

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating gender and mobility: A qualitative exploration of women's sport participation, health, and sociocultural constraints in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of socio-cultural constraints on women's participation in sports in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, with a specific focus on their effects on sexual and reproductive health. We used a qualitative research design. The data were collected from 20 urban and semi-urban women using purposive sampling techniques, gathering information through interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. We present the findings using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that socio-cultural norms often portray sports as a male-dominated activity, although physical activity is accepted for its health benefits. Women adapt to sports by perceiving them as health-related, usually balancing family and community expectations with their personal goals. The research demonstrates the need for policies that encourage women's participation in sports, ensure access to safe transportation, promote female coaching, and address socio-cultural barriers to enhance women's reproductive health and overall well-being. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [11]: 177-188).

Keywords: Women's Sport Participation, Women's Health, Gender and Mobility, Family Honour, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'impact des contraintes socioculturelles sur la pratique sportive des femmes à Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, au Pakistan, en se concentrant plus particulièrement sur leurs effets sur la santé sexuelle et reproductive. Nous avons utilisé un modèle de recherche qualitatif. Les données ont été collectées auprès de 20 femmes urbaines et semi-urbaines à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage dirigé, par le biais d'entretiens, de groupes de discussion et d'observations sur le terrain. Nous présentons les résultats à l'aide d'une analyse thématique. Les résultats révèlent que les normes socioculturelles présentent souvent le sport comme une activité à prédominance masculine, bien que l'activité physique soit reconnue pour ses bienfaits pour la santé. Les femmes s'adaptent au sport en le percevant comme une activité liée à la santé, trouvant généralement un équilibre entre les attentes familiales et communautaires et leurs objectifs personnels. Cette recherche démontre la nécessité de politiques qui encouragent la pratique sportive des femmes, garantissent l'accès à des transports sûrs, favorisent l'entraînement féminin et s'attaquent aux obstacles socioculturels afin d'améliorer la santé reproductive et le bien-être général des femmes. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2025; 29 [11]: 177-188).

Mots-clés: Participation sportive des femmes, Santé des femmes, Genre et mobilité, Honneur familial et Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, the involvement of women in sports is influenced by socio-cultural norms, particularly purdah and izzat, which regulate their mobility and participation in public life. These norms hinder women's presence in public spaces, curtailing their involvement in sports and adversely affecting their reproductive and psychosocial well-being. Men often perceive sports as their domain, while discussions about women's physical activity usually focus on its health benefits. Mobility restrictions based on gender result in health

disparities, diminished levels of physical activity, heightened stress, and limited choices regarding reproductive health.

In the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, deeply ingrained gender norms have consistently influenced women's participation in sports, highlighting the importance of socio-cultural frameworks.¹ Studies show that purdah, a practice of gender segregation, is closely linked to izzat, a concept of family honor that influences women's physical mobility and public presence.²⁻³ Sports are shaped not only by personal decisions but also by shared moral values, established religious

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convictions, and the societal examination of women's behaviors and appearances.⁴ Investigations reveal that insufficient infrastructure, a scarcity of female coaches, and minimal family support hinder women's participation in physical activities and sports.⁵⁻⁶ Researchers have linked the imposed limitations to adverse effects on women's physical health, psychosocial well-being, and social inclusion.⁷⁻⁸

Despite widespread recognition of these dynamics, significant gaps persist in the current body of work.⁹ Their distinct sociocultural contexts limit our comprehension of how women perceive and differentiate between sports and physical activity. The analysis inadequately explores the intricacies of purdah, izzat, and community norms in real-world scenarios, failing to consider the varied values, aspirations, and experiences that differ across different generations.¹⁰ Studies on women's participation in sports often lack robust sociological frameworks to analyze the interplay between systemic constraints and individual agency effectively.¹¹ Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a comprehensive perspective on the embodied, social, and cultural aspects of women's participation in sports in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.¹²⁻¹⁴

Socio-cultural expectations primarily influence the Global South, particularly Africa, in regulating women's mobility and access to public spaces.¹⁵ In African societies, societal expectations limit women's engagement in physical activity, resulting in poorer health outcomes, heightened stress levels, and constrained reproductive freedom.^{15,16} Comparative studies reveal the connections between gender, mobility, and health, highlighting how these socio-cultural factors impact women's health on a global scale. This investigation seeks to address a deficiency in existing literature by exploring cultural norms, mobility, and health within conservative societies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study examines the strategies employed by women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to navigate socio-cultural constraints and develop effective policy interventions, thereby challenging traditional gender norms. The emphasis is on how habits, access to capital, and sport culture influence women's bodily practices, mobility, and visibility in public spaces. The findings are crucial for developing strategies that promote women's participation in sports and challenge gender norms in a manner tailored to specific contexts. The research is based on Bourdieu's theory of practice.

Sociocultural and structural factors influencing women's sport participation

This study examines four factors influencing women's sport participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focusing on socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, and individual agency, using Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, based on existing literature and field observations.

Gendered Mobility Constraints

Cultural institutions like Purdah impose significant gendered mobility constraints that affect women's participation in sports in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹⁷ Purdah mandates the separation of genders, imposes modest attire requirements, and limits women's presence and mobility in public areas.¹ Restrictions on women's participation in public sporting venues are frequently viewed as a challenge to izzat, the shared honour of their family, subjecting them to societal observation, ethical evaluation, and potential damage to their reputation.¹⁷ Boundaries are created through official channels, like institutional rules that limit women's involvement in sports or public gatherings, as well as unofficial methods, such as community monitoring, gossip circles, and moral oversight by both male and female members of the community. Control over women's bodies and movements acts as a significant mechanism in sustaining wider gender hierarchies.^{1,17}

Cultural conceptions of sport and physical activity

Gender significantly shapes our understanding of sport and physical activity, and it is closely linked to mobility limitations.¹⁸ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) perceives sport as a realm associated with masculinity, esteemed for its competitiveness, public visibility, and physical prowess. Contrarily, women often justify their physical activity engagement for private, health-related, or socially acceptable reasons.¹⁹ Engaging in light exercise or leisurely walks in the home courtyard can be sufficient for maintaining health, whereas participating in competitive sports might be viewed as socially inappropriate or ethically questionable.²⁰ The cultural divide in sports limits women's access and influences how they internalize and navigate acceptable activities, rendering public and

competitive participation both transgressive and a challenge to gender norms.²¹

Intergenerational transmission of norms and values

The passing down of norms and values between different age groups impacts women's participation in sports, showcasing the evolution of gender attitudes over time.¹ Previous generations, shaped by traditional views of femininity and seclusion, frequently emphasized women's roles in the home, modest behavior, and familial obligations.²² Young women, shaped by their education, social media presence, and urban lifestyles, often display more ambitious or equal-minded perspectives regarding gender and sports. Variations in sport participation across generations frequently necessitate the endorsement of parents and older individuals, influencing both attitudes and tangible results.²³ Household decision-making is vital in navigating cultural continuity and change, where generational alignment or conflict greatly influences women's opportunities for participation in sports.¹

Access to social, cultural, and physical capital

The allocation of social, cultural, and physical resources within and among communities is an essential factor that influences women's involvement in sports.²⁴ Social capital encompasses the relationships established through family, peers, mentors, and community allies, providing encouragement, advocacy, and logistical support, such as women attending sporting events together.¹⁷ The concept of cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and symbolic legitimacy in sports that facilitate participation, developed through education, role models, or previous involvement in physical activities. Physical capital includes the tangible abilities for athletic performance as well as the availability of essential resources such as facilities, equipment, safe transportation, and qualified coaches.¹ Disparities in capital intensify the challenges within the sports arena, as women with greater social status, robust support systems, and access to facilities can manipulate restrictive norms more adeptly. In contrast, those without resources continue to face marginalization.²⁵

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu's theory

The analysis employs Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to examine the impact of socio-cultural structures and individual agency on women's

participation in sports.¹²⁻¹⁴ Bourdieu's triad of habitus, capital, and field offers a thorough insight into how gendered practices are reproduced, negotiated, and occasionally transformed within cultural contexts.²⁶ Figure 1

Habitus denotes the enduring framework of dispositions, values, and ingrained orientations that individuals cultivate through extensive socialization within cultural and social contexts.²⁷ The women's habitus in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is influenced by purdah, which entails a gendered spatial practice that necessitates physical separation, modest attire, and restricted visibility in public spaces.²⁸ Beyond clear behavioral guidelines, inherent norms shape women's conduct, notions of propriety, and socially acceptable physical engagement.²⁹ Patterns of behavior represent a historical and cultural framework that impacts women's ambitions in sports, bodily practices, and choices; they function in both a structuring and shaping capacity.³⁰

Capital encompasses both the tangible and intangible resources that individuals can leverage to navigate and shape social dynamics.³¹ This study emphasizes the significance of social capital, encompassing relationships and connections, such as family, peers, and mentors, in facilitating or limiting women's involvement in sports. Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, skills, and recognition that women hold in sports, enabling them to assert a legitimate position within the realm of athletics.³² Physical capital includes the athletic capabilities of the body and the availability of resources such as sports facilities, equipment, and skilled coaching.³³ The distribution of capital is imbalanced, influencing involvement, circumstances, and independence in sports.³²

A field represents an organized social environment where participants, influenced by the inherent logic of the field, vie for status and acknowledgement by utilizing the types of capital that are esteemed within that context.³⁴ The sports landscape in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa intertwines international and national narratives surrounding gender equality and women's empowerment with local cultural norms that emphasize gender segregation, modesty, and the safeguarding of family honor.²³ The participation of women in sports has the potential to empower individuals while also generating sociocultural tension, as it confronts established gender roles and societal expectations.¹ Bourdieu's Theory of Practice is utilized to analyze the creation and continuation of women's sporting practices.¹²



Figure 1: Theoretical framework

The investigation addresses the influence of conservative socio-cultural settings on women's behaviors, examining how access to resources and tactical applications allows certain women to challenge limiting norms, while also considering the role of sport in these interactions, which acts as both a platform for opportunity and a site of constraint. The theoretical framework uncovers obstacles to women's involvement in sports and the tactics they employ to secure access, enriching conversations about gender, agency, and cultural transformation in conservative societies

Methods

Research objectives and questions

The study investigates the gender-specific distinctions between sports and physical activity among women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the impact of purdah, izzat, and community norms on women's mobility and sport participation, and the influence of intergenerational perspectives. The following research questions were investigated: (1) How do women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa conceptualize and differentiate between “sport” and “physical activity” within the socio-cultural framework of their communities? (2) In what ways do the intertwined

constructs of purdah, izzat, and prevailing community norms shape women's mobility and their decisions to engage in sport? (3) How do intergenerational perspectives influence women's attitudes toward, and lived experiences of, sport participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa?

Research design

The study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate the socio-cultural, intergenerational, and structural factors influencing women's sport participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study involved 20 female participants from Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, from March to August 2025. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of participants lived experiences. The study utilized Bourdieu's Theory of Practice to examine the interplay between habits, capital, and sport in shaping women's sporting trajectories.¹²⁻¹⁴

Study setting

The study was conducted in urban and semi-urban areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in northwestern Pakistan known for its conservative socio-cultural structures and religiously inflected

value systems. In specific communities, gender segregation is prevalent, limiting women's physical mobility and visibility in public life. This limitation is due to communal expectations of modesty and honor (*izzat*), making their participation in social, educational, and recreational areas highly contested, especially in areas associated with physical activity or sport. This study examines community attitudes towards women's mobility and public participation in urban and semi-urban areas, highlighting that urban areas provide greater access to educational opportunities, media, and sporting infrastructure. Nonetheless, gender norms continue to influence women's access. Semi-urban contexts exhibit a significant contrast between traditional gendered behavior norms and emerging social change aspirations, providing a crucial comparative dimension to the analysis. The research examined how women navigate cultural codes in their daily lives, especially in sports and physical activity, while also highlighting the uneven opportunities and barriers influenced by geography, class, and generational change. Figure 2.

Sampling strategy and participants

The study involved 20 female participants from urban and semi-urban areas of Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, focusing on women's experiences with sport and physical activity in the region. The study used a purposive sampling strategy to gather diverse data, focusing on intergenerational variation and contextual complexity. Four participant categories were targeted: (1) women actively involved in organized sport, (2) women participating in informal or non-competitive forms of physical activity, (3) women not currently engaged in sport but possessing relevant aspirations or lived experiences, and (4) community stakeholders such as physical education instructors, coaches, and parents. The study recruited participants from various categories, including female Khyber Pakhtunkhwa residents aged 15 and older, to ensure diverse experiences and align with the study's objectives.

The purposive identification of participants gave rise to profound observations about conservative socio-cultural environments. The selection of 20 participants was guided by the concept of theoretical saturation, indicating that additional data collection yielded no new themes or insights. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke demonstrated that following completion of 20

interviews, further data collection did not yield substantial new insights, suggesting that saturation had been achieved. Table 1.

Developing the interview guide

An interview guide was created utilizing Bourdieu's Theory of Practice alongside current research regarding women's participation in sports within conservative environments.¹²⁻¹⁴ The guide examined how women's attitudes, resources, and roles within the sporting arena shaped their practices and experiences. The study integrated theoretical frameworks and existing literature to analyze structural constraints and the strategies employed by women to assert their agency. Academic peers and community advisors evaluated the guide to enhance its contextual relevance. Input resulted in the rewording of questions to eliminate stigmatizing language and ensure respect for local customs. A preliminary test was carried out involving two women who were not part of the main sample to evaluate the guide's clarity, cultural relevance, and the comfort level of participants. Additional enhancements encompassed tools for examining intergenerational dynamics and negotiating community surveillance. The interview guide was designed to combine open-ended, theory-driven questions with context-specific probes. Open-ended questions (e.g., "How do you define or understand sport in your community?") allowed participants to articulate meanings in their terms, while targeted probes (e.g., "How does *purdah* influence your ability to participate in sport?") ensured systematic exploration of the study's core constructs. The guide's depth and flexibility facilitated the emergence of unexpected themes while ensuring coherence with the analytical framework. The iterative process provided adaptability by integrating participant concerns with established theoretical focuses throughout the fieldwork.

Data collection methods

This study collected data from March to August 2025 using various qualitative methods to ensure depth, triangulation, and contextual sensitivity. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data on participants' understanding of sport, physical activity, *purdah*, *izzat*, and community norms. The interview guide, based on Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field, is intended to examine how socio-cultural structures and individual agency influence women's sporting practices.

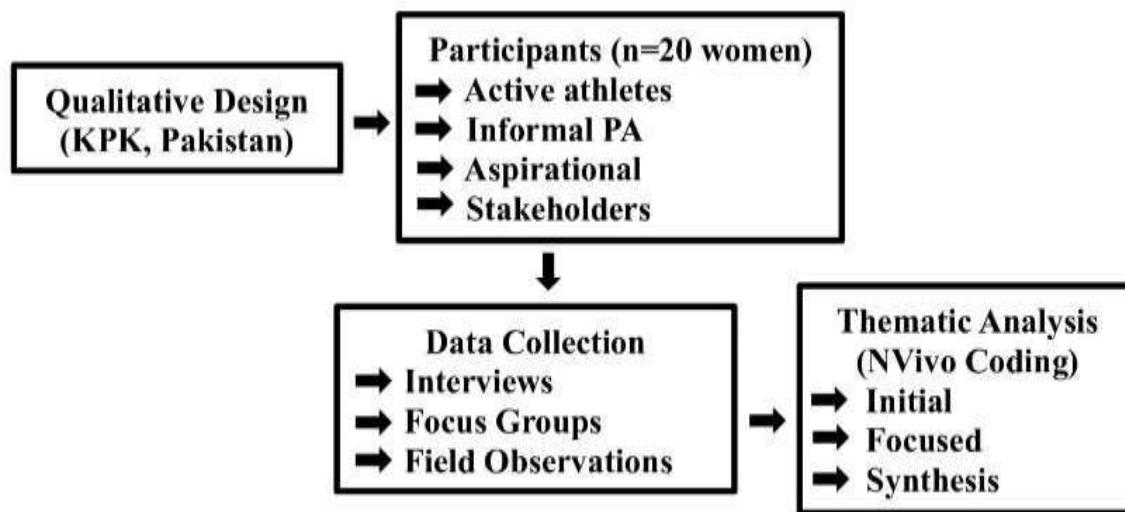


Figure 2: Research design

Table 1: Participant profile overview

| Category | Number of Participants | Age Range | Key Characteristics | Participation Context |
|---|------------------------|-----------|--|--|
| Active in Organized Sport | 5 | 15–25 | - Competitive athletes (e.g., volleyball, athletics). - Higher education/urban. | Schools/colleges, local clubs. |
| Informal Physical Activity | 6 | 20–40 | - Light exercise/walking at home. - Married; cite health reasons. | Homes, private courtyards. |
| Aspirational (No Current Participation) | 4 | 15–30 | - Desire to participate but face constraints. - Mixed urban/semi-urban. | Limited access to facilities/social disapproval. |
| Community Stakeholders | 5 | 30–50 | - Coaches, PE teachers, parents. - Influence norms/logistics. | Schools, community centers. |

The interviews, lasting 45–70 minutes, were conducted in Pashto, promoting inclusivity and authenticity, and they were later translated into English. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted among women of similar age groups to facilitate dialogue on shared experiences, intergenerational differences, and collective negotiation of cultural expectations. The study used field visits to understand community-level discourses and peer group consensus, as well as field observations at sports grounds and training centers to document patterns of women's mobility, participation, and social interactions in natural settings. The study utilized detailed field notes to understand the embodied, spatial, and relational aspects of sport engagement, enhancing its interpretive depth. The interviews and field

discussions were recorded with participant consent, supplemented by detailed field notes, ensuring methodological rigor and preservation of contextual detail. The research team transcribed all interviews and focus groups verbatim, ensuring accuracy by checking transcripts against audio files.

Considering the cultural context and linguistic variety, all interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Pashto, the participants' native language. After the interviews were completed, the conversations were transcribed verbatim. A two-step translation procedure was employed to ensure that the translations were accurate and culturally relevant. Initially, bilingual researchers who spoke both Pashto and English conducted the interviews. Then, a second team member, who spoke Pashto fluently, checked the

translated transcripts to ensure that the idea remained clear and that no cultural subtleties were lost. To ensure the accuracy of the data, the transcripts were also reviewed for consistency across multiple sessions. There were frequent checks for correctness throughout the transcribing process. To ensure that no material was left out or misinterpreted, each transcription was verified against the corresponding audio recordings. The goal of this iterative procedure was to ensure that both language precision and cultural settings were maintained, which are crucial for the validity of the qualitative results.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, following the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to examine qualitative data, highlighting both recurring themes and contextually specific subtleties.³⁵ Thematic development occurred concurrently with ongoing data collection, allowing for the continuous observation of new themes as they emerged. The process validated the theoretical saturation point and reinforced the choice to finalize recruitment. The use of NVivo software facilitated systematic management, coding, and retrieval of data, thereby improving analytic transparency and rigor. The primary author led the coding process, engaging in discussions with two academic peers to foster reflexivity and minimize personal bias. A minimum of two coders independently evaluated the transcripts. We addressed the inconsistencies in coding by fostering agreement and engaging in a continuous improvement process to maintain uniformity throughout the dataset. The investigation employed a combined analytical method, integrating deductive and inductive techniques, informed by Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field.¹²⁻¹⁴ This approach facilitated the emergence of themes based on participants' experiences and cultural meanings within the local context. The coding process progressed through three distinct stages. Initially, coding divided the data into significant units that maintained the integrity of participants' voices. Secondly, focused coding was performed to pinpoint recurring patterns and overarching issues across interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Thematic synthesis combined patterns into advanced analytical categories, offering a theoretically informed and empirically grounded perspective on women's sport participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Reflexive memos were kept

during the analytic process to document theoretical insights, monitor changing interpretations, and critically recognize the researcher's positionality. The thorough application of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor validated the study's trustworthiness.³⁶ Thorough fieldwork, comprehensive data gathering from multiple sources, and validation through member checks significantly bolstered the study's credibility. Detailed accounts of the context, participants, and cultural environments improved the study's applicability, allowing readers to evaluate the significance of the findings in comparable scenarios. Keeping a thorough record of methodological choices and analytical processes guaranteed the study's dependability and its potential for replication. Ultimately, confirmability was tackled through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing with academic colleagues, which contributed to reducing bias and improving interpretive reliability. The approaches utilized established a robust basis for acquiring insightful viewpoints on negotiations in women's sports within traditional socio-cultural contexts.

Ethical considerations

An ethics board approved the study, and participants provided informed consent. Due to cultural sensitivities surrounding women's participation in sports in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the study focused on ensuring that participants felt safe and respected. Confidentiality was maintained, with personal identifiers removed and pseudonyms used in their place. Participants were entitled to withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were designed to be culturally sensitive, and the research team collaborated with local advisors to ensure respect for participants' values and experiences. Field observations were conducted in a manner that did not infringe upon participants' privacy or cause them discomfort. The data collected were kept anonymous to prevent potential stigma or reputational harm.

Results

The investigation reviews four themes derived from interviews and focus group discussions with women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, centering on their views regarding sport, the influence of purdah and izzat, intergenerational dynamics, and the significance of social and cultural capital in influencing participation, emphasizing the intricate negotiations

of agency within restrictive socio-cultural environments.

Conceptualizations of sport and physical activity

Participants in interviews often differentiated between "sport" and "physical activity," with sport usually considered competitive, public, and institutionally organized, while physical activity was associated with domestic or private movements. One university student explained:

"Walking or stretching at home is acceptable for health, but playing volleyball in college is considered inappropriate for girls. For them, that's sport, and sport is for men."

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, specifically the concepts of habitus, field, and capital, helps explain the distinction between sport and physical activity among participants.¹²⁻¹⁴ Women's narratives reveal how purdah and izzat normalize private health-oriented practices while promoting competitive sports as transgressive, thereby internalizing community surveillance and reproducing gendered boundaries.³⁷ Sport in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa challenges traditional hierarchies, with women's presence challenging the dominant association of sport with masculinity and public visibility.^{38,39} Women's strategic framing of physical activity as health-enhancing demonstrates habitus' adaptive potential, allowing them to negotiate limited participation and transform health discourse into symbolic legitimacy. The dynamics depict how symbolic violence, influenced by cultural norms and moral sanction, reinforces exclusion while also revealing areas of agency.¹⁸

Purdah, Izzat, and Community Surveillance

Interviews reveal purdah and izzat as key mechanisms regulating women's sporting opportunities, causing gossip, reputational risk, and family conflict in sports settings. A married participant shared:

"When I visit the playground, neighbors remark that my husband is lacking strength for permitting me to be outdoors. They claim that a woman who runs or shouts disrespects purdah."

Similarly, a 17-year-old participant described moral policing:

"Even if my scarf slips slightly during play, the neighborhood aunties complain to my mother that I

am exhibiting arrogance. It becomes an issue of family honor."

The accounts of women revealing gossip, reputational risk, and moral policing highlight the role of purdah and izzat in regulating women's participation in sports. Bourdieu's framework suggests that these dynamics are symbolic violence, where cultural norms and expectations are internalized and reproduced as natural boundaries of appropriate femininity.¹²⁻¹⁴ Community surveillance enforces women's bodily practices, turning public sporting visibility into a threat to family honor and reinforcing gendered habits that prioritize modesty and domesticity.⁴⁰ In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, sport becomes a contested arena where women's presence challenges the dominant logic of public space and physicality, with purdah serving as a symbolic structure linking bodily conduct with moral worth. The narratives reveal women's resilience in expressing their agency through their embodied practices, such as playing in the playground or adjusting headscarves, within restrictive structures.³⁹

Intergenerational perspectives on women's sport

The study revealed intergenerational tensions in women's sport perceptions, with older women valuing purdah as a symbol of femininity and respectability, while younger participants aspired for greater participation. One mother, reflecting on her daughter's interest in athletics, remarked:

"In our time, girls didn't consider sports; we were taught that a successful girl stays at home. But my daughter sees sport as part of education. I feel proud but also worried about what people will say."

Conversely, a younger participant argued:

"Our mothers accept restrictions because they grew up with them. But we see women on social media and TV playing football and cricket. We want that too. It gives us confidence."

Bourdieu's habitus and cultural capital theories reveal intergenerational tensions in women's perceptions of sport, with older women adhering to purdah as a sign of femininity, reflecting restrictive socio-cultural conditions.¹²⁻¹⁴ Younger women's exposure to formal education, social media, and urban cultural influences enhances their cultural capital, allowing them to see sport as a legitimate means of self-expression and empowerment.^{39,41} Habitus are dynamic and adaptable to changing structural conditions, with older generations often resembling conservative

gendered dispositions, while younger women's aspirations challenge inherited norms. Mothers' ambivalence, while proud of their daughters' ambitions, also signifies their role in mediating the balance between traditional expectations and emerging gendered agency.⁴² Intergenerational differences in sporting attitudes reveal how cultural shifts and resources alter habits across generations, allowing for incremental gender norm transformation.

Access to social, cultural, and physical capital

Access to capital, education, and mentorship significantly influence participation in sports, with women with supportive families having better opportunities to navigate restrictions. A participant from a middle-class family described:

“My father drops me off at the sports complex every week. People talk, but because he supports me, I can continue. Without him, it would be impossible.”

By contrast, a participant from a lower-income background explained:

“There is no female coach in our area, and I cannot travel alone to the city. Even if I want to play, there is no safe way.”

Bourdieu's concept of capital and its uneven distribution across social groups can be used to explain the disparities in women's sporting participation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.¹³ Women with supportive families utilize social capital to access sporting spaces, while education and mentorship provide cultural capital, aligning sport with personal development and knowledge.⁴² The lack of safe transport, female coaches, and facilities reveals a lack of physical capital, disproportionately marginalizing women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.³⁹ Capital distribution in sport perpetuates structural exclusions and shapes women's ability to negotiate gender norms, with some accumulating legitimacy while others face disadvantages due to class, gender, and geography.^{14,43}

Informal negotiation strategies

Women used negotiation strategies to engage in sports, such as practicing early in the morning to avoid visibility or presenting it as a health necessity. One participant noted:

“I tell my family that running keeps me healthy and helps with my studies. When I say this, they agree more compared to if I said, “I want to compete.”

Women's practices of sport, often concealed or viewed as a health necessity, demonstrate the adaptive aspect of habits, where restrictive gender norms create limited participation spaces.¹²⁻¹⁴ Women use health and education discourses to leverage cultural capital, gaining legitimacy within their communities and reducing perceived threats to family honor.^{40,41} The strategies reveal women's daily "tactics" to survive within dominant power structures, without directly confronting the authority of Purdah or community surveillance. Bourdieu's practices illustrate how agents navigate structural constraints in the sport field by strategically adapting their behavior while maintaining social acceptance. Negotiations, while not constantly dismantling symbolic violence, represent incremental resistance that may eventually alter the legitimacy of women's sport participation.^{18,39}

Discussion

This study examines the complex processes in which women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa navigate their participation in sports within the socio-cultural contexts of purdah and izzat. Women's gendered hierarchies shape their perception of sports and physical activity, favoring private, health-oriented activities and denying competitive sports as transgressive. Previous studies have identified sport as a gendered field that heavily regulates women's embodied practices.^{38,39}

Participants in sport view it as a health necessity, demonstrating strategic adaptation aligned with Bourdieu's habitus, allowing women to attain limited agency within restrictive norms.¹⁴ Purdah and izzat are significant symbols of symbolic violence, promoting surveillance and moral policing that restrict women's bodily autonomy.¹ Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power suggests that women's experiences of gossip, reputational risk, and family conflict align with the naturalized boundaries of femininity.¹⁴ The study supports previous research indicating that gender segregation and family honor play a crucial role in regulating women's access to public life in conservative Muslim societies.⁴⁰ Participants' resilience, exemplified by defiance and redefining sport as education, suggests that women, even within symbolic domination, actively reconfigure meaning to maintain their presence in sport.

The study highlights intergenerational tensions in women's sporting practices, with older

women adhering to purdah as a sign of respectability. Education and global sporting culture, in contrast, influence the aspirations of younger women. The intergenerational divergence underscores the dynamic nature of habitus, which continues to adapt despite historical sedimentation and changing capital distribution conditions.¹² Mothers' ambivalence, characterized by pride in daughters' achievements and fear of community judgment, illustrates how cultural continuity and change coexist within family negotiations. The study suggests that generational differences in gender attitudes significantly influence the gradual shift in women's participation in public spheres.^{41,42} Access to social, cultural, and physical capital plays a significant mediating role in women's sporting trajectories.⁴⁴ Women with supportive families and educational resources are better equipped to navigate restrictive environments, while those without these resources face disadvantages, reflecting Bourdieu's concept of equal opportunities. The absence of safe transport, facilities, and female coaches in sports further reinforces inequality, confirming previous studies that infrastructural deficits exacerbate gender exclusions.³⁹ Interventions should extend beyond attitudinal change to include structural reforms that enhance women's access to resources and safety in sporting contexts.

Participants' informal negotiation strategies, such as practicing in less visible spaces, invoking health discourse, and aligning sport with education, demonstrate resistance within restrictive environments, albeit incrementally shifting cultural legitimacy over time. As Thorpe (2009) argues, such negotiations illustrate how women inhabit contradictions, simultaneously constrained by and resistant to dominant gender norms.¹⁸ This study highlights the limited yet meaningful opportunities women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provide for sport participation, challenging its exclusivity as a masculine domain. The study reveals that women's sport participation in conservative societies is not a simple binary of resistance or compliance but instead involves layered negotiations mediated by intergenerational dynamics, access to capital, and symbolic structures like purdah and izzat. Policy interventions should avoid homogenizing women's experiences and recognize the diversity of strategies they use to balance cultural expectations with personal aspirations. Addressing socio-cultural and

structural barriers is crucial for sustainable and equitable change in women's sport participation.

Implications for research

This paper examines the issue of gender and sport within the context of conservative communities, particularly the obstacles that women face when attempting to participate in sports. Future studies should explore comparative case studies from the Global South to expand our knowledge about the convergence of gender, mobility, and health across diverse cultures. The study should investigate how women navigate restrictive environments and examine the informal strategies they employ to participate in sports, despite structural limitations. The study can utilize Bourdieu's theory of practice to investigate how various forms of capital can surmount cultural barriers to women's mobility.

Implications for policy

The research highlights infrastructural and cultural issues in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, recommending policy interventions to improve access to sports and physical activity for women. The community's involvement is crucial in breaking down gendered barriers to movement. Policies should be tailored to local cultural practices, recognizing physical activity as a health and educational right for women. Family and community support, along with collaboration with religious and community leaders, can foster a supportive environment for women in sports. The older generation should be actively involved in discussions about the advantages of women participating in sports.

Implications for practice

The paper emphasizes the necessity for tailored strategies to boost women's participation in sports within conservative societies. The program teaches coaches, educators, and community leaders that sports are not a threat to traditional values but rather a means of promoting health and education. We should implement strategies that empower women by assisting them in navigating cultural barriers and promoting greater access to sports opportunities. Encouraging women to participate in sports, providing safe spaces, promoting role models, and discussing health benefits with families can lead to cultural transformation and change attitudes.

Conclusion

The investigation examines how women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa participate in sports while navigating the socio-cultural constraints of purdah, izzat, and community oversight. The findings indicate that various factors, including established habits, the specific field, and the availability of social, cultural, and physical resources, influence women's participation in sports. Women distinguish between "sport" and "physical activity," conceptualize involvement in terms of health or education, and navigate family and community expectations. Purdah and izzat persist as forms of symbolic control; however, differences across generations, along with the impact of education, social media, and urban experiences, indicate gradual cultural changes that create new opportunities for women's participation in sports. Individuals with robust social and educational support systems are more adept at mobilizing resources and creating opportunities for engagement, whereas those without such resources continue to face significant marginalization.

The findings suggest that targeted interventions are necessary to increase women's participation in sports. These interventions must transcend superficial inclusion tactics and tackle the underlying socio-cultural dynamics and systemic disparities. It is essential for those in positions of authority to focus on ensuring safe transportation, the inclusion of female coaches, and improved access to facilities for women's sports, while also acknowledging the vital role of family and community support. Leveraging current discussions surrounding health and education can position women's sport as culturally significant and socially endorsed. The adaptive strategies employed by women have the potential to transform the cultural acceptance of their involvement in sports. Future investigations should consider intergenerational perspectives and the impact of policy measures on enhancing women's access to capital and sporting opportunities.

Authorship statements

Rizwan Ullah was responsible for the initial draft, conducted interviews, performed data analysis, drafted the manuscript, conceptualized the study, developed the methodology, and wrote the original article. Hongyou Liu supervised the project. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Ethics approval

Approval for ethical considerations was secured from the School of Physical Education & Sports Sciences at South China Normal University, located in Guangzhou, P.R. China. All participants provided informed consent, and their confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study.

Data availability statement

The study's data is unavailable to the public or inaccessible upon request as this information could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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