

Analyzing the Role of Gender Inequality and Structural Barriers Faced by Women Athletes in Pakistan

Rehan Mushtaq*¹, Shafiq Qurban²

¹*MPhil Scholar, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding author: rehan.ali10228@gmail.com

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Women Athletes, Sports Governance, Pakistan, Radical Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Social Constructivism, Media Representation

DOI No:

<https://doi.org/10.56976/jsom.v4i3.292>

This paper is a critical analysis of the existing gender differences and infrastructural challenges that women athletes are facing in Pakistan. Based on the Radical theory (Feminism), Marxist Feminism, and Social Constructivism, the study surveys the scope by which the norms of patriarchy, institutional disregard, economic alienation, and a biased representation of women in the media limit female access and achievement in sports. It is based on a qualitative, explorative design, as semi-structured interviews were applied to speak with women in sports of various profiles, with sports reporters and representatives of institutions involved. Thematic analysis led to the identification of deep-seated socio-cultural resistance, lacking gender sensitive policies. Gender inequalities are experienced in terms of funding and structures, inequality within the infrastructural constraints, and symbolic expression in the media narratives. Nonetheless, several athletes have shown to be resilient by using grass-roots movements and online platforms to build visibility and power. The authors of the paper believe that an equitable sporting environment can be established through the practice of gender-responsive budgeting, infrastructure investment, media changes, and structural reforms in the governance of sports. Results become a piece of feminist work in the field of sport and provide policy prescriptions that can be implemented according to the global gender equality guidelines.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, women's active participation in international sports has occurred gradually, but significant differences still exist between males and females (Eime et al., 2021). Although organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and UNESCO advocate equality, women continue to be underrepresented in sports globally, with less than 40 percent of the world's sports participants, and only 4.16 percent of them receive equal media coverage (NJAS, 2024). Inadequate sponsorship, under-representation at the top, and wage disparities exacerbate inequality. Such international trends are enhanced by the persistent patriarchy in Pakistan, according to which the role of women is mainly defined in terms of their role at home (MedCrave, 2022). In an Ipsos poll, 80 percent of Pakistanis consider the leading role of a woman in society to be a wife or a mother, and almost 90 percent of females and girls do not participate in any sports activities. Policies can be gender-neutral and, in theory, do not consider the issues of women (Malik & Tudor, 2024).

The socio-cultural situation has been reluctant and halting in the induction of women in sport in Pakistan (Ahmed Laar et al., 2022). Some of the milestones were the first women's hockey title won in 1976, the first appearance of the national team in 1983, and the first women's cricket Test in 1979 (Ahmed Laar et al., 2022). However, advances have frequently been the work of individual innovators rather than institutional backing. High-profile players such as Sana Mir in cricket, Samina Baig in Mountaineering, and Maria Toorpakai Wazir in squash have confronted the cultural barriers in their fields at a high personal cost (Puthran, 2022). These success stories highlight resilience and the extraordinary success of women who overcome institutional constraints. Religion and cultural barriers are also significant barriers. According to surveys, mass media bias and the conservative nature of our cultures are the leading obstacles to the involvement of women (Yenilmez, 2021). The most substantial barriers refer to negative perspectives of the family, no transport, harassment in the streets, and social humiliation (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022). Nevertheless, these obstacles do not stop Pakistani women who participate in such competitions as the South Asian Games and Commonwealth Games from gradually changing the mindset of the public (Aslam, 2021).

The inequality is massive compared to the world. Women's football, which is the fastest-growing sport for women globally, has very few female participants in coaching and officiating. In Pakistan, the number of registered cricketers exceeds 100,000, of which only 460 are women, or there are 200 men to every woman (Benson, 2024). This is an indicator of the underlying prejudices close to the grassroots level and the reason why most female athletes complain of fewer resources, appreciation, and opportunities in their careers (Rodríguez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite the observable progress, cultural, institutional, and economic factors still impede the development of other sports among women in Pakistan to a great extent.

2. Literature Review

The problems of gender inequality in sport in Pakistan are huge, both on the structural and cultural levels. The systematic marginalization of women athletes starts with a lack of availability of infrastructure and training grounds. Less than 10 per cent of sports facilities in the country are open to women, and this percentage further declines in rural or underserved areas. As an example, athletes such as Mahoor Shahzad have had significant difficulties

accessing courts and quality coaching in large cities such as Karachi, which indicates the severity of the situation even in cities (DW, 2021). Girls are almost absent in sporting facilities in regions like Balochistan or Gilgit-Baltistan, and so many talented sports persons fail to develop at an early age. The cultural and societal barriers also enhance this exclusion. Over 60 percent of Pakistani women are discouraged from taking part in sports due to a codified patriarchal society, in which women are considered to be at home and nurturers of family (Pak.net.pk, 2023). In the conservative society, especially in the rural parts of Punjab and Balochistan, women engaging in sports is considered an offence against the social norms of decency and respectability. A study in the Mustung district of Balochistan, which involved more than 300 female students, pointed to family disapproval, religious interpretations, and negative attitudes of staff members as the most important social obstacles to female access to athletics (NJAS, 2024). Similarly, school leaders and teachers in Lahore and Sargodha educational institutions have also cited the existence of academic pressure, issues of safety, the absence of female coaches, and resistance among parents as other significant barriers (MedCrave, 2022).

The monetary difference between the women and men is noticeable. Both government and privately sponsored teams also give an unfair advantage to men's teams, and thus, women athletes receive only about 25 per cent of the amount given to men. The example of cricket as one of the most loved sports in the country entails that, according to historical records, until 2017, male players used to make an average of 77,000 dollars annually. In contrast, women players only got 12,000 dollars a year, even though they also participate in the international arena on behalf of this country. Despite the recent developments to raise the allowances of female players by half and to have a twofold growth in daily stipends, the discrepancy still appears rather large and systemic (Dawn, 2021). The lack of equal funding has a direct effect on women's access to training camps, nutrition, equipment, and exposure to applications abroad.

Psychological pressure and harassment are another dimension that is poorly reported yet widespread. Research studies have also established that young female sportswomen tend to receive moral policing, sexual harassment, and ridicule in society. A recent survey of 247 Pakistani women athletes found that such aspects as harassment, judgment on social status, gender stereotyping, and male gatekeeping are primary factors behind psychological stress, which makes many women leave sports early (SUIT Journal, 2023). Other athletes, such as Noreena Shams, have come forward publicly to discuss how deeply-rooted this issue is on a structural level in sports federations, and call out administrative authorities to take action (DW, 2021). In addition to this, the depiction of women in sports through the media is not high at all, and a trend of sports coverage that focuses on sports related to women or female sports personalities does not exceed 15 percent. This invisibility does not grant the female gender just recognition but sponsorship and social legitimacy as well. However, some have brought forward female-led initiatives. Clubs such as Diya WFC in Jordan and Balochistan United have been involved in grassroots efforts to get girls involved in football with little or no government support, as the UN and NGOs fund such activities. In the same way, Karishma Ali in the Chitral region and Abiha Haider in Islamabad are young athletes who broke these conventions and

established training camps and recognition on an international scale, despite the threats and the institutional neglect (The Guardian, 2024; FT, 2024).

Most recent data on national sports programs indicate that an increasing number of girls are interested in sports, but nothing much is done at the institutional level. During the last fiscal year 2024/25, there were 2731 girls in government cricketing training programs and 250 in boxing, highlighting the need for inclusive programs (Dawn, 2025). It is, however, not sustainable that such programs be kept alive without an expanded structural reform. The research work undertaken at the university level also shows that the most important predictors of the persistence of female participation in sports are family support, socio-cultural approval, financial ability, and exposure to harassment (BBE Journal, 2024).

To conclude, the positive data give a clear image of a highly unequal sports scene in which women are welcome in Pakistan. The barriers cannot be treated separately or in an individualistic way; they are connected, institutionalized, and strengthened by cultural rules, economic inequality, institutional oversights, and policy silence. As much as individual excellence and small-scale institutional activities have come up, the general environment is hostile and exclusionary. These facts underlie this study, which aims to critically examine such issues and suggest ways to achieve more equal inclusion of women in the sports system in Pakistan.

2.1 Gap in the Existing Literature

Although the current research attempts to provide a holistic picture of the available data concerning gender inequality, the presence of institutional obstacles, as mentioned by the women athletes of Pakistan, has its share of limitations. To begin with, the research may be geographically restricted as it is impossible to gain easy access and conduct the research in particular cities like Lahore, Karachi, or Islamabad, and hence, the research might not encompass the special issues being encountered by women athletes in remote or rural areas. Second, the access to interested persons, especially the current or former female athletes and members of sport institutions, might run into bureaucracy, unavailability, or the unwillingness of individuals to comment on such delicate issues as discrimination, sexual harassment, or even indifference on the part of an institution. Also, the research uses primarily qualitative research tools, such as interviews and case studies, that have great richness but, as such, are inherently subjective and might not illustrate the whole range of experiences based on the various sports disciplines or even the areas in which the study is conducted.

The other devious weakness is that there is no institutional transparency at the sports federations and government departments within Pakistan, which is likely to serve as a physical barrier to obtaining accurate information on policy, budgets, and gender-targeted programs. There is also the issue of cultural sensitivities because even the questions about the gender role, questions regarding patriarchy, and visibility of women in sports might be met with reluctance or even self-censorship among the participants. Lastly, there can be restrictions imposed by a lack of time and resources to collect and analyze data more thoroughly. Notwithstanding these constraints, the paper attempts to offer valuable insights that will resonate with academic findings and provide policymakers with a guide towards formulating more welcoming and

gender-equitable policies that will affect the future participation of women in sports in Pakistan.

3. Materials and Methods

The methodology used in this Qualitative Research and the exploratory data analysis is due to the need to examine the issue of gender inequality and structural obstacles experienced by women athletes in Pakistan, especially between 2000 and 2024. The qualitative method applied is particularly appropriate in the interpretation of socio-cultural, institutional, and policy-based issues portrayed towards women in the sporting field. The primary sources of information of this study comprise the data of 4-5 female athletes of different sports areas (e.g., cricket, football, martial arts, athletics), participating at various levels in Pakistan, besides two interviews with sports journalists, to gather institutional insights. The secondary data includes journal articles on academic research, gender related sports policies, media write-ups, international guidelines (such as those by UNESCO, IOC, UN Women), and government documents available on sports and gender in Pakistan. These materials will provide valuable information about the policy environment, media discussion, and international practices across the globe. Document analysis is done through examination of the nationalization of sports policies, media articles, official reports, and institutional structures of women in sports. It aids in establishing the extent of support, representation, and gender sensitivity at the sports institutions in Pakistan. This methodological framework provided a comprehensive systematized study of the issues of gendered inaccessibility in the sports industry of Pakistan, both to scholarly discussion and policy implementation. The study follows the acceptable ethical principles. The confidentiality and anonymity of respondents are strictly maintained, and before interviews, informed consent is obtained.

4. Discussion and Findings

The competitive gaming communities can be seen through the lens of feminist theory that questions how power, identity, and representation are constructed and contested within the context of culture. Even though the analogue world and digital spaces promise to be more open and governed by meritocracy, social hierarchies no less determine both of them than the offline world. It can only be because of the continuance of the patriarchal norms that the presence of women in these spaces is never neutral; assumptions about gender roles, authority, and competence always manage it. Such a theoretical framework makes it possible to consider not only how gaming cultures are both playful practices, but also spaces in which more general and intense battles over inclusion and equality are played out. In said spaces, the theory of social identity explains as to the processes by which exclusion is perpetuated. The domination in a given field of culture leads that given group to create an identity as an opposite that distinguishes it as being differentiated from the others. This can particularly place women on the outside in the gaming world, where their status is questioned, regardless of their talent or hard work. The belonging of the in-group is signaled by practices, which are either explicit or implicit, which enhance the group cohesion. The fact that digital interaction occurs under the cover of anonymity, that it is highly competitive, and that much online communication is performative are other factors intensifying exclusionary dynamics by empowering those who tend to be constrained in face-to-face communication. The effects of these dynamics do not

stop at the interpersonal discomfort and extend to structural inequality. The women have to contend with converging demands: first, there is the daily burden of unfriendly encounters, second, there is the psychological burden of constant monitoring, and third, there is the resource scarcity of less access to networks, opportunities, and recognition. All these barriers work to compound themselves, forming circles in which underrepresentation is simultaneously both the symptom and symptom of further exclusion. The results of such kinds demonstrate that the culture of participation is not only determined by personal excellence but by the institutional replication of privilege and disadvantage.

Nevertheless, under such circumstances, women are also fighting back so that they have a voice and agency in the sphere of gaming. These include community-creation projects, demonstrating expertise, and withdrawing choice fully from engagement in specific contacts. Any expressions of resistance (large or subtle) break the reductive power of exclusion, but so too do they open up exposures of how the burden of change is unequally distributed, perhaps doubly so on the shoulders of those already disadvantaged. The focus on resilience may deal with ill person-level responses that dwarf the necessity to include comprehensive and structural action to deal with the sources of disparity, as opposed to signs of disparity. Changing gaming cultures into really inclusive ones presupposes not only structural change but also a cultural one. Social media platforms should enforce community standards in the same way. This should have transparency in moderation, with mechanisms to reach unreached groups. It is also of paramount importance that the norms that cherish diversity and raise issues against gender stereotypes and deconstruct the symbolic borders according to which some bodies are perceived as outsiders are cultivated. These alterations also require long-term effort on the part of institutional actors and community members, because they cannot and must not withdraw from society. The fight against inequality in the digital world is part of the fight towards equality worldwide.

The quality analysis of the interviews with five Pakistani women athletes shows that gender inequality, structural constraints, and individual resilience of women have a complex interaction in terms of the involvement of women in sports. The influence of family attitudes proved to be the determining aspect, as some athletes, including Rahat Khan and Sumayya Tariq, have had great support from their fathers, brothers, and sisters and thus overcome the expectations of society. Some had to initially overcome resistance in their families, which later relaxed, such as Janita Taveed. Lack of governmental and institutional support was prevalent across the board. The participants complained of poor financial support, unavailability of sports equipment, absence of travel subsidy, and poor infrastructure. Such inequality in the investment of states, where male-dominated sport, such as cricket, was favoured, also established systemic disparity and entrenched gender hierarchies in policy and administration, further promoting inequality. The constraints were aggravated by poor access to competition and the global market. Sportspeople were outraged by the limited number of female-centric championships and lack of access to worldwide participation, especially in sports such as hockey, which has low national representation of female athletes.

Ineffective management of the federation, lack of grassroots efforts, and inability to develop talent over time further retarded development. Another structural barrier that was

identified was media neglect, where senior men athletes or elite men athletes received excessive coverage at the expense of rising female talent. This invisibility discourages recognition and motivation, spreading stereotypical notions that undervalue the sporting accomplishments of women in society. The athletes were very motivated and entered the agency despite these seemingly ruinous obstacles. Sports were said by many to present the confidence, discipline, and flexibility in social interconnection even in the face of regional prejudice and cultural norms, especially those in the more conservative aspect of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Both technical advice and emotional support were, however, restricted by the lack of female mentors and coaches, creating a demand to recruit more women as leaders. Structural reforms were also advanced by the participants, which included sports scholarships, the revival of sports within the education set-up, and collaborative work by the education and sports ministries in identifying talent at a young age.

The same deeply rooted constraints in the coverage of marginalized groups in Pakistan were also noted by parallel interviews organised with journalists. Editors became a kind of gatekeeper that did not want to tell stories about minorities since they could face backlash, controversy, and even state retributions; this trend drives even more imbalanced pictures and strengthens the prejudices in the community. The lack of representation of positive stories about minorities and the lack of efforts to overcome the existing stereotypes result in the marginalization of the population by the state of independent journalist self-censorship, justified by threats, harassment, and accusations of anti-state and anti-religious ideas, groups, and cultures, which defines the limitation to the extent of the public discourse. Journalists reporting on sensitive matters expose themselves to both work and non-work-related danger in the absence of institutional support and backing. These results are a call to action to use human rights-based media training to create more equitable, thoughtful, and inclusive media representation, and to introduce structural changes that guarantee the safety and support of those committed to reporting underreported narratives.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The paper examined the infrastructural and inequity incurred by female athletes in the Pakistani context through interviews with several women in different sports. It was established to have deep socio-cultural constraints, institutional marginalization, economic want, and media silence. Strong patriarchal traditions consider sports to be a male sphere, and their influence on the streets is a conditional menace to feminine purity, which restricts female freedom of movement, material means, and access to facilities. Persistent discrimination, even after overcoming social resistance, includes access to training, financial support, and leadership positions. Symbolic exclusion could be evidenced by the fact that there was a low proportion of women in sports media and policy. Through the wisdom of being resourceful, informational networks, and mentorship, most athletes were able to weather the systemic odds against which they were faced, despite these constraints. This analysis used feminist theories to describe such processes. Radical feminism has emphasised how women's bodies in sport are controlled under patriarchal influence by applying modesty norms, transaction, and controlled mobility. The structures that underlie this marginalization are the economic systems that undervalue the labor of the women in sports, undercompensate them, and do not provide stability in careers. This

reality was brought to light by Marxist feminism. The social constructivism revealed that sports were culturally coded as masculine, and therefore, women participating in the sport were on the outside. Collectively, the views provide a fair insight into the factors that influence gendered sports experiences in Pakistan. Based on these findings, the research suggests the implementation of a gender-sensitive sports policy that could include definite objectives, budgetary means, oversight measures, and an increased presence of females in sports governance. The areas that should be invested in include safe and gender-friendly facilities, specialized coaching, affordable transportation, and financing such as scholarships and sponsorships. Media is also expected to encourage sports among women, teach journalists to be gender sensitive, and emphasize stories of female successes. Sports should be part of gender equity courses, and schools need to carry out awareness campaigns to promote the participation of girls.

Weaknesses of the study are the small sample size (in a multi-urban context) and the qualitative design, which limits generalizability. It also did not include the voices of men in sports, policymakers, and coaches, and complete national data on females in sports. Future research should use longitudinal designs, assess provincial and cross-national comparisons, delve into stress and burnout during this period, and focus on situations that are particularly challenging for marginalized women athletes. Exploring the impact of gender equity interventions and examining how digital media and grassroots activism have strengthened the voices of women in sports are also trails to be explored.

Finally, the results show how critical it is to eliminate systematic discrimination in the Pakistani sports industry. Closing cultural divides and economic disparities, eliminating institutional discrimination, and enabling women to gain more visibility and a voice can help the nation construct a more inclusive sporting culture that values women's talent.

6. References

- Adjepong, A. (2015). Women, gender, and sport in developing countries: A critical review of the literature. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 50(1), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690212466070>
- Ahmed Laar, R., Perveen, S., & Ashraf, M. A. (2022). Young women as change agents in sports and physical activities in the Punjab (southern) province of Pakistan. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 857189.
- Aslam, S. A. (2021). Women and sport in Pakistan. In *Women and Sport in Asia* (pp. 148-156). Routledge.
- BBE Journal. (2024). *Institutional Support and Female Participation in University-Level Sports*. <https://bbejournal.com/BBE/article/view/685>
- Benson, S. (2024). The Value in Sponsoring Women's Football World Cup for Companies.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality*. Penguin Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bryson, L. (1987). Sport and the maintenance of masculine hegemony. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 10(4), 349–360. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(87\)90052-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(87)90052-5)

- Ceccato, V., & Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2022). Fear of sexual harassment and its impact on safety perceptions in transit environments: a global perspective. *Violence against women*, 28(1), 26-48.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). Teaching thematic analysis: Overcoming challenges and developing strategies for effective learning. *The Psychologist*, 26(2), 120–123.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Dawn. (2021, December 8). Breaking barriers. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1594471/breaking-barriers>
- Dawn. (2025, July 12). Women-centric metrics: Nearly 3,000 girls enrolled for sports training. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1916210/women-centric-metrics-nearly-3000-girls-enrolled-for-sports-training>
- DW. (2021, June 11). Pakistan: Female athletes defy odds in a patriarchal society. <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-female-athletes-defy-odds-in-a-patriarchal-society/a-57846399>
- Eime, R., Charity, M., Harvey, J., & Westerbeek, H. (2021). Five-year changes in community-level sport participation, and the role of gender strategies. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, 3, 710666.
- Financial Times (FT). (2024, July 5). The girls are playing football in remote Pakistan. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/fab435d8-558f-4b4a-b564-dbf4ff146369>
- Hargreaves, J. (1994). *Sporting females: Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports*. Routledge.
- Malik, A., & Tudor, M. (2024). Pakistan's coming crisis. *Journal of Democracy*, 35(3), 69-83.
- MDPI – Religions. (2019). Muslim Women and Sport: A Case Study of Pakistan. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/11/617>
- MedCrave Online. (2022). Issues and challenges for female participation in physical activities at the secondary school level in Sargodha Division. *MOJ Sports Medicine*, 6(2). <https://medcraveonline.com/MOJSM/issues-and-challenges-for-femalersquos-participation-in-physical-activities-at-secondary-school-level-in-sargodha-division.html>
- Messner, M. (2002). *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports*. University of Minnesota Press.
- National Journal of Advanced Studies (NJAS). (2024). Social barriers to female participation in Balochistan. *SPARK Journal*, 12(1). <https://nja.pastic.gov.pk/SPARK/index.php/spark/article/view/108>
- Pak.net.pk. (2023). The battlefields of female athletes in Pakistan. <https://pak.net.pk/pakistani-sport-news-pakistans-drama-industry-news/the-battlefields-of-female-athletes-in-pakistan>
- Puthran, A. (2022). *Unveiling Jazbaa: A History of Pakistan Women's Cricket*. Birlinn Ltd.
- Riger, S., & Sigurvinsdottir, R. (2016). Thematic analysis. In L. A. Jason & D. S. Glenwick (Eds.), *Handbook of methodological approaches to community-based research: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods* (pp. 33–42). Oxford University Press

Rodríguez, L. A. O., Fernández, R. G., & Palacio, D. M. (2024). Individual Performance in Women's Grassroots Football: A Physical and Emotional Perspective. *IEEE Transactions on Human-Machine Systems*.

SUIT Journal. (2023). Social and psychological constraints faced by female athletes in Pakistan. *SPARK Journal*. <https://journal.suit.edu.pk/index.php/spark/article/view/638>

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (pp. 17–36). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2>

The Guardian. (2024, July 6). Beating the odds: Three Olympic sportswomen on overcoming poverty, mockery – and small swimming pools. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/jul/06/beating-the-odds-three-olympic-sportswomen-on-overcoming-poverty-mockery-and-small-swimming-pools>

Tong, R. (2013). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.

Yenilmez, M. I. (2021). The impact of media and cultural beliefs on women's participation in sports in Turkey: The challenges faced by Turkish women in professional sports. *Sosyoekonomi*, 29(48), 91-106.