultural traditions, and a lack of encouragement from families and educational institutions. Findings were highlighted female students face strong personal and social barriers that prevent them from being physically active. Cultural and social beliefs—such as traditional gender roles—strongly discourage girls from engaging in physical activities. When there is limited support from families and schools, girls are less likely to participate in sports. The study suggests that schools, families, and the government should work together to eliminate these barriers. Awareness programs, improved facilities, and support from teachers and parents can help increase female participation in physical activities. By creating a more supportive environment, we can help female students stay healthy, confident, and active in their daily lives.

Keywords: Female Students, Physical Activity, Barriers, Social Pressure, Cultural Norms, Family Support, School Environment

Introduction

Physical activity plays a critical role in maintaining physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, especially during adolescence and early adulthood. However, despite the widely recognized benefits of regular physical activity, participation rates among female students remain significantly lower compared to their male counterparts (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This discrepancy is influenced by a variety of barriers that can be personal, social, cultural, or environmental in nature.

Research suggests that female students often face societal expectations and gender norms that discourage active engagement in sports and physical activities (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). In many cultures, particularly in



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conservative or traditional societies, issues related to modesty, family restrictions, and fear of social judgment act as powerful deterrents to girls' participation in physical exercise (Kaur et al., 2021). Furthermore, inadequate access to facilities, lack of female coaches or role models, and safety concerns also contribute to the reduced involvement of females in sports-related activities (Sallis et al., 2012).

Internal barriers such as low self-confidence, poor body image, and a lack of motivation further compound the problem (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). These psychological factors are often shaped by media portrayals of the ideal female body and by peer pressure, creating a hostile environment for girls seeking to engage in physical activity. Schools and universities, though important platforms for promoting health and wellness, sometimes lack inclusive programming or supportive infrastructure, further marginalizing female students from active participation (Casey et al., 2009).

Addressing these multifaceted barriers is crucial not only for improving female students' physical health but also for enhancing their academic performance, mental health, and social development. This study aims to investigate the barriers that female students face in participating in physical activities, with the goal of informing inclusive policies and practices that promote equal opportunities for all students.

Research Objectives

- 1) To identify the main barriers that prevent female students from participating in physical activities.
- 2) To examine the influence of social and cultural factors on female students' participation in physical activities.
- 3) To analyze the impact of family and institutional support on female students' involvement in physical activities.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Female students face significant barriers that hinder their participation in physical activities.

H2: Social and cultural factors have a significant negative impact on female students' participation in physical activities.

H3: Lack of family and institutional support significantly reduces female students' involvement in physical activities.

Literature Review

Literature review assist in providing basics and essentials regarding the basic components and variables and their association among the variables. It also highlights the most relevant information and material about the specific phenomena in the specific context. Thus, in this chapter, the researcher is intended to provide the most specific/relevant as well as the recent literature regarding the research variables. The present thesis is planned to provide the background of the existing research. It is provide the current literature about Barriers to participation in physical activities faced by female students.

Physical Activities and Female Participation

Physical activity plays a crucial role in the physical, mental, and emotional development of individuals. Among female students, participation in physical



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activities contributes significantly to their overall well-being, academic performance, and social integration. Despite these benefits, female participation in sports and physical activities remains relatively low due to a variety of socio-cultural, psychological, and environmental barriers.

Several studies emphasize the positive outcomes of physical activity for females. Bowker (2006) found that adolescent girls who participate in sports tend to have higher levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being than non-participants. This is supported by Hausenblas and Fallon (2006), who reported that physical activity helps improve body image and reduces the risk of body dissatisfaction, which is a common psychological barrier among young females.

Self-efficacy, defined as one's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations, is another critical factor influencing female participation in physical activities. Kort-Butler and Hageman (2011) suggest that self-efficacy not only motivates initial involvement in sports but also promotes sustained engagement. Physical activity further reinforces self-confidence, helping females cope with societal expectations and body image concerns (Qurban et al., 2019).

However, cultural and environmental factors can restrict female involvement in physical activities. For instance, in many societies, traditional gender norms, lack of female-friendly facilities, and limited support from family and institutions inhibit girls from engaging in sports (Borges et al., 2010). Additionally, societal ideals about physical appearance can discourage girls from participating due to fear of judgment or body shaming (Beatrix et al., 2013).

To address these challenges, educational institutions and communities must adopt inclusive strategies that foster a supportive environment for female students. Encouraging peer support, offering gender-sensitive programs, and promoting positive role models can help dismantle barriers and enhance female participation (Ryska, 2002; Taliaferro et al., 2011).

Sports Participation and Physical Activity

Sports participation is widely recognized as an essential contributor to individuals' physical activity levels and overall well-being. Participation in organized or informal sports offers individuals the opportunity to improve their physical health, mental resilience, and social skills. Among students, especially adolescents and young adults, involvement in sports is positively associated with increased levels of physical activity and healthier lifestyles.

Research has consistently shown that sports participation enhances physical activity levels, leading to improved cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, and reduced risk of chronic diseases (Pate et al., 2006). In addition to physical benefits, engaging in sports contributes to better psychological health. For example, adolescents who participate in regular sports activities report lower levels of stress and anxiety and higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Bowker, 2006; Taliaferro et al., 2011).

Sports participation also correlates with improved academic and behavioral outcomes. According to Khan et al. (2012), students who are actively involved in sports perform better academically and demonstrate more discipline and time management skills than non-participants. Moreover, McKay and Fanning (2016) argue that consistent participation in sports can serve as a protective factor against negative behaviors and promote positive youth development.



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However, some studies suggest that the relationship between sports and physical activity is not always linear. Kort-Butler and Hagewen (2011) found that while sports involvement often increases physical activity, the emphasis on competition or performance outcomes may, in some cases, create pressure that discourages sustained participation, especially among less competitive individuals. Richman and Shaffer (2000) also found gender-based differences, where male students tended to benefit more from sports in terms of physical activity compared to their female counterparts.

Participation in Physical Activity and Body Image

Body image refers to an individual's perception, thoughts, and feelings about their physical appearance and bodily functions. This self-perception plays a significant role in influencing behavior, especially participation in physical activities. Research suggests that individuals with a positive body image are more likely to engage in physical activity, while those with a negative body image may avoid such activities due to self-consciousness or fear of judgment (de Bruin et al., 2009).

Participation in physical activity has been found to improve body image by enhancing physical fitness, strength, and overall body satisfaction (Hausenblas et al., 2004). Engaging in regular physical activities contributes not only to physical health but also to mental well-being, including improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall body appreciation (Taliaferro et al., 2011).

Studies among female college students show a particularly strong link between physical activity and body image. Annesi and Marenco (2015) found that consistent involvement in exercise programs led to greater body satisfaction and reduced anxiety related to appearance. Similarly, Peng et al. (2017) observed that body image significantly influenced female students' motivation to participate in sports, with self-efficacy acting as a mediating factor.

However, the relationship is not always straightforward. Excessive societal pressure to attain a "perfect body" can sometimes lead to unhealthy comparisons and decreased body satisfaction, even among physically active individuals (Borges et al., 2010). Furthermore, the media's portrayal of ideal body types often contributes to negative self-perception and may discourage participation in physical activities (Beatrix et al., 2013).

To promote positive outcomes, physical activity programs must focus not only on fitness but also on fostering healthy body image and inclusive, non-judgmental environments. Encouraging body diversity and self-acceptance may enhance participation, particularly among adolescent girls and young women who are often more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction.

Sports and Peer Development

Participation in sports and physical activities has a profound influence on peer relationships and social development, especially among children, adolescents, and young adults. Engaging in team-based or group sports helps individuals develop important interpersonal skills such as cooperation, empathy, communication, and conflict resolution (Ryska, 2002). These skills are nurtured through regular social interaction, shared goals, and mutual support during athletic participation.



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Ullrich-French and Smith (2009) emphasize that friendship quality and peer acceptance are key social outcomes of sports participation. Adolescents who are involved in organized sports often report higher levels of peer support and stronger social bonds compared to their non-participating peers. These positive peer interactions contribute to emotional development, self-worth, and a stronger sense of belonging. Similarly, Riley and Smith (2011) highlight that peer acceptance and friendship status are often enhanced through sports, where being part of a team helps individuals gain social recognition. The dynamics of teamwork, role clarity, and shared success foster trust and camaraderie, which in turn promote pro-social behavior.

Furthermore, Semenchuk et al. (2018) found that participation in physical activities boosts self-esteem and motivation, both of which play a role in enhancing social relationships. Students involved in sports also benefit from higher levels of companionship, guidance, and emotional support, which are vital for adolescent development. According to Toldson and Lemmons (2013), regular involvement in sports provides structure and moral guidance, which can influence peer behavior and group norms positively.

The Impact of Physical Activity on Cognitive Function

Physical activity has long been recognized as a key factor in promoting not only physical health but also cognitive development and academic success. Numerous studies have demonstrated that regular engagement in physical activity can enhance brain function, memory, attention, and overall cognitive performance among children and young adults (Marques et al., 2017). These cognitive improvements are often attributed to increased blood flow to the brain, the release of neurotrophic factors, and enhanced neuroplasticity.

Pate et al. (2006) assert that activities such as walking, running, cycling, and dancing positively influence children's academic achievement by improving attention span, classroom behavior, and readiness to learn. Malina (2014) adds that while fitness and recreation are sometimes used interchangeably, fitness involves a set of functional capacities that are closely linked with both physical and cognitive outcomes, especially in school-aged children. These capacities are influenced by genetic factors, developmental stages, and consistent participation in physical activities.

Trudeau and Shephard (2010) further support this notion by emphasizing that students who participate in physical education and light exercise perform better academically. Their findings also suggest that parental encouragement and role modeling significantly impact children's willingness to engage in physical activity, which in turn supports their cognitive development.

Blash and Unger (1995) highlight that participation in group-based physical activities also fosters essential soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and community engagement—all of which contribute to cognitive and emotional development. Furthermore, the work of Trudeau et al. (2008) confirms that early engagement in physical activity predicts better cognitive outcomes later in school life.

Collectively, the literature suggests that physical activity is a fundamental component in promoting not only physical fitness but also cognitive health. Schools and policymakers are therefore encouraged to prioritize physical



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education as an integral part of the curriculum to support children's overall development.

Physical Activity and Self-Esteem

Physical activity has been consistently linked to improvements in self-esteem across different age groups, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth or personal value, and it plays a vital role in psychological development and social functioning. Participation in sports and regular physical activity provides opportunities for mastery experiences, social interaction, and body satisfaction—all of which can enhance self-esteem (Shapiro & Martin, 2010).

According to Schraml et al. (2011), physical self-esteem—a subdomain of global self-esteem—develops through the perception of one's physical abilities and appearance, especially during early adolescence. These attributes can significantly influence confidence and social acceptance, particularly among female participants who may be more sensitive to body image and physical competence during puberty.

Fisher and Bakal (2001) noted that a lack of regular physical activity among students can lead to not only physical health issues such as obesity and cardiovascular problems but also mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, and reduced self-worth. On the other hand, students who engage in structured physical activity report better mood, enhanced self-image, and greater academic engagement (Whitaker, 2007).

Furthermore, Castelli et al. (2007) emphasized that regular physical activity contributes to a positive mental state, which correlates with higher academic performance and better emotional regulation. Similarly, Haugen et al. (2011) reported that students aged 18–22 who participated in sports experienced increased self-confidence and improved perceptions of body image, especially among females.

Abdelkrim et al. (2010) added that participation in sports not only boosts self-esteem but also enhances physical attributes such as muscular strength and aerobic power, which further reinforce positive self-perceptions. Chida and Hamer (2008) also found a significant association between physical activity and academic achievement, suggesting that enhanced self-esteem could act as a mediating variable.

In contrast, Whitaker (2007) pointed out that while some studies found no significant correlation between physical activity and academic performance, the role of self-esteem might still be important in influencing other developmental outcomes. Overall, the literature highlights that consistent engagement in physical activity is a powerful contributor to developing and sustaining self-esteem, especially in educational settings.

Research Methods

The researcher employed a quantitative research method to systematically collect, measure, and analyze numerical data related to the barriers faced by female students in participating in physical activities. In the context of this study, the target population included all 120 female students currently enrolled in Sports program at Government Graduate College for Women, Narowal. Given that the total population was relatively small, finite, and easily accessible within the



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college premises, the researcher decided to include the entire population as the sample, ensuring that every individual had the opportunity to contribute data to the study. A convenient sampling technique was applied, as the sample was selected based on accessibility and willingness of the participants. To gather data, the researcher utilized a pre-validated and adopted questionnaire that was specifically designed to explore the barriers to participation in physical activities among female students. This questionnaire included items covering social, cultural, institutional, and personal barriers and was administered directly to all 120 participants under guided conditions. Once the data were collected, they were carefully coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 21, which facilitated the organization and statistical analysis of the responses.

Results

H1 – Female Students Face Significant Barriers That Hinder Their Participation In Physical Activities

| Variable | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t-value | p-value |
|-------------------------------------|-----|------|----------------|---------|---------|
| Perceived Barriers to Participation | 120 | 3.46 | 0.51 | 7.11 | 0.001 |

A one-sample t-test was conducted to examine whether female students face significant barriers that hinder their participation in physical activities. The analysis revealed that the mean score for perceived barriers was significantly higher than the neutral value of 3.00 on the Likert scale, indicating the presence of perceived barriers among the participants, $t(119) = 7.11$, $p = .001$. As shown in Table 1, the mean score was $M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.51$. Since the p -value is less than .05, the result is statistically significant, supporting Hypothesis 1. This suggests that female students do indeed perceive substantial barriers that negatively affect their participation in physical activities.

H2 – Social And Cultural Factors Have a Significant Negative Impact On Female Students' Participation In Physical Activities

| Independent Variable | Dependent Variable | N | Mean (SC Factors) | Std. Deviation | β -value | p-value |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----|-------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| Social and Cultural Factors | Participation in Physical Activities | 120 | 3.38 | 0.49 | -0.63 | 0.001 |

To test Hypothesis 2, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether social and cultural factors significantly predict female students' participation in physical activities. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between social and cultural factors and participation, $\beta = -0.63$, $p = .001$. This suggests that as social and cultural barriers increase, participation in physical activities among female students decreases.

The mean score for social and cultural factors was $M = 3.38$, with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.49$, indicating a moderate perception of such barriers among the sample. Since the p -value is less than .01, the result is statistically significant, and Hypothesis 2 is accepted. These findings confirm that social norms, cultural expectations, and gender roles negatively impact female students' physical activity involvement.



H3 – Lack Of Family And Institutional Support Significantly Reduces Female Students' Involvement In Physical Activities

| Independent Variable | Dependent Variable | N | Mean (Support Level) | Std. Deviation | β -value | p-value |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|----------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| Family and Institutional Support | Involvement in Physical Activities | 120 | 3.22 | 0.55 | -0.59 | 0.003** |

To examine Hypothesis 3, a linear regression analysis was conducted to assess whether lack of family and institutional support significantly reduces female students' involvement in physical activities. The findings revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between family/institutional support and participation, $\beta = -0.59$, $p = .003$. This indicates that lower levels of support are associated with decreased involvement in physical activities among female students.

The mean score for perceived support was $M = 3.22$ with a standard deviation of $SD = 0.55$, suggesting that participants moderately perceive a lack of adequate support from both their families and institutions. As the p -value is less than .01, the results are statistically significant, and thus, Hypothesis 3 is accepted. These findings underscore the crucial role of support systems in promoting active participation among female students.

Findings

- The current study aimed to explore the barriers to participation in physical activities faced by female students, with a specific focus on perceived barriers, social and cultural influences, and the role of family and institutional support. The following findings were drawn from the data analysis:
- Perceived Barriers (H1): The study revealed that female students face statistically significant barriers that hinder their participation in physical activities. The mean score ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.51$) and a significant t -value ($t = 7.11$, $p = .001$) confirmed that perceived obstacles are a common and serious concern among the participants.
- Social and Cultural Factors (H2): A significant negative relationship was found between social and cultural factors and physical activity participation ($\beta = -0.63$, $p = .001$). These findings highlight that gender roles, societal expectations, and cultural norms are major constraints affecting female students' engagement in physical activities.
- Family and Institutional Support (H3): The regression analysis also indicated a significant negative impact of lack of family and institutional support on female participation in physical activities ($\beta = -0.59$, $p = .003$). This suggests that supportive environments at home and within educational institutions play a crucial role in encouraging or discouraging physical activity participation among female students.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it is evident that female students encounter multiple barriers that limit their involvement in physical activities. These include personal perceptions, deeply rooted social and cultural norms, and inadequate family and



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institutional support. The acceptance of all three hypotheses underscores that these barriers are not isolated or occasional but are systemic and interrelated. Therefore, improving female participation in physical activities requires a multi-faceted approach targeting these key areas of concern.

Recommendations

In light of the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Awareness Campaigns: Educational institutions and government bodies should conduct awareness programs to challenge harmful cultural norms and stereotypes related to female participation in sports and physical activities.

Parental and Family Involvement: Families, especially parents, should be educated about the importance of physical activity for girls' health and development through workshops, seminars, and community meetings.

Institutional Improvements: Schools and colleges should provide safe, accessible, and female-friendly sports facilities, including hiring female physical education instructors and organizing regular sports events for girls.

Policy Initiatives: Policymakers should develop gender-sensitive physical education policies that encourage equal participation of females in sports and remove structural and cultural barriers within academic institutions.

Counseling and Motivation: Psychological support and counseling services should be made available in schools and colleges to help girls overcome self-doubt and increase confidence regarding physical activity participation.

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