

**SOCIAL GENDER EQUALITY IN THE FIELD OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND
SPORTS**

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Annotation: Social gender, class, race, ethnic origin, religious beliefs, political views, culture, physical disability, age, and many other factors represent interrelations reflected at the macro level through sport and at the micro level through physical education classes, which serve the function of reproducing prevailing societal values and transmitting them from generation to generation. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that physical education and sport can transcend traditional practices woven with social gender codes to become a field that ensures equality, embraces diversity, and opens the door to change. The formation of such a comprehensive and inclusive structure is only possible through the re-interpretation and reconsideration of educational components - curriculum, educational environment, teachers, learning materials, school administration, parents - overcoming gender discrimination. In other words, physical education and sports activities can be restructured to a level that provides social gender equality and justice. Thus, the individual is enabled to discover their body, freely express their thoughts, and comfortably exhibit their physical practices. Otherwise, physical education and sport may remain fields hosting many forms of discrimination such as sexism.

Keywords: Physical education, sport, social gender, education, society.

Introduction

In the final quarter of the 20th century, when the distinction between biological sex and social gender became more clearly recognized, the field of education-like many others-entered a phase of critical scrutiny through the lens of gender. The idea that differences between men and women in personality, intellect, and behavior stem solely from biological factors-rather than social experiences shaped by family, culture, society, and politics-was increasingly called into question. The central question addressed in this article is whether education and its components continue to reproduce entrenched patterns of gender discrimination, or whether they offer a framework for deconstructing such inequalities. For instance, do schools serve as institutions that legitimize dominant ideologies, including those related to race, gender, and class? In recent years, efforts aimed at ensuring equal educational opportunities, particularly through gender-sensitive approaches, have brought greater visibility to the role of gender in education.

It is widely acknowledged that eliminating gender inequality in education requires, at a minimum, guaranteeing access to schooling for all children-especially girls-regardless of their social, cultural, economic, ethnic, racial, or class backgrounds. Beyond access, educational content must be enriched to reflect gender equity, textbooks should be stripped of content reinforcing gender hierarchies, teachers must be educated on what constitutes gender discrimination, and school events should be designed to include all participants equally. These are essential steps toward realizing equality of opportunity in education [1].

Nevertheless, despite such efforts, it is evident that traditional practices privileging one gender over others still persist, and new questions and challenges continue to arise. This suggests that strategies such as increasing girls' school attendance, revising curricula to remove gendered content, raising teacher awareness, and appointing more women to school leadership positions are not sufficient on their own to eliminate gender discrimination in education.

Therefore, we must return to the fundamental question: How should education be defined, what should it include, and what should it exclude in order to avoid reinforcing gender-based discrimination? True transformation is possible only through an approach that does not ignore or deny the relevance of gender. Yet, what complicates this discussion is the paradoxical role of education-while it appears to promote gender equality on the surface, it may simultaneously contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchal codes [2].

For instance, while launching a campaign to teach girls how to read and write is undoubtedly a significant step forward, how should we interpret the fact that their participation in the educational process often leads to the formation of a model of the "quiet, obedient, polite, modest, successful, well-behaved girl," whereas boys are associated with traits such as "rebellious, outspoken, carefree, and brave"?

To what extent does education contribute-either directly or implicitly-to the internalization and normalization of gender-based divisions of labor in everyday life? Clearly, it would be incorrect to generalize these dynamics to all students or apply them uniformly across the entire educational system. The point being made here is that while certain reforms aimed at promoting gender equality in education have shown partial effectiveness, they remain insufficient in fully resolving the underlying problem.

In today's world, numerous critical questions must be discussed, such as: How are schools as physical and social spaces being designed in this century? How does the "rationality" of these public institutions intersect with gender? Which gender is more likely to be marked as successful or unsuccessful in fields such as sports, mathematics, science, technology, and engineering? Why do girls, often unconsciously, feel the need to exhibit masculine traits in competitive environments? And to what extent are success, achievement, competition, motivation, and academic advancement gendered experiences? [3]

Thus, in the relationship between education and gender, conflicts between school culture and girls' sense of identity, and tensions between societal expectations and girls' authentic aspirations, further deepen the existing problem. Notably, physical education and sport have been identified in several studies as fields that reproduce gender inequality, reinforcing the arguments outlined above [4].

A gender perspective on physical education and sport

Does sport have a gender-or should it? Can we speak of sports that are inherently masculine or feminine? As a field centered on the body, the connection between sport and both biological and social gender is undeniable, as is its association with concepts such as strength, power, success, competition, ambition, skill, and efficiency. A fundamental question arises: Does physical education and sport reinforce patriarchal ideology within the subject?

In recent years, growing global interest in health, the emergence of regulatory reforms, and the influence of women's movements have led to increased female participation in sports. However, it is widely acknowledged that this growth is not uniform across societies and cultures, does not always lead to positive experiences, and may not be sustainable. For example, although the proportion of female athletes in the Olympic Games rose from 14.6% in 1972 to 45% in 2016, men remain more active than women in sports-even in economically developed countries-sustaining the gendered association between sport and masculinity. The persistence of this view

is strongly influenced by the content of physical education curricula, teacher attitudes, school administration, student outcomes, and educational materials [5].

To eliminate binary notions such as smart–emotional, strong–weak, fast–slow, muscular–delicate, and active–passive, we must internalize and adopt the idea that biological sex is not destiny. A second consideration is intersectionality: students may face discrimination not only due to their gender, but also because of their social class, race, or ethnic background. A student who experiences gender-based domination and simultaneously belongs to an economically disadvantaged class may be subject to double discrimination.

Examining the historical development of physical education reveals numerous examples of such inequalities. Wright explains that the types of games and events boys participate in differ according to their social class and ethnic origin. In this framework, boys from the white middle and upper classes are educated to assume leadership roles, while boys from working-class backgrounds are socialized to be obedient and disciplined [6].

The design dimension of education involves identifying what gender model a student has adopted, exploring it closely, assessing their level of awareness, and engaging them in critical discussion of the issue. The aim is to develop the student's critical thinking and support their self-awareness. Teachers can guide students to reflect on dominant gender stereotypes-using techniques such as brainstorming-and help them question representations in sport. This pedagogical approach is referred to as deconstructive pedagogy.

Methodological dimension

The methodological dimension refers to the application of teaching techniques and strategies during physical education lessons to encourage both girls and boys to actively participate in sports, develop positive motor skills, and improve their sense of self-efficacy and competence. Particular attention should be given to motivating girls or boys who are marginalized within predominantly male groups, creating safe and inclusive spaces where they can move freely, and supporting them in overcoming stereotypes. Implementing teaching methods that acknowledge classroom differences can help prevent the internalization of labels such as “shy,” “insecure,” or “weak.” In this sense, gender equality can be strengthened through diverse instructional strategies [7].

Curriculum dimension

This dimension involves emphasizing strategies, topics, tools, and activities that do not reproduce gender discrimination. For example, a curriculum that encourages girls to focus solely on fitness and boys on football, or one that promotes using separate equipment for each gender, may undermine equal access to sport and reinforce stereotypes. It is essential to design inclusive programs that provide equal opportunities for all students to participate in various forms of physical activity.

Relational dimension

The relational dimension refers to the quality of communication between teachers and students, aiming to foster students' positive self-perception, motivation to learn, and acquisition of social skills. The stronger the bond between teacher and student, the easier it becomes for students to overcome challenges they face. One effective approach within this dimension is the narration technique, which allows students-especially those facing discrimination-to share their experiences and seek resolution. In addition, classroom discussions on gender and sport, gender representation in physical activity, and the male-dominated nature of certain sports disciplines help students develop values and emotional skills such as empathy, confidence, respect, awareness, and equality [8].

Reflexive dimension

This dimension centers on the teacher's attitudes and awareness regarding gender. It goes beyond merely treating male and female students equally; it emphasizes the teacher's critical consciousness about how physical education and sport can challenge gender stereotypes. Teachers must recognize that sport is a powerful cultural field that plays a key role in transmitting societal values across generations. This requires critically re-evaluating both theoretical and practical aspects of physical education to avoid reproducing gender discrimination. In doing so, the physical education class becomes a space not only for movement but also for critical reflection and transformation.

Conclusion

Physical education and sport represent a critical domain through which students can explore and understand themselves in a multifaceted and holistic way-physically, emotionally, academically, intellectually, socially, and psychologically. This field allows individuals to share and express their physical experiences "in front of others or together with them," to demonstrate their bodily abilities with freedom and confidence, and to accept and understand themselves through their bodies. In this sense, physical education creates a space of presence and self-expression, far beyond mere physical movement.

However, participation in physical education and sport-its form and frequency-can be shaped by intersecting factors such as class, race, gender, and culture. This may result in unequal access and barriers to self-realization, particularly for students from disadvantaged or marginalized groups.

So, what approach should be taken? If physical education is defined and implemented from an inclusive and comprehensive perspective, it can become a safe and empowering environment for any student who has experienced discrimination. Otherwise, a setting is created in which the body is denied, leading to lifelong shyness, fear, and issues of self-doubt.

Common stereotypes-such as the belief that muscle development in female students compromises their femininity; that certain sports (e.g., those involving reproductive organs or breasts) are risky for women; that girls are inherently weaker and cannot perform as well as boys; that they have thinner bones and are more prone to injury; or that sports like football, wrestling, boxing, basketball, judo, and karate are "male-only" disciplines-reinforce gender-based discrimination in sport and obstruct the ontological development of identity. These beliefs construct sport as a domain showcasing male athleticism, while coding the female body as weak, delicate, and injury-prone. As a result, gendered power relations in sport become sharply visible-one body is elevated, while the other is diminished.

Physical education and sport are not only capable of reproducing gender-based discrimination-they also hold the potential to eliminate it. Of course, the latter should be the priority. To achieve this, it is essential to ensure active participation of all genders, though numerical equality alone is not sufficient to eradicate discrimination. The key lies in developing gender awareness among teachers, school administrators, and parents, and transferring this awareness to students.

Rather than viewing sport as inherently masculine, we must consider the interests and needs of girls, provide them with leadership opportunities, and support their engagement in sports based on their own preferences, without assigning specific sports to either gender. Curricular content should encourage discussion around the relationship between sport and social gender, foster values such as empathy, awareness, and respect, and avoid using gender-segregated equipment or reinforcing discriminatory language such as "don't play like a girl" or "hit like a man."

The physical design of sports spaces should not prioritize the dominant gender-for example, schoolyards should not be constructed solely around football fields. Collaborating with parents to raise awareness of gender equality and highlighting the benefits of sports participation for both boys and girls is also essential for building a fair educational environment.

In an educational setting where students develop their personal identities and physical-mental well-being, the teacher plays the most fundamental role. Regardless of the teacher's gender, their words, gestures, teaching materials, and methods serve as bridges for conveying and reinforcing social and cultural codes. Thus, supporting all students equally in sport-related activities is a concrete step toward achieving gender equity.

Indeed, when all students collectively engage in physical activities during physical education classes, it represents a vision of unity across cultural diversity, abilities, gender, beliefs, and other differences. A teacher who embraces this diversity as valuable content takes a vastly different pedagogical approach from one who-consciously or unconsciously-privileges a single gender, class, or voice within a homogenous group.

Therefore, physical education should not be evaluated solely from a biological or physical standpoint, but also from philosophical, cultural, sociological, and psychological perspectives, through an interdisciplinary lens.

In conclusion, physical education and sport have the potential to become spaces where discrimination is actively challenged and positive transformation is achieved through deliberate pedagogical practices. Sport should not be seen as exclusive to one gender or as a domain of male monopoly, but as a human-centered field that values and reflects diversity. With new research and inclusive practices, sport can be expanded and reimaged as a tool for equity and social change.

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