Participation of Pakistani Female Students in Physical Activities: Religious, Cultural, and Socioeconomic Factors

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Abstract: In sports literature, women’s participation in physical activities has always been characterized as “problematic.” Muslim women’s participation is often considered to be limited by their culture and religion, which also affects their attitude toward physical activities. The purpose of this study is to explore the participation and perceived constraints of Pakistani female students in physical activities, using a feminism-in-sports approach. Semi-structured and informant-style interviews with female students from Larkana, Pakistan, were conducted. The results show that participants either do not practice or participate very little, due to the limitations of socioeconomic factors, religious values, and culture. By exploring the diverse ways in which 20 female students talk about their participation in sports activities, we provide different narratives for sports decision-makers (at the school and government level), parents, and community practitioners (political and religious) to consider and draw upon in their curriculum and policy design, as well as daily practices, to support women’s participation in sport activities.

Keywords: female students; women’s sports; Pakistan; perceived barriers; Islam

1. Introduction

Physical activities play a vital role in people’s emotional, mental, psychological, social, and physical development. Despite general agreement with this concept, many societies have not yet guaranteed equal rights and opportunities for men and women in sport and exercise. Due to cumulative and diverse working environments, sports professionals need to understand how different social and cultural factors can influence individuals. Scholars emphasize that the consequences of not participating in physical activities are not acceptable globally (Yu et al. 2004). There are many studies about women’s participation in physical activities in different countries (Batty and Lee 2002; Yu et al. 2004; Harkness 2012); however, very limited research is available about the issues that influence women’s participation in physical activities in Pakistan (Laar et al. 2019; Nanayakkara 2012). This paper mainly discusses women’s participation in physical activities in Pakistan, and how this is influenced by different social and cultural factors. By adopting the feminism-in-sports conceptual approach, according to Story and Markula (2017), in sport studies, feminist theory identifies the participation of men and women in sports within the hegemonic masculine system of society.

In general, the participation rate of Muslim women in sports is lower than that of women of other religions. Many previous studies, in different religious contexts (Klein 2007; Di-Capua 2005; Mirsafian et al. 2014), focused on the idea that religion imposes many restrictions on sports. In the Pakistani context, Muslim women’s participation in physical activities depends on religious and
cultural constraints (Fazal et al. 2019), and the ethos of college physical education and sports facilities (Laar et al. 2019). Despite these constraints, Muslim women in Pakistan show a positive attitude toward sports (Khan et al. 2012), and religion is considered less of a constraint than other social and economic factors (Laar et al. 2019). However, the society and culture in Pakistan have always been measured through Islamic values (Ashraf 2019). Islam has a greater impact on most aspects of life in Pakistan than in other Islamic countries (Laar 2019; Wilber 1964; Ashraf 2018). It continues to be the dominant factor discussed in the literature regarding influences on people’s lives, particularly the lives of women. Therefore, it is very important to understand how social and cultural factors in Pakistan influence women’s participation in sports, and further provide suggestions with the aim of helping Pakistani society, particularly Pakistani women, to maintain a healthy lifestyle by enhancing their participation in sports. This is the best way for women to realize their freedom and rights and strengthen gender equality in Pakistani society. The broad purpose of this paper is to add to the literature looking at the participation levels of women in Muslim countries, in this case in Pakistan. While a few books and articles have been written from this perspective, especially regarding the participation levels of women from Muslim countries, and elaborating on Pakistan, the list is by no means exhaustive. The current study has the potential to open a fresh understanding of female sports participation in Pakistan and the perceived challenges relating to this, that will serve to illuminate some constructive suggestions and issues, in terms of participation in and development of sport in Pakistan.

2. Women’s Participation in Sports: A Historical Overview

Women’s participation in sports has had dissimilar developments across different regions and countries, which can best be traced through participation in the Olympics. There have been revolutionary developments from the end of the 19th century, predominantly in Europe and the USA. Prior to that, sports were developed by men and for men. The first Olympics in 1896, which did not allow women to participate, is one example that distinguishes the women’s role as applauding the athletes from the spectator stands. At the second Olympics, without the approval of the International Olympics Committee (IOC), organizers allowed women to compete officially in two events, and unofficially in at least 11 sports. In 1928, a long dispute between the IOC, the International Amateur Athletics Federation and the International Women’s Sports Association, was partially resolved when women participated for the first time in the Olympic Games. Since the beginning of the Summer Olympics, women’s participation has increased from 22 participants in two women’s events in the 1900 Olympics (2.2% of total participants), to 5059 participants in 145 women’s events in the 2016 Olympics (45% of total participants). This reveals a massive increase in the number of female participants and a huge development in women’s programs. Therefore, in the presence of frequent and significant opposition to women’s sports, there was a continuous struggle towards increasing the number of women participating in physical activities.

The literature on the problems of women’s participation in sports across the world show diverse sets of challenges that are similar in nature. Women face gender stereotypes and are considered weaker and submissive, and allowing them to participate in sports could make them strong, which seems to challenge male dominance (Messner 1988). Numerous studies on women’s participation in sports (Kara and Demirci 2010; Maher and Thompson Tetreault 1997; Samdahl and Jekubovich 1997) determined that lack of knowledge, lack of time, overcrowding, family and financial difficulties, and a long distance from activity areas were the most significant constraints women faced.

The participation of Muslim women in sports is significantly lower than that of other women, and seems to be problematic regarding various sports (Pfister 2010). As far as Muslim women’s attitudes toward sports and exercise are concerned, religious affiliation, the environment, culture, traditions, and social factors play important roles. Some Muslim countries have not been supportive of women’s participation in sports, regardless of the level of competition; in contrast, some Muslim countries allow women to participate in almost all sports, but also stipulate Islamic dress codes (Mirsafian et al. 2014). Normally, women have very few options for clothing in an Islamic country and wearing revealing
clothes is not encouraged. Sports outfits are one of the major issues constraining participation in sports events, such as the Olympics, for women from Islamic countries. In many Islamic countries, women wear a hijab, covering their entire body except the face and hands, while they can decide if and how they want to cover their hair in other Islamic countries. The formal dress codes in competitive sport do not fully meet Islamic criteria, but most Muslim women athletes decide to wear formal dress, claiming that this does not conflict with their faith. The case of accepting hijab in taekwondo competitions by the World Taekwondo Federation is one of many examples that has spurred debates on respecting every culture in sports, by providing the freedom to wear culturally accepted clothes to compete. However, some federations have strict dress codes; the Modern Pentathlon Federation is one example, prohibiting women from wearing a “burqini,” a swimming outfit that covers the whole body. This has caused severe concerns about Muslim women’s participation in swimming competitions (Pfister 2010). Besides the sports outfit, interpretations of Islamic values, and the cultures of individual countries are other challenges for women’s participation in sports.

3. Women’s Sports Participation in Pakistan

Pakistan, an Islamic country with a 97% Muslim population, provides similar but diverse examples compared to the rest of the Islamic world. In Pakistani society, men dominate in all aspects of life, including sports, like not only other Islamic countries that share a similar faith, but other South Asian countries that share a similar culture (Nanayakkara 2012). Literature on the issue of sports in Pakistan is comparatively limited in its context and in the games it focuses on. The majority of published material is dominated by cricket, especially analysis of the rivalry between Pakistan and India (Nawaz and Hess 2018). However, the academic literature on Pakistan’s participation in other international games, such as the Olympics, is very limited. In the context of women’s participation in sports, it is even more sparse, despite the fact that only 10 Pakistani women have participated in competitions throughout the history of the Summer Olympics, from 1896 to 2016. Only a few studies (Laar et al. 2019; Cailliau 2013; Khan 2007; Nawaz and Hess 2018) have paid attention to the role of women in sports, and constraints that women might face during sports participation. Women’s participation in sports in Pakistan depends on several factors, including interests, abilities and skills, caste, social class, cultural norms, and religious restrictions (Khan 2007; Laar et al. 2019). Cailliau’s (2013) analysis of the reasons for the absence of Pakistani women athletes in the Summer Olympic Games determined that nearly 90% of Pakistani women do not participate in sports, and several constraints, such as lack of money and facilities, family permission, and social, cultural and religious restrictions, play important roles. Though Pakistani law does not forbid women from wearing specific clothing, cultural norms that have been constructed through Islamic values require women to follow several societal and religious traditions (Nanayakkara 2012). Therefore, the main objective of this study is to describe the current situation of Pakistani female students participating in sports activities, in terms of religion, culture, and other socioeconomic concepts that play important roles in women’s participation in sports.

4. Research Design

In order to assess the elements that influence the sports participation of Pakistani female students, qualitative results are provided in the current study. Similar to other studies on women’s experience in sports (Lenneis and Pfister 2017; Mirsafian et al. 2014) and in Pakistani society (Fazal et al. 2019), we conducted semi-structured and informant-style interviews with 20 female students (see Table 1) from Larkana city, which is located in the south of Sindh Province in Pakistan. The students were interviewed in Sindhi (the local language most spoken in the province, and the mother tongue of both interviewees and interviewer) and the interviews were translated into English. The focus on gaining rich information through interviews can be summarized by Rosenthal’s statement, “In order to understand and explain the interviewee’s statements about his or her past specific topics and experiences, it is necessary to interpret some parts of his or her current life and his or her future perspectives” (Rosenthal 2004).
Table 1. Background information of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Anonymized)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Undergraduate Year</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeenat</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakeena</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Botany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lareb</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zainab</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>Islamic studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hareem</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>Physics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zubaida</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sughran</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Mass communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naseeba</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zareena</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batol</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rukhsar</td>
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<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Physics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haseena</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
<td>Physical education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobahar</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farzana</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4th year</td>
<td>Islamic studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Zoology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naila</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Botany</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shabnam</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Physical education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the students were 19–24 years old and they had different academic majors. Notably, an academic gap for women is common in Pakistan (Table 1). Normally, in Pakistani society, it is not easy (for male researchers) to get a female audience. The author received many refusals on their first attempt. This is the reason the author approached the respondents with an official procedure, first contacting the heads of departments, then reaching out to participants with the help of snowball sampling. The interviewees were contacted through letters describing the study and its purpose, making it clear that participation was voluntary. In this study, ethical considerations were followed by ensuring participants’ privacy and confidentiality regarding the research data and their identity or affiliation. Considering the ethics of the study, before the interview, all participants were informed of the theme, scope, and objectives of the study. Our research provides abundant opportunity to understand the current situation of Pakistani female sports participation and its constraints. Notably, this type of data is generally difficult to access in Pakistani society, which makes this material extremely valuable. To conclude the study, suggestions to enhance women’s participation in sport activities are given in detail. This study has also some limitations. First, the participants were all women, talking to a male researcher. Despite the fact that they participated voluntarily, were relaxed while talking to the researcher and seemed to be less conservative, their reflections may contain some restrictions. However, the presence of a female teacher at the time of interview is a reason they did not feel as shy about sharing their experiences with a man. Secondly, participants were from one city and the sample size was small, so they may not be representative of the total population. Thirdly, the study’s qualitative information or analysis might not have comparative value.

A wide range of semi-structured interview strategies (e.g., Cohen et al. 2007; Drever 1995; Foddy and Foddy 1994; Hartas 2015; Fazal et al. 2019; Ashraf 2019) have been adopted, so that research participants can provide detailed descriptions of their experiences and opinions. We also incorporated the informant approach proposed by Powney and Watts (2018) in our interview process. This is an open interview that allows participants to re-describe their experiences. They were encouraged to elaborate on the personal significance and explanations they bring to their experiences, as well as the challenges they face in their daily participation in sports activities. In order to do this, we asked each of them to explain their participation in sports in or out of school, the facilities provided, constraints imposed by parents/teachers/friends, religious and cultural limitations, etc., through common core questions that included the following: Do you think your identity as a Muslim girl has any influence...
on your sports participation? Do you think our society/culture encourages female sports participation? If yes, how? If not, what do you think is the reason behind it? Do you think we have enough facilities for women to participate in sporting activities? If not, what do you think is the reason behind the lack of facilities? Do you face economic problems during participation in sports? Do your family members (especially your parents), relatives, teachers, and friends support your sports participation? Are you presently experiencing any barriers to participate in physical activities? Please explain in detail.

We adopted qualitative, exploratory, and inductive methods of analysis, using thematic analysis (TA), as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Our first step in the analysis was to understand the data in detail by repeatedly reading each interviewee’s answers. In this way, through our analysis, the inherent coherence and integrity of every student’s story could be respected and maintained. Then, we designed the mega-categories or themes according to the comments of all 20 students. Overall, our methods and strategies enabled us to get a better understanding and explanation of participants’ experiences. Finally, after a thorough study of all 20 narratives, we compared the themes in all the transcripts to determine the similarities and differences among them. In the following, we give detailed information about the generalized comments of participants in broad themes (Mirsafian et al. 2014; Fazal et al. 2019; Lenneis and Pfister 2017), including religious and cultural values, economic and career issues, lack of sports facilities, family values regarding physical education, social factors, and personal factors.

5. Research Findings

These are statements of 20 female students from Pakistan who participated in our study, exploring their everyday lives and physical activity practices. The women who participated in this study were Muslim undergraduate students and had some common experiences, including being confronted with religious or cultural limitations that are incompatible with participation in physical activities. There were, however, participants in the study, such as Naseeba and Sakeena, for whom the experience of a lack of sporting facilities was a bigger hindrance (discussed further below). The following section focuses on the students who perceived that participating in sports can conflict with religious, cultural, and socioeconomic related factors.

6. Religious and Cultural Values

Some of the students in the study were strongly influenced by religious or cultural limitations; Nobahar, Sughran, and Zubaida are examples. They talked about perceiving the consequences of misinterpreting the Islamic religion; according to them, there are unwritten rules that are followed, for example, women cannot participate in sporting activities. Most of the interviewees agreed that their religion did not prevent their participation in sports; as Miles and Benn (2016) noted, this is not a consequence of religion itself, but shows that “the cultural requirements of Western and Islamic sports-related environments conflict.” However, some emphasized that, due to certain misconceptions, influential religious persons do not really support women’s participation in sports. For instance, Nobahar argued, “They (society members) think that female students should study rather than wasting their time on it. May be our society and culture does not support female participation; because of wrong interpretation of religion and self-made society norms.”

Nobahar has a firm belief in Islam and most of her knowledge of the religion has been transferred through traditions. Nobahar has very positive relationships with her family members. Some of the students, including Nobahar, due to cultural limitations, have experienced neighbors gossiping about them when they go out for sports. The unsupportive behavior of society members became a barrier to sports participation for her. The histories of other students also contain stories regarding challenges they face when trying to participate in physical activities, exemplified by the following account:

“As far as Islam religion is concerned, it does not prohibit us to participate in physical activities, but still our society and culture think it is not good that females go out and
Six participants out of 20 responded relatively similarly to Sughran. She has never participated in any official or unofficial organized physical activity in her leisure time. Sughran spends two hours every afternoon reading the Quran and other Islamic books, so she is very certain about the dos and don’ts of Islam. She knows the importance of being in good physical shape according to Islam. Sughran’s argument is similar to that found in previous studies (Lenneis and Pfister 2017; Walseth and Fasting 2003). Two of the other students in the study, Zubaida and Naila, also faced similar limitations. Zubaida’s and Naila’s stories are fascinating, as they really want to make society aware of the health benefits of participating in sports, especially for women.

Zubaida argued, “Major problems which I/other girls are facing in sport participation are: society is not supportive to female sports and our culture does not encourage female sport participation, we should educate our society as a whole and bring the opportunities to the female students. ([Make them]) aware that physical activities are very important to make individual’s healthy body and active mind, make him/her smart and positive minded.”

Naila reported, “In our society it is not considered good for females to participate in outdoor activities frequently; to overcome these issues we should conduct inspirational/motivational programs for parents and society members, [make them] aware about the physical and mental benefits of physical games may work in enhancing female sport participation and in our culture it should be supportive like others.”

The idea that exercising is important according to Islam, but the cultural requirements of Western and Islamic sports-related environments conflict with religion (Islam) has been supported by many scholars and by Muslim feminists who work for women’s right to participate in sports (Abdelrahman 1992; Al-Qaradawi 1992; Miles and Benn 2016). These findings are also comparable with studies such as Laar (2019), Walseth (2015), and Lenneis and Pfister (2017); according to those studies, religion does not seem to have a large influence on women’s sport participation. On the other hand, these findings contradict other studies suggesting that Muslim women’s participation in sports is challenging due to religious restrictions (De Knop et al. 1996; Zaman 1997). According to our findings, the assumption that Muslim women cannot participate publicly was dispelled by the students mentioned so far.

### 7. Economic and Career Issues

According to Ahmad (2015), low economic status or a lack of sponsors can result in terminated participation in sports. Economic status and power have a huge influence on the objectives and aims of sport organizations in society (Ritzer 2007; Bairner 2007). Financial problems are mostly responsible for the lack of participation in sports, especially concerning women. In our study, Haseena experienced severe sanctions, due to a lack of economic support. Her family has a very low income. Her father is a government employee with a limited salary and has five mouths to feed. They lack the resources to start or sustain physical activities. The family does not have a large lawn at their home to exercise. When replying to my question about whether she had the financial support to afford the sports expenditures she likes to participate in, Zareena said, “I love playing badminton, but I do not think I can continue participating longer. It is not like football or cricket, you just buy equipment once and can play several times. I think badminton rackets, shuttles, and badminton court maintenance is too expensive. I do not have any financial support from my parents/school or other sponsors.”

According to previous studies (Johnson et al. 2001; Shores et al. 2007; Walseth and Strandbu 2014), the economic status of the family is an important factor that plays a major role in sports participation, especially for girls. According to the observations of Wilson and Spink (2006), economic problems/less financial support can lead to nonparticipation. The highest-ranking jobs are not related to physical education and sports in Pakistani society. In Pakistani culture, a position related to physical education is not preferred. In Pakistan, people mostly prefer government jobs, and they think a career in a
sports-related field is not as promising as in other fields. Another student from the current study, Haseena, faced career challenges when selecting physical education (P.E.) as a major. Her story seems interesting in the way that she has been criticized for being a woman selecting a P.E. major.

Haseena reported, “Whenever someone knows that my major is P.E., the very first reaction I see on their faces is a smile (in a critical manner), and say they do not think this major has good scope in a career sense. Parents hardly support their children to choose physical education as a major field. We hardly find PhDs in such field, especially females.”

No fewer than five students with different majors raised the concern that P.E. (as a major) is underestimated in our culture and society, especially for girls. Haseena’s view of P.E. as a career fits well with the findings of Yu et al. (2004). According to that study, most schools do not even have compulsory physical education classes. This type of practice restricts most students from participating in sporting activities and keeps them unaware of their benefits.

8. Lack of Sporting Facilities

Having enough facilities is pivotal to participation in sports. Some of the participants said that a lack of facilities was their primary reason for not participating in sporting activities. Naseeba stated, “There are not enough facilities in schools or in public places to participate in sports, especially for girls. The reason behind it is very obvious, that the government, media, and other institutions are not taking interest in female sport participation so they are not giving any attention for facilities as well.”

Naseeba has four members in her family; her father is an assistant commissioner and her mother is a housewife. According to her, she is interested in sports and her parents are supportive, but she would like to have separate facilities for women at schools or nearby. Due to the lack of desired resources, she does not really want to participate in physical activities. Another student who faces a lack of facilities is Sakeena. She thinks there are not enough women-only facilities and she does not like to participate with boys. According to her, boys are too violent when they are playing football at school. Sakeena thinks there should be separate physical activities for women, because she is afraid of being hit by the boys when they are playing together. She said, “I like sports physical activities, especially badminton and football. Sometimes I also play at my home, but I do not dare to start outside with my friends and colleagues because of lack of facilities in our environment for females.”

These comments were echoed by four other students who seemed disturbed by the lack of facilities. Sakeena’s parents do not allow her to participate in physical activities because of the intermingling of sexes; they think it is not good for her, because in most of Pakistani society, women should not be seen doing sports with their male counterparts. If separate facilities, such as indoor grounds, gymnasiums, or separate swimming pools for women were provided, then her parents might allow her to participate in sports. These findings are supported by Walseth (2015), Lenneis and Pfister (2017), and Amara (2013), who found that a gender-segregated environment was a necessity for women’s participation in sport. Similarly, according to observations by Flintoff and Scraton (2001), and Wright (1995), due to the presence of boys using the same facilities, Muslim female students do not want to participate in sports, and feel conscious of their body shape and skill level.

9. Family Values about Physical Education

Mainly (but not exclusively) in Pakistan, women are not allowed to indulge in outside activities without their parents’ permission. Hareem has five members in her family and most of them are businessmen. She received most of her education in private institutions. She thinks that the teachers are good enough to encourage girls in sport’s participation, and would like to participate, but “I stopped taking part in sporting activities, and the reason is I did not find any support from my family members to participate in such activities.”

Hareem has a very complicated relationship with her family. She is often in conflict with her father over issues of gender and what is appropriate behavior for young girls. Hareem used to play cricket after her (female) teacher convinced her mother to let her participate. Afterwards, her father
complained that she spent too much time on cricket, and this was not suitable for a young girl. He also complained that Hareem was mixing too much with boys and that this was not good for her. Her father asked her to leave cricket. She sent a message to all parents who do not allow their female family members to participate in physical activities and training: “Parents should develop a sense of trust in their children, give them separate facilities and a safe environment, and should encourage their girls to participate in sports. Motivation and encouragement is a very important key to enhance participation of females in sports, it is very good for physical fitness and health for females, they must participate.”

In the same context, Fatima wanted to join a badminton club, but her parents did not think it was suitable for girls. In the current study, most of the students (including Fatima) reported that their families directly or indirectly prohibited their participation in sports, or put obstacles in their way. Fatima said, “I love to play badminton, but because of my father I do not participate in events in school or college level. Before my father went to Saudi Arabia for performing Hajj ([pilgrimage]), sometimes I play with my schoolmates, but after my father returned from Hajj he became stricter.” She just plays at home with her brother now. She further added: “My brother will go to university for his further studies soon, and then I will also stop playing at home. If only my parents allow me, I can play in any competition and can win some prizes.”

Fatima’s and Hareem’s experience of sanctions was also discussed by Muslim feminists such as Mernissi (1991), who used their knowledge of Islam as a source, and point of departure, in their struggle for Muslim women’s rights. In addition, similarly to Walseth (2006), the findings of the current study conclude that the parents of Muslim women constrain their participation in physical activities, whereas Knez et al. (2012) observed in their study that parents of Muslim women not only support them, but also take them along to participate in such activities.

10. Social Factors

People’s negative attitudes toward women’s sports in society affects the sports behavior of interviewees. The work of Dagkas et al. (2011) highlights that schools are the only place where some Muslim women can experience formal participation in sports. However, female students reported that, under some unwritten regulations, the government, school management and society (unofficially), do not support women participating in sports. This can be exemplified by comments from the students in this study, who are disturbed by these social issues.

Rukhsana said, “I quit! Because of less support from the society and school, I was kept away from sports. Science students need to study more and sports can disturb their time. Keeping this in mind, I was not officially allowed to participate in any sports/game at school.”

Rukhsana mostly studied in public institutions, and her studies did not have any connection to sports. As science requires intense focus, the school did not allow her to join any extracurricular sports activities. The histories of other students also include stories of the challenges they faced when trying to participate in sports. This can be illustrated by the following description:

“I live in a small town where girls normally do not go out for sports. My husband does not support me for such activities now. I have responsibilities in my home, it’s hard for me to participate in sports” (Amina).

The way in which most of the students’ participation in physical activities is limited due to a lack of facilities, supports much of the sports literature, which positions Muslim female students as “problematic” (Carroll and Hollinshead 2017; McInerney et al. 2000). Furthermore, this research challenges some of the previous findings. According to Knez et al. (2012), female students were encouraged, and provided with facilities to participate in a variety of summer and winter sports.

11. Personal Factors

Some students described personal factors that influence their attitude toward sports participation. They reported that sports are hard for them and that they lacked interest, and some of them possessed
traditional attitudes. The following are examples of how the students in this study were influenced by such factors. By request of the students, their names are kept confidential.

“I do not think sport is necessary for human beings. Besides, I have not heard of any other benefits of sports, except wearing fashionable sportswear and making new friends. I have no interest in participating in sport activities. I am super healthy because I am Muslim and I offer prayer five times daily, which keep my mind and physics perfect and healthy.”

This student goes to the mosque once a week with her family. She has a good relationship with her family. She has few friends. They also have no sports background. She described her mother as the most important person in her life. She thinks whatever her mother thinks about her must be best for her and her future. If her parents do not allow her to do an activity, she can accept this, and it is not a big deal for her. One more student in the study shared her ideas about the value of P.E. in her life. She is not interested in attending physical education classes, because she thinks she needs good grades at school and cannot waste time on other activities. According to her, she could not find any practical benefit of sports participation. She further added,

“I do not like to participate in sport, to be honest. I prefer not to eat any food for 10 days instead of participating in P.E. for one hour, because sport is hard. I don’t like to do the hard motions. Other activities, such as walking in the streets and window shopping with friends, are more attractive for me.”

The lack of interest in participating in such activities by these two students and other women could be the result of less motivation, or a lack of awareness about the health benefits of sports participation. When looking at the cultural limitations in their surroundings, students do not like to start physical activities; for example, Sughran in this study did not dare to start participating, when she heard the comments people made regarding young girls participating in physical activities. The ideas of the two students mentioned above resemble those of some studies focusing on a lack of self-interest in physical education and laziness. According to the finding of Mirsafian et al. (2014) and Laar (2019), female students do not think participating in physical activities is important, and according to them, there are not many benefits of participating in sporting activities.

12. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research provides a new perspective for understanding Pakistani female students’ perceived restrictions on sports participation, especially regarding the Islamic religion, with the help of empirical investigation. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the current situation of participation in sporting events, and the constraints on this, through a feminism-in-sports theoretical lens. According to the current study, the sanctions that female students experience are diverse, ranging from being the subject of gossip, or an unsupportive society/family/teachers, to cultural limitations and a lack of facilities. Cultural limitations influence the other factors, as well. Because of the unsupportive culture in this society, many parents and teachers do not encourage women to participate in sports. These obstacles led students to quit playing sports in public places; in many cases they do not even dare to start, as two of the students (Sughran and Sakeena) in this study described. The results of this study reveal that the majority of female students have a negative attitude toward sports and exercise (Mirsafian et al. 2014). This study shows that other members of their ethnic group, including their parents, and limitations, due to a lack of separate facilities, restrict their participation in sports (see the comments of Haseena, Sakeena, and Naseeba). In the account presented above, it is members of society and cultural restrictions that sanction participation, and operate like guardians of ethnic boundaries. In other cases, neighbors take on this role. Some of the students have experienced neighbors gossiping about them; this was described by Nobahar, Sughran, Zubaida, and Naiila (Miles and Benn 2016; Laar 2019; Lenneis and Pfister 2017). Previous studies have focused on the role of parents as agents limiting their daughters’ participation in sports (Carrington et al. 1987). The study presented here shows that
parents do sometimes constrain their daughters from participating in sports, often due to a lack of separate, female-only facilities, as in the case of Hareem and Fatima. Their participation in sporting activities is influenced by a lack of parental support (Walseth 2006; Knez et al. 2012). The rest of the participants face socioeconomic problems, for example, Rukhsana and Amina experienced sanctions by their teacher and husband, respectively (Carroll and Hollinshead 2017; McIverney et al. 2000); Zareena feels economic pressure (Johnson et al. 2001; Shores et al. 2007; Walseth and Strandbu 2014); and others do not participate due to a lack of motivation and interest (Mirsafian et al. 2014; Laar 2019).

Of the constraints pointed out by the participants, as discussed above, most of the students experience cultural limitations, a lack of support from society and their parents, and a lack of facilities. As far as religion is concerned, the idea presented by the participants is that exercising is important according to Islam, and, because the idea that Islam encourages people to keep fit supports the view of many scholars, Miles and Benn (2016) emphasized that lack of participation is not a result of religion itself, but shows that “the cultural requirements of Western and Islamic sports-related environments do not match”. According to the ideas of Benn et al. (2010) and Benn and Ahmed (2006), the unwritten and misleading rules regarding the Islamic religion should be vigorously challenged; Islam is not an anti-sports religion. Islamic feminists support this assumption, emphasizing that “Islam is a supportive religion that supports women’s participation in sports activities” and stating that there is no provision in the Quran prohibiting women from participating in sports, as long as they meet the requirements in terms of modesty (Hargreaves 2007; Jawad et al. 2011).

It is recommended that Muslims themselves attach importance to educational programs and future sports policies within the Islamic community, and that sports policy-makers cooperate with Islamic leaders and members of the Islamic community, to avoid the problems participants are currently facing (Benn et al. 2010). Additionally, health and physical educators should change their narrow, stereotypical thoughts. Secondly, where required, teachers are advised to discuss specific needs and requirements with female students, and contact parents and local Islamic leaders (with the consent of students) to determine the location and purpose of sports activities in the syllabus (Arar and Rigbi 2009; Nakamura 2002). Apart from this, teachers (and school government bodies) should provide weekly sports opportunities for all female students. The government should provide funds for the sports sector to improve sports facilities for female students, and efforts should be made to ensure that women hold more major administrative positions. In addition, sufficient infrastructure should be maintained for easy and safe access, and there should be privacy in the facilities and changing rooms, as, according to the current study, this is a severe problem for women. Sports culture should be revived; the government should revisit the sporting framework of Pakistan. Otherwise, the country’s immense potential in sports can never be realized. Parents, society members, and teachers should be aware of the benefits of sports; only then can they encourage sports for all (Laar 2019). Although the issue of the media was not raised by our respondents, it directly and indirectly influences women’s participation in sports. In sports, there are no role models, such as famous and popular female athletes and champions, because the media only reports on the competition, training, and daily lives of famous male athletes. According to Laar (2019), the media fails to present the real picture of Islam—it is not an anti-sports religion. This matters, as representation of sportswomen surely would impress many of their fans, which would be helpful in enhancing female sports participation in Pakistan. Most importantly, women themselves should learn from the feminist theory that they should stand up for their rights in this male-dominated society. They should stand firm and not let themselves be weakened by the tactics of other society members.

Lastly, since sport is a mirror of society, there can be radical changes only if the general attitude of Pakistani society toward sport changes, and both society and sport as a social institution are further modernized. Sport in Pakistan does not have to follow the Western pattern; it can preserve its national characteristics based on long-held traditions. However, an internal transformation of the traditional view that Islam is against female sports, and the corresponding cultural limitations, should lead to enhanced participation in both society and sport. Discovering the reason behind these views could
be a challenge for future studies, with larger samples, but it might be explained by the fact that, as a religion, Islam is open for individual interpretation.

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