



From Gender Stereotypes to Participation of Iranian Women in Sports

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the role of gender stereotypes in women's participation in sports. The present study was conducted with a qualitative, constructivist approach, serving its purpose. The participants in this study were 15 Iranian women and girls aged 15 to 55 who participated in sports recreationally or professionally and were selected as the final sample using a theoretical and purposive sampling method. Based on the results of the interviews, the focused codes extracted from the initial codes, which are presented in the form of theoretical codes of gender stereotypes in this study, include negative views of families towards girls' sports, social and cultural norms governing in sports, male dominance in some sports, breaking taboos in sports, dominant forces in sports, distrust of female athletes, and common stereotypes in sports that were identified. Therefore, changing social and cultural norms, educating and informing families through increased media coverage of women's sports, and role modeling will reduce gender stereotypes in sports and create conditions where women and girls can engage in sports without cultural and social restrictions.

Introduction

Stereotypes are institutionalized in people's minds through the process of socialization in a way that sees boys as more capable and values their sports activities more than girls. This attitude creates gender differences in sports participation and performance (Chalabaev et al., 2013). "You throw

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like a girl" is a stereotype that portrays women and girls as weak and unathletic (Hively & El Alayli, 2014). While female athletes are establishing themselves in the world of sport, their ability to challenge gender barriers and limiting notions about their physical appearance and athletic ability through their increased participation in sports is evident (Wilde, 2007). Sport has traditionally carried gendered connotations in society and various cultures, resulting in stereotypes (Liu et al., 2023). Gender stereotypes are common social beliefs about the personality and behavioral characteristics of social groups that emphasize the differences between men and women. Around the world, people equate sports with masculinity (Hively & El Alayli, 2014), and gender stereotypes are a factor in distinguishing between men's and women's (Derks et al., 2016). For example, football and basketball are often regarded as symbols of masculine sports and masculinity, whereas dance and gymnastics are often viewed as feminine. Gender stereotypes in sports are a valuable and important factor in the ongoing improvement of gender equality (Prot et al., 2011).

Sport is a unique phenomenon due to its exceptional capacity to question male power structures, promote equality and women's empowerment, and break down the male-female binary. However, globally, numerous barriers exist to women's participation in this arena (Parvez, 2024). In some geographic areas, some sports are more commonly played by men or women, which helps perpetuate these stereotypes (Matteo, 1988). Furthermore, historically, the patriarchal institutionalization of sport has helped participants in various settings to learn and justify stereotypes from an early age (Díaz-Martínez et al., 2024). Important people such as fathers, mothers, siblings, friends, teachers/mentors, the media, etc., play a role in the development and transmission of gender stereotypes (Mateo et al., 2021). Female teachers and coaches are aware of the existence of gender stereotypes in sports environments and know that these stereotypes limit opportunities for girls' sports advancement and development (Díaz-Martínez et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the media often portrays sports in a way that focuses primarily on male athletes, which reinforces and perpetuates the association between sports and masculinity (Koivula, 1999). The negative consequences of these stereotypes for women include less opportunity to enjoy the same conditions and benefits as men (including social, economic, and cultural), limited participation in sports, and free expression of potential in various dimensions (Amin et al., 2023). Despite the male-dominated world of sports and the prevalence of gender stereotypes in which women are portrayed as less important (Fink, 2015). Some sports are considered feminine activities due to the predominant participation of women. These include individual disciplines with an aesthetic focus, such as rhythmic gymnastics and swimming (Peral-Suárez et al., 2020). Gradually, the roles of men and women in sports are evolving, although gender differences persist, and female participation rates in certain sports have increased. However, a significant portion of sporting activities remains influenced by gender, leading men and women to unconsciously participate in sports associated with their respective genders (Mateo et al., 2021).

The issues and problems identified in the field of women's sports reflect the profound impact of gender stereotypes and roles that have created widespread challenges for women. The program "Transforming the World 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" prioritizes the promotion of gender equality, the elimination of gender stereotypes, and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation (UNESCO et al., 2024). The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (European Commission, 2020) prioritizes promoting gender equality, eliminating gender stereotypes, and ensuring non-discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It emphasizes the importance of women's and girls' participation in sports and achieving gender balance in employment opportunities within sports organizations. However, the results of these policies remain unclear, and despite increasing global levels of sports participation, women continue to face systemic, structural, and societal barriers (Parvez, 2024).

In the male-dominated world of sports, there has been a legacy of prejudice against female athletes. Girls and women have challenged the limiting, negative, and narrow-minded notions that they should not participate in sports, sweat, show aggression, or compete. They have begun to incorporate physical strength and athletic skills into the definition of femininity. As a result, traditional stereotypes of women are slowly changing and evolving. This process will continue until girls and women no longer feel compelled to choose between sports and femininity. Although there is a long way to go, women are overcoming these stereotypes (Wilde, 2007). Breaking down stereotypes creates more opportunities for women at leadership and management levels in sports, which in turn can lead to a reduction in gender inequalities in other areas of life. On the other hand, increasing the presence of women in competitive and media sports can create positive role models for future generations and change limiting beliefs about women's abilities (Cooky et al., 2015). Ultimately, breaking down stereotypes can lead to a more inclusive and equitable environment in sports, where women and men are equally respected and valued (Kane, 2013).

As at least half of the world's population, women play important and pivotal roles in societies. The limitations to women's participation in sports activities worldwide have included financial, cultural, and social constraints, as well as human and professional constraints and structural and managerial constraints, among others (Saadati Fard et al., 2021). Even though numerous findings confirm the effectiveness of physical activity on the physical, mental, and social health of women at all stages of life, it is considered an efficient tool for improving their quality of life (Swann et al., 2018). However, in Iranian society, as in many other societies, there is a lack of physical activity among women for various reasons, including the prevailing socio-cultural conditions in the society (Abbasgholizadeh et al., 2017).

In Iranian society, there are negative attitudes toward women's sports activities; the existence of some subcultures, stereotypes, and family prejudices are among these problems (Naghdi et al., 2011). Women can use athletics as a platform to show their presence in the community (Arian & Ghaderi, 2021). According to research, women in Iran are the most marginalized part of sports and have been excluded from sports in many cases; efforts to change this situation have not been very effective (Javaheri et al., 2021). These challenges and other factors, such as gender stereotypes and social stigmas, have led to the exclusion of many Iranian women from sports and sports environments, which will have a negative impact on women's health. In addition to women's health, women's sports at the national level significantly reduce government costs by mitigating social harms and improving physical, mental, and social health indicators. At the international level, the presence or absence of women in sports activities is a global indicator of the social status of women in society (Monazami et al., 2011). Accordingly, it is essential to examine and identify factors that can contribute to the inclusion of Iranian women in sports, thereby improving their health status and promoting social justice in sports (Gholipour et al., 2025).

Research on this topic is limited in Iran, with most studies examining the role of media and stereotypes (Javani et al., 2022; Moharramzadeh et al., 2024; Nayiri & Nayiri, 2021; Nazari et al., 2023; NazariAzad et al., 2020). Increasing participation in sports leads to an increase in women's civic and social activities, and it can create positive role models for future generations as well as motivation for girls and young women (Manouchehri et al., 2024). In Iran, like many societies, women face problems and inequalities such as lack of access to equal educational facilities as men, unequal job opportunities as men, poverty and unequal income, greater tensions, and playing multiple family roles and conflicts in these roles, to which sports can also be added (Monazami et al., 2011). Sport as a behavior, attitude, and decision has the potential to improve individual health (Lima, 2020), and achieve academic success and progress in society and all environments in which women operate (Kotschwar, 2014), identifying gender barriers from the perspective of female athletes can benefit women and society as a whole, as diversity and equality contribute to the growth and development of sport at all levels. Therefore, further studies are needed in this area to

help understand this complex phenomenon and lead to increased participation and representation of women in sports.

Methodology

The constructivist approach to Grounded Theory (Mills et al., 2009) posits that individuals actively construct the realities they attribute to events, actions, processes, ideologies, and conditions in the world and then act upon them (Charmaz, 2015). This study employed the constructivist approach to Grounded Theory Charmaz (2006), as it differs from traditional versions (Glaser et al., 1992) in that grounded theory constructivists focus on the meanings that can be constructed from the interpretation of data. GT is typically employed in cases where no relevant theory exists or when limited information is available (Charmaz, 2015). The selected statistical sample is Iranian women who engage in sports recreationally or professionally. The necessary data were collected through 15 semi-structured interviews with women and girls aged 19 to 55. A purposive sampling method with the greatest diversity was also employed, aiming to incorporate extensive evidence from the interview texts, which helped increase the transferability of the results. According to Charmaz, a focused interview is a way of generating data in qualitative research. Typically, a concentrated interview is a one-way conversation conducted slowly, exploring the perspectives of research participants within the context of their personal experiences related to the research topic (Charmaz, 2015). In the present study, first, an interview guide was prepared for the interview so that the researcher could help in asking questions and addressing all aspects of the subject; second, the interview questions were designed from general to specific, third after the interview transcripts were written, their analysis was carried out simultaneously and continuously with data collection, and the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. Before this, the subjects were explained about the subject, the purpose of the article, the work process, adherence to ethical principles, etc. On average, the duration of each interview was between 30 and 70 minutes, and the analysis of the obtained data was carried out using a primary, focused, and theoretical coding method. In the initial coding, the text was coded line by line, and categories were extracted; then, in the concentrated coding process, these categories were compared with each other, and codes were invented to relate these categories to each other; then, in the theoretical coding stage, the core or central category of the research was identified. Two criteria of reliability and transferability were used to evaluate the research. In this study, the requirements of validity, reliability, confirmability, and transferability were used to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the qualitative data obtained. For this purpose, the researcher's continuous engagement and contact with the participants and the research field indicated the validity of the article. Additionally, the confirmation of the concepts and categories extracted from the interview transcripts, with the help of several participants (member control strategy), indicated the confirmability of the data and research results (Hariri, 2016; Momenirad, 2013).

The validity coefficient of the data was considered through transcription as quickly and accurately as possible, and all stages of the research were accurately recorded by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, this study employed a sampling method with the greatest diversity, aiming to present extensive evidence from the interview transcripts, which helped increase the transferability of the results (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Sampling with the most incredible diversity aimed to select women who had different perspectives on the topic, as well as various backgrounds and experiences. The intra-subject agreement method was also used to calculate the reliability of the interviews. To calculate the reliability of the interview using the intra-subject agreement method between two coders (evaluators), a professor in the field of sports management was recruited as a research associate (coder) for the study. The necessary training and techniques for coding the interviews were then transferred to him. In each of the interviews, the codes that were similar in the opinion of both people were identified as "agreement," and the dissimilar codes were identified as "disagreement." Then, the researcher, along with this research associate, coded three interviews, and the percentage of intra-subject agreement, which serves as an indicator of the analysis's reliability, was calculated. The results are shown in Table 1.

$$\text{Subject within Agreement Percent} = \frac{\text{Number of Agreements} \times 2}{\text{Total Number of Codes}} \times 100$$

Table 1. Results of the Dependability Study between the Two Transition Encoders

Row	Interview Number	Total Number of Data	Number of Agreements	Number of Disagreements	Retest Dependability
1	2	10	4	5	80%
2	7	13	6	4	92%
3	12	8	3	2	75%
Total	21	31	14	9	90%

As shown in Table 1 the total number of codes recorded by both people (the researcher and the collaborator) is 90%, which is higher than 60%, so the reliability of the coding is confirmed (Rezaei, 2018).

Results

Data collection and analysis led to the development of a grounded theory that shows how gender stereotypes can affect women's participation in sports. The focused codes extracted from the initial codes, which are presented in the form of theoretical codes of gender stereotypes in this study, include negative views of families towards girls' sports, social and cultural norms governing in sports, male dominance in some sports, breaking taboos in sports, dominant forces in sports, distrust of female athletes, and common stereotypes in sports. The extracted codes are listed below.

Table 2. Primary and focused codes extracted from interviews

Theoretical Code	Focused codes	Primary codes
Gender Stereotypes	Negative view of families	Preference for studies and education over sports, family encouragement and support for continuing education and playing sports for fun rather than for championships and careers, family negative experience of professional sports/the lack of professional sports for women in Iran, family extreme sensitivity towards training with men, family embarrassment due to sports/type of clothing among relatives, common misconceptions about sports, family fear of physical harm as a result of sports, family view of male coaches and thoughts of honor in traditional families, incompatibility of clothing for some disciplines and male coaches (martial arts practitioners' clothing versus male coaches)
	Social and cultural norms governing in sports	The tendency of teenage girls to show off their power, the tendency to violent sports due to the bitter experience of not being safe in their place of residence, the tendency to martial arts due to the feeling of insecurity in the lower areas of the city, the effect of women's knowledge of their place of residence and the ability to cover themselves, With that culture to prevent harassment, the negative view of those around them towards sports, negative stereotypes towards women's sports from celebrities, attention to female athletes first as women and then as athletes, not to avoid sports due to fear of changing their appearance in martial arts and for confrontation, the need to choose gentler words to describe the body in overweight girls, pushing women towards lighter sports
	Male dominance in some sports	Traditional beliefs and gender stereotypes about sports, sports are just sports, the abandonment of some disciplines in the field of women in Iran is a factor in not engaging in professional sports, martial arts are inappropriate for girls, injuries and changes in appearance, this sport is for men, gender challenges facing women in some disciplines, talent does not know gender
	Breaking taboos in sports	Sports are a factor in breaking traditional norms, creating awareness among men about the role of sports on the health of women and girls, eliminating the stereotype of sports as leisure time, ensuring security on the way to clubs and gyms by relevant organizations, the low culture of some cities in pushing and encouraging women to play sports, women winning medals in disciplines where men are not excellent, trying to change old beliefs, the first step towards equality

Dominant forces in sports	Police dealing with female athletes in public, dealing with or protesting by a group of people against women's sports in public, stereotypical views of women's clothing in sports arenas, undervaluing sports (considering it unimportant), not posting pictures of female athletes in cities in Muslim countries, keeping women behind the scenes, the need to keep women in a safe place by wearing the hijab, not prioritizing sports due to financial issues, poor media coverage
Distrust of female athletes	Family shame due to sports/type of clothing among relatives, use of hijab equipment despite limiting performance to prevent offensive encounters with female athletes, personality and behavior of female athletes causing disruptions on the route, Girls and women athletes not being trustworthy or inspiring, girls in the cage of others' expectations instead of letting them fly
Common stereotypes in sports	Weight training makes girls tough, girls shouldn't do bodybuilding, bodybuilding makes girls' bodies masculine, no matter how much you practice, you can't catch up with boys, you won't achieve anything in sports, girls have no ability, sports like gymnastics and martial arts are dangerous for girls, sports have no career prospects, girls should get married, not sports, you won't become anything in sports, why do you play football, aren't you a boy?, sports make you less beautiful, karate is not good for girls, sports contradict the duties of femininity, loss of reproductive ability, girls lose their virginity through martial arts

Negative Family Views of Girls' Sports

Gender stereotypes of female athletes are a complex and vital issue. As previously mentioned, gender stereotypes refer to a set of social beliefs and perceptions that attribute specific roles and characteristics to women and men. These stereotypes can lead to social and cultural limitations that affect individuals' abilities and opportunities (Eagly & Carli, 2018). One of these stereotypes is formed within the family. Analysis of the formation and development of sports, from the perspective of the trajectory of the sport, confirms that family members have the most interaction with the athlete and are their main companions, both in terms of guidance in sports activities and emotional and financial support. By receiving appropriate family support and encouragement in the first contact with sports, athletes feel more motivated and confident to overcome challenges and dilemmas and make more efforts to achieve their goals, which leads to a richer individual experience and, in the long term, their persistence in sports (Gonzaga et al., 2023). It should be emphasized that the influence of family on the development of young athletes can be both positive and negative, and family members can also become a significant source of demotivation, disappointment, and sports abandonment (Teques & Serpa, 2013). From this perspective, it is clear that parental involvement in sports spans a spectrum, ranging from low involvement to moderate participation and ultimately to excessive involvement (Hellstedt, 1990). On the spectrum of participation, the provision of support from family members is significant, which can take the form of emotional support (concern about comfort and safety in sports), informational (advice or guidance on possible solutions to problems encountered in sports), and tangible (tangible assistance such as transportation and financial aid). Considering the above, the role of the family in girls' participation in sports is a critical issue. Regarding the stereotypes that govern this sector for girls' participation, one of the girls says: *Ever since I started playing futsal, my mother has been telling me, "What's the point?" She once called my coach and said, "Leave my daughter alone; she needs to study."*

And another girl says: *"My mom was very against it because when she saw my aunt (my aunt is an athlete and volleyball coach), she always said, 'Don't pursue sports; have fun.' Don't focus your life on sports like your aunt; focus on studies."*

Another girl who practices Hapkido says, "My mom always said you have no future. This discipline has no federation; there's nothing you can do to get anywhere in it. For example, there were other sports, but we didn't have any federation, no competitions abroad, and so on."

Social and cultural norms governing in sports

In today's world, there are different views on the relationship between sport and society. Some experts believe that it is society that influences sport (Manouchehri et al., 2024). The present study and data analysis also clearly demonstrate that the participation of women and girls in sports is influenced by the norms and culture prevalent in society. In this regard, one of the female karate practitioners says; "They were all saying this girl was getting hurt; it wasn't good at all."

Another girl said; "My cousin would make fun of me every time I got hurt and my facial shape changed. For example, I broke a tooth once, but my brother and parents didn't have any problems."

One of the female runners said; "They told me that someone might look at you or say something to you on the track. It's better to stay indoors. You can see the track, where there are houses on both sides and the windows of the houses face the track. But I came and resisted. People here don't have a good view of us running on the track. They look at us from all sides. Of course, this is for a small town like here."

Male dominance in some sports

Since the 1970s, girls and women have increasingly participated in competitive sports. But men have imposed restrictions, keeping women out of their games and competitions and forcing them to play on women's teams with fewer facilities. While many examples in industry and sports show women can do tough, so-called "male" jobs, many still believe that women's biological differences prevent them from competing in male-dominated fields. Sports organizers have also attempted to restrict women to sports that were thought to reinforce traditional notions of "femininity," such as swimming, tennis, and gymnastics, and have designed "girl-specific" rules to discourage them from playing the ambitious and aggressive games typically associated with boys and men (Kidd, 2013). In this regard, it was common to hear statements such as, "This sport makes girls tough," "Girls shouldn't do bodybuilding," and "Bodybuilding makes girls' bodies masculine" during interviews. One of the female bodybuilders says; "When a famous athlete comes on national media and says that women shouldn't do bodybuilding or exercise, that women should have children, what else can be expected from others?"

In this case, one of the girls says; "They tell me you've become very muscular; you look manly!! Why do you dress like a man? I always hear this, or my friend tells me, you're very tough, girl; you shouldn't be so tough."

Breaking taboos in sports

We live in a society that is still entangled in traditional and conservative thinking and whose structure is based on hierarchical power relations. These structures cause women to be neglected in many areas, especially in conditions of severe social deprivation (Lima, 2020). Over the years, women in sports have earned the title of icons of liberation. In particular, Maria Esther Bueno, with her extraordinary technical display, won several Wimbledon titles, earning her the nickname "Queen of Wimbledon." She brought the world's attention not only to tennis but also to fashion, surprising and delighting the public with her short skirts that excited the sports world and are still in fashion today. At a time when swimmer Violeta Coelho Neto wore a "conventional" swimsuit, Maria Lenk broke new ground with her daring, plunging swimsuits, defying cultural taboos not only in sports but also in her daily life (Votre & Mourão, 2001). In this regard, one of the national team coaches says: "We women tried to learn ourselves, train our team, provide training courses, different training courses, refereeing, coaching, management, and so on... Well, slowly, women were able to achieve a really good position in this field, and they themselves became excellent in

this work. In the past five, six, or ten years, women were truly the top students in all the classes they attended, in classes where there were also men. Well, this made them grow."

From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the impact of social reforms—partly brought about by feminist movements and reinforced by industrialization—reduced women's dependence and subordination, and their once passive social role became increasingly active. This gradually affected their daily lives and ensured their presence in the world of sport. Women first competed in the modern Olympic Games in Paris in 1900. However, it was not until 1932 in Los Angeles that the first Brazilian and South American woman, Maria Lenk, competed. South America lagged behind the developments in North America and Europe. For a long time, the number of Brazilian women participating in the Olympic Games remained unchanged. Swimming was the sport that offered the most opportunities to women, and it eventually led to an increase in the number of Brazilian female competitors (Votre & Mourão, 2001).

Another girl from the national team says, *"When I want to go running, my father doesn't let me wear leggings and says, 'Dad, let me go; I can't go to practice like this.' Well, it's very difficult. I go to practice in a space far from my home. For example, our house is here. I have to practice here. I live in an officer's house, but I go to north Tehran for practice and work. I must be somewhere far from my family because they really get me. Even my Instagram says the same thing, 'Dress like this,' but I fight them."*

One of the coaches says, *"Because I had endured so much hardship myself, I give them time to achieve what they really want. I promised these young people that I would even make them wear the national team, and I really kept my word and made them wear the national team."*

Dominant forces in sports

Sports federations are responsible for developing their sports and providing facilities and opportunities for elite athletes to grow, participate in domestic competitions, and win honors in international arenas. Therefore, the governing laws and the type of governance they have are of particular importance (Mehrabi et al., 2023). In developing countries like Iran, where dependence on government resources is prevalent, and the government is the primary sponsor and backer of sports and sports organizations, many sports would struggle to compete at various levels without government support. This dependence has made it difficult for society to participate in sports, and within the sports sector, the lack of multiple supports has created problems for the industry.

Regarding this extracted code, many girls pointed out the lack of financial support from the federations, and some consider strict government regulations to be the reason for the low level of progress of girls in sports. In this case, one of the girls says, *"Television is acting very poorly. This is the media's duty. Everyone accepts it. Everyone sees it. Now, in my opinion, it is a part of the story. Introduce a female champion. We do not create myths. Introduce the champions of each discipline. For example, the champion of a certain discipline has these kinds of education. Which province is it active in? This way, a large number of people can be attracted to different disciplines."*

In the same case, another person says, *"The federations are acting very poorly. They don't even care that I was a champion. I won medals for the federation for years. I worked hard. The year I said goodbye to the championship, goodbye. No one comes to ask me how my athlete, who managed to win 3 world medals, is doing now. Where is she?!"*

One experienced coach in Tehran says, *"Culture building should start in elementary schools and kindergartens. This is not something we can do at an older age. If we start in kindergartens, as all the teachings have been said, starting in schools, we can actually define the space in a way that*

includes the benefits of sports and the effects of sports. Well, where is the place for education? Of course, the country's schools and universities."

Distrust of female athletes

The study of girls and girls' culture in sports reveals gendered scenarios and gendered experiences (Krane et al., 2014). In this regard, a female athlete says, *"We went to our competitions one year and trained with a male coach. Then that year I posted a photo (on the internet). I showed the photo and printed it. I was happy to work with a great coach like Mr.... I was very annoyed by this... Everyone told my father that now a girl must do this manly sport?! They were very angry, saying that she would get hurt... The coach is dead; why do you let her work with a Kurdish coach?! Her clothes are not appropriate... ."*

Another girl, after quitting sports, says, *"One year, the atmosphere in the city was very bad. My father wouldn't let me, saying, 'We don't trust society.'"*

Common gender stereotypes in sports

Girls should act and look feminine, and boys should appear masculine. These socially supported beliefs about masculinity and femininity have led to different expectations and behaviors for women and men in sports. While Western societies afford girls greater freedom to move beyond the traditional and narrow boundaries of femininity, there are still boundaries that should not be crossed (Halberstam, 2003). Among the collected data, some stereotypes were repeated more than others, including Weight training makes girls challenging, girls shouldn't do bodybuilding, bodybuilding makes girls' bodies masculine, no matter how much you practice, you can't catch up with boys, you won't achieve anything in sports, girls have no ability, sports like gymnastics and martial arts are dangerous for girls, sports have no career prospects, girls should get married, not sports, you won't become anything in sports, why do you play football, aren't you a boy? Sports make you lose your beauty; karate is not suitable for girls; sports contradict the duties of femininity, causing loss of reproductive ability, and girls lose their virginity through martial arts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine gender stereotypes in sports and Iranian women's participation in sports. Despite recent progress in women's participation in sports, there are still many cultural and social challenges that prevent women from participating more widely in this field. In this study, the results obtained from the analysis of various topics were comprehensively presented, followed by discussions on these findings. Subsequently, solutions for addressing the identified challenges and issues were provided, and finally, a clear and concise summary of the research was presented to the readers.

Negative Family Views of Girls' Sports

One of the main themes extracted from the interview data was the family's negative attitude toward girls' participation in sports. This negative perspective often stems from cultural concerns, traditional beliefs, and gender expectations. Families may perceive sports as a masculine activity and consider it to conflict with conventional feminine roles (Pfister, 2010). In many cases, girls face resistance from their parents—especially fathers—when trying to continue their athletic activities. This resistance serves as a significant barrier to the development and flourishing of their talents (Dagkas & Benn, 2006). Such attitudes not only reduce girls' motivation and participation in sports but can also have negative effects on their self-esteem and personal identity (Krane et al., 2004). These restrictions are often more evident in societies where traditional gender roles are deeply institutionalized. The family, as the primary social institution, plays a crucial role in shaping girls' attitudes toward sports. A negative attitude can significantly hinder an individual's athletic journey from the outset (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Therefore, it is essential to take effective measures to address these barriers by educating families—particularly parents—about the importance of sports for girls' physical and mental well-being, as well as its role in fostering self-confidence and social

skills. Educational institutions and the media can also play a pivotal role in challenging and transforming stereotypical attitudes.

Social and cultural norms governing in sports

The findings of this study also show that social and cultural norms have a significant impact on girls' participation in sports activities. In many societies, especially traditional societies, girls' participation in sports still faces restrictive and stereotypical views. These stereotypes define gender roles in a way that does not consider sports a feminine thing. These norms are created and reinforced not only in families but also in educational environments, media spaces, and the policies of each country. Studies have shown that one of the main barriers to girls' participation in sports is the fear of social judgment and the pressure to conform to gender norms. Moreover, the lack of female role models in the media and insufficient institutional support for girls' teams and clubs create structural obstacles to the advancement of women's sports (Pfister, 2010). In this context, families play a critical role in either challenging or reinforcing these norms. Girls who receive parental support are more likely to continue their involvement in sports (Harwood & Knight, 2015). Based on the findings, policymakers in sports and education must revise their cultural and promotional programs to lay the foundation for transforming social attitudes. Furthermore, leveraging sports as a platform to empower girls can help redefine gender roles and promote gender equality (UNESCO et al., 2024). Overall, overcoming restrictive norms demands a shift in deeply rooted cultural perceptions and the cultivation of a new generation that views sports not as a male privilege but as a human right accessible to all members of society.

Male dominance in some sports

Sports that are traditionally considered masculine, such as football or weightlifting, are more restricted for Iranian women. However, female athletes around the world have pushed gender boundaries somewhat by displaying qualities such as determination, competitiveness, and physical strength. They are offering a new definition of femininity in sports (Krane et al., 2004). Through physical activities and sports, girls have the opportunity to develop their physical abilities while also cultivating social skills such as teamwork, commitment, discipline, and goal setting.

Breaking taboos in sports

The findings of this study suggest that female athletes, particularly in societies with traditional cultural structures, are playing a significant role in challenging historical and social taboos related to the body, gender, and gender roles in sports. The active presence of women in arenas that were once exclusively male-dominated, such as football, boxing, wrestling, or cycling, has not only challenged physical and social limitations but has also prompted a reevaluation of prevailing notions of "masculinity" and "femininity" in sports (Scraton et al., 1999). One of the most significant aspects of breaking taboos is crossing cultural and religious boundaries. In some countries, female athletes have faced structural barriers such as the lack of facilities, mandatory dress codes, gendered perceptions, and even legal prohibitions. Nevertheless, narratives of resistance and empowerment have turned these women into inspiring role models for future generations (Pfister, 2010). Despite their dual role, the media has played a prominent part in this process. On the one hand, stereotypical portrayals of female athletes have sometimes reinforced discriminatory views.

On the other hand, the presence of women in global sports events and the virtual space has provided a platform to amplify their voices (Fink, 2015). Breaking taboos in sports is not only a sports action but also part of a broader social and cultural movement that challenges social norms and presents a new perspective on women's empowerment, presence, and identity. The continuation of this journey requires structural support, fair policymaking, and public education to reshape society's view on the body and women's role in sports.

Dominant forces in sports

One of the most important political solutions for empowering women to reduce gender inequality is to enact laws that minimize gender inequality. Officials and policymakers should play a key role in this regard and enact laws that minimize inequality. In this case, one of the policies can be in the media. The media plays a crucial role in the development of women's sports, which can be achieved by fostering a supportive cultural attitude towards women and women's sports in both the media and society (Moharramzadeh et al., 2024). The media shapes people's perceptions of women's athletic successes (Abdavi & Fakhri, 2011). Therefore, they play an important role in eliminating negative stereotypes and attitudes that exist towards women's sports.

Distrust of female athletes

Distrust of female athletes stems from gender stereotypes, structural discrimination, and unequal media coverage. Research shows that female athletes are often confronted with doubts about their abilities, professionalism, and even their gender authenticity (Fink, 2015). Furthermore, the lack of financial support and equal facilities for female athletes undermines confidence in their capabilities. However, increased public awareness and gender equality policies, such as Title IX in the United States, have taken steps to reduce this distrust (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014). Ultimately, distrust of female athletes is not only unjust but also hinders the progress of women's sports.

Common gender stereotypes in sports

Gender stereotypes in sports continue to act as one of the main challenges in achieving gender equality. These stereotypes have infiltrated all levels, from athletic performance and participation to media, officiating, management, coaching, and even macro-level sports policymaking (Dworkin & Messner, 2002). Beliefs such as "women are inherently unsuitable for strength-based sports" or "aggressive sports are incompatible with femininity" are among the typical stereotypes that systematically limit women's participation (Kane, 2013). The role of the media in reproducing gender stereotypes is undeniable. Research has shown that media coverage of female athletes is often less than that of male athletes and tends to focus more on their physical appearance, personal lives, and "feminine" behaviors rather than their technical performance and athletic skills. Even in advertising images, female athletes are often depicted in poses that lack power or competitiveness, while men are portrayed performing intense and heroic actions (Daniels, 2009).

Another dimension of gender stereotypes is discrimination in access to resources, facilities, and opportunities. Female athletes in many countries receive less financial support, are underrepresented in coaching and managerial roles, and have limited involvement in high-level sports decision-making (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). This structural gap is a direct reflection of the same stereotypes that limit women's presence in various spaces, including sports. However, in recent decades, a wave of resistance and the redefinition of female athletes' identities has emerged. Women have not only challenged stereotypes at the professional level but have also confronted them in the media, education, and awareness-raising sectors. The growth of sports movements, the increasing presence of women in event management, and new representations on social media have created new opportunities for breaking through these stereotypes.

Conclusion

Sport reflects the wider society and can also convey restrictive gender messages. However, it can also act as a powerful tool to challenge gender stereotypes and strengthen the role of women in society. However, achieving gender equality in sport requires broader structural and cultural changes. These changes include increasing financial and media support for women's sports, creating educational and coaching opportunities for women, and addressing stereotypical attitudes in society. In addition, the media plays a key role in changing the image of female athletes, (Javani et al., 2022), and should help strengthen the position of women in sports by showcasing their successes and achievements rather than focusing on appearance or traditional roles. Ultimately, women's participation in sports not only improves their health and self-confidence but can also serve as a powerful role model for future generations and move society towards gender equality.

For decades, the European Union has developed an "exceptional" strategy and policy on gender equality, focusing on improving the reconciliation of work and private life, combating gender stereotypes, and preventing and combating violence against women (Alonso & Gutiérrez, 2023). Gender equality is a central aspect of human rights. Its achievement is essential for achieving sustainability and development that is focused on people's needs. For more than fifty years, there has been a vibrant international debate about inequalities and their impact on multiple societal challenges (Mateo et al., 2021). One of the things that emerged from the data was the negative view of families towards girls' sports, which is a deep and multidimensional challenge rooted in culture and society. To change this attitude, coordinated efforts are needed at the individual, societal, and policy levels. By increasing awareness, changing stereotypes, and creating safe and supportive environments, girls can be allowed to benefit from sports and achieve gender equality in different areas of life, especially sports and society. Given that the existence of gender inequality in society causes a waste of human resources, reduces the role of women in social participation, and also affects women's physical and mental health, there is a need to identify and implement solutions to reduce gender inequality (Hamzehgardezshi et al., 2023). One of the most important solutions to reducing gender inequality is to increase awareness in the context of society and the family. In this regard, the first issue is to properly educate girls and boys and change the belief that men are superior to women, from school to university.

According to the study's results, it appears that research in the field of women's sports can help eliminate discrimination and gender stereotypes in sports. Additionally, increasing the number of female coaches and selecting and appointing decision-makers in the field of women's sports from among their ranks, as well as modeling successful female athletes, can help reduce gender stereotypes. From the perspective of female athletes, although there are physiological limitations for them in some sports, a significant part of gender inequalities is imposed on them by society. As long as this discriminatory and unequal view exists at the societal level, athletes' efforts to eliminate these gender inequalities will take time. It should be noted that every female athlete is a champion in the fight against stereotypes, and women themselves can create change in the world of sports (Ahmadi & Molana, 2023). In recent years, female athletes have excelled across a diverse range of sports, achieving record-breaking performances, clinching major titles, and raising the profile of women's athletics on a global stage. Therefore, the need to build a culture in society seems very necessary. One of the practical tools in building culture is the media, which plays an effective role in improving and modifying public culture regarding the acceptance of women in sports. Unfortunately, instead of building a positive culture for women's sports, it is effective in increasing gender inequality among female athletes. Conducting such research can be effective in changing the direction of media programs and news coverage of women's sports in favor of women's sports.

It is also possible to reduce cultural and social restrictions and create a platform and grounds for women's participation in sports through consultation with sports officials and government institutions. It appears that conducting similar research on gender inequality in sports, such as comparing and analyzing women's performance in disciplines shared with men, can be effective in identifying gender inequalities in sports. Additionally, research on the recent movements of women athletes in Iran, conducted through interviews with women athletes at all levels of sports, is recommended. Cultural differences and the existence of subcultures in the vast country of Iran can be effective in expanding or reducing stereotypes. This issue has not been thoroughly examined in the present study and could be considered for future research.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines: Ethical points have been observed.

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