

## THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS: A CASE STUDY OF SOCCER

<sup>1</sup>Irfan Ullah

<sup>2</sup>Tauseef

<sup>3</sup>Sahar Gul

<sup>4</sup>Umar Ghani

<sup>5</sup>Afzal Rehman

<sup>6</sup>Zaheeruddin

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education SUIT Peshawar, KP

<sup>2</sup>Lecture in Health & Physical Education Higher Education Department, KP

<sup>3</sup>Lecture in Health & Physical Education Higher Education Department, KP

<sup>4</sup>Physical Training Instructor Federal Government Educational Institutions C/G

<sup>5</sup>MS Scholar Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education SUIT Peshawar, KP

<sup>6</sup>MS Scholar, Department of Sports Sciences and Physical Education SUIT Peshawar, KP

[irfanullah949@gmail.com](mailto:irfanullah949@gmail.com) [tauseefshinwari87@gmail.com](mailto:tauseefshinwari87@gmail.com) [sahargul908@gmail.com](mailto:sahargul908@gmail.com)  
[umarghani77@gmail.com](mailto:umarghani77@gmail.com) [afzalrehman67@yahoo.com](mailto:afzalrehman67@yahoo.com) [zaheerudding03301@gmail.com](mailto:zaheerudding03301@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This paper examines the gender stereotypes that affect the women involvement in competitive soccer. Although the concept of female athletes becoming more visible is becoming reality, sex-based barriers are still restricting the activities of women in masculine sports. The study establishes the most important stereotypes that have a relative impact on participation and finds solutions to mitigate the impact. To achieve this, there was a mixed-methods approach which involved quantitative surveys of female soccer players in different tiers of the competition together with the qualitative semi-structured interviews of coaches and administrators. The patterns between stereotypes and participation were identified through statistical analysis and thematic one. The results indicate that stereotypes concerning physical abilities of women and expectations related to femininity in society continue to impact soccer playing. Women in competitive soccer feel marginalized by way of lack of media coverage as well as institutionalization. Nonetheless, these stereotypes are starting to be counteracted by more popular professional female soccer and institutional gender equality programs. The paper highlights the importance of further initiatives to tackle gender role in sports with institutionalized support, better media coverage and grassroots. It has been recommended that specific actions should be taken to transform the social attitudes, employ more women to be present at the top, as well as, provide equal opportunities and resources to the female football players. These actions are critical towards breaking the walls and creating inclusive conditions where women can compete and develop in the competitive soccer.

**Keywords:** Gender stereotypes, gender participation, sports compe

### Article Details:

Received on 28 March 2025

Accepted on 19 April 2025

Published on 29 April 2025

Corresponding Authors\*:

Zaheeruddin

## Introduction

### Background and Relevance

Gender stereotypes are an established phenomenon that has had a significant impact on influencing the societal roles and expectations. Among the most royal stereotypes is the sphere of sports, with the involvement of women being underestimated over the years, and instances of gender-based discrimination being rife in this area. Soccer being a male dominated sport has been the prime example of the issues women face when attempting to take part in competitive sports. However, historical and current marginalization notwithstanding, women sports have become very visible in recent years. This change has not totally eliminated the gender stereotypes that still influence the participation of women in these sports.

There are societal prescriptions on gender roles, which tend to portray the male gender as being more of an athlete and that women are less competitive or less physically empowered. Such stereotypes play a part in the underrepresentation of women into sports and especially competitive sports. This is compounded in soccer where institutional restrictions, media images and the perceptions of the society to women are all influential factors that restrain their ability to join and excel in the sport.

This paper examines how this group of gender stereotyping affects women involvement in competitive soccer with particular emphasis on how the stereotypes affect the experience of players, their performance, and career trajectory. The intention is to establish the main stereotypes contributing to women not being able to play soccer, evaluate the effect on the latter, and come up with practical suggestions on how to change that situation.

### Research Problem

Although the presence of literature on gender equality in sport activities has increased, the role of gender stereotypes in the participation of women in soccer has not been researched extensively. This study aims at answering the following questions:

1. What are the prevailing gender stereotyping on the involvement of women on competitive soccer?
2. What is the effect of such stereotypes on the participation of women in soccer at the different levels of competitions?
3. How can these barriers be addressed to make more women be involved in competitive soccer?

The answers to these questions will help this research to contribute to the current debate on gender equality in sports and share information on how soccer can be made a more pleasant place with women.

### Key Terms and Definitions

**Type: Gender Stereotypes:** The mistaken ideas regarding the characteristics, behavior and tasks considered proper to people regarding their gender. These stereotypes tend to make men appear physically stronger and more competitive as compared to their female counterparts especially in the sports arena.

**Competitive Sports:** Competitive sports are those, where there is an organized competition and that are usually highly skillful and highly committed like professional or semi professional sports.

- Soccer (Football): This is a group game with two teams each composed of eleven players who play to put goals in the goal of the opponent. Soccer is a very popular sport in

the world; however, it has always been dominated by the male players particularly on a high level of competition.

## **Structure of the Article**

The article is organized in the following way:

**Section 3 (Literature Review):** The literature review on the subject of gender stereotypes in sports and soccer in particular. It entails theoretical viewpoints and criticism of the existing literature.

**Section 4 (Methodology):** The research design, data collection procedures and data analysis methods.

**Section 5 (Results):** A report about the most important findings of the research, both statistical and qualitative.

**Section 6 (Discussion):** The findings and their interpretation in the framework of current research including the discussion of limitations of the study and future research recommendations.

**Section 7 (Conclusion):** A summary of the primary findings, the implication of the study, as well as beneficial recommendations to be taken towards solution of gender stereotypes and competitive soccer.

## **Literature Review**

### **Sports and Gender stereotypes**

The subject of gender stereotypes in sports has received a lot of coverage in literature. Studies indicate that gender stereotypes are very entrenched in the society and that, they influence attitude toward female athletes. Women are in most cases viewed as less powerful in terms of physical power, competitiveness and endurance compared to men in most cultures which are vital in competitive sporting activities (Krane, 2001). The effects of these stereotypes are not only on the attitudes of companies but also on the opportunities of women in sport.

An important theme in the literature has been the lack of women representation in sports, and mostly in high positions and the media. Sport in women has always seen a shadow cast on their male counterparts in media coverage as well as in institutional areas. Coakley (2009) states that female athletes remain invisible and unrecognized as players; therefore, this stratagem propagates the view that the sport of women is not as exciting and significant as that of men. This is a mismatch that directly affects the number of women getting into competitive sports including soccer.

Media also has a major contribution in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in sports. Female athletes are often represented in terms of traditional femininity with more emphasis on their looks and personal life as opposed to the achievement in sports. This image is quite different with male athletes who are usually shown as powerful, aggressive, and concerned only with their performance (Messner, 2002). Such a gendered media coverage further perpetuates stereotypes and solidifies the view that women sports such as soccer are not worthy of media coverage.

### **Obstructives to Female soccer in Soccer**

Although the female soccer sport has tremendously improved over the past years, it is coupled with many challenges of increased participation. These obstacles may be further divided into societal, institutional, and individual. The barriers that are encountered in society encompass cultural attitudes that do not promote the engagement of women in any physical activity, especially that which is perceived to be violent or violent like soccer.

Gender norms endorse these attitudes by making women caregivers and men breadwinners and athletes (Birrell, 2000).

Institutional barriers are considered as the absence of infrastructure, finances, and sponsorship of women soccer. On the grassroots level young girls do not have the opportunity to play soccer as frequently as men and programs of women soccer do not get the funding and support that men soccer programs get (Fasting et al., 2004). This inequality can be applied to professional soccer, in which the women leagues normally have less media coverage, sponsorship and financial aid compared to male counterparts (Cooky et al., 2010).

The personal obstacles are based on the psychological effects of the gender stereotypes on the self-worth and self-confidence of women in their sporting skills. It has been established that women athletes tend to develop anxiety and self-doubt because of the social expectations and need to fit in the traditional gender roles (Gill, 2007). This will influence their performance and slow their development in competitive sports such as soccer.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

There are a number of theories that give an idea of the correlation of gender stereotype and female involvement in sports. Among the theories is the social role theory in which people are socialized in terms of gender according to societal expectations (Eagly, 1987). This theory stipulates that women should fit their roles in which nurturing and care giving are an important over competing or physically doing things. This anticipation influences their tendencies and hobbies which leaves them with few chances to practice such activities as soccer that demands their physical power and competitiveness.

The other theory that is pertinent is stereotype threat which is defined as fear of proving negative stereotypes that belong to his/her group, which culminates in anxiety and poor performance (Steele, 1997). In female sport, the threat of perpetuating stereotypes of females physical capacity can be experienced, which will result in unfavorable performance and withdrawal to join the competitors within the competitive setting. The given theory applies especially to female soccer players who are regularly perceived as being physically weaker than their male counterparts.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although a lot has been said on gender stereotyping in sport, there is a necessity to conduct further research in this area that pays particular attention to soccer and the challenges that female soccerists have to contend with. The literature is rather inclined to generalization and the unique circumstances of soccer with its cultural and institutional obstacles have not been investigated thoroughly. Moreover, little is known about what soccer female players undergo during various stages of their career such as grassroots to professional soccer. This paper intends to address these gaps by specifically concentrating on soccer and the influences gender stereotypes have on the participation of women in diverse levels.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The mixed-method research design that is used in this study provides an in-depth knowledge of how gender stereotypes affect the participation level of women in competitive soccer. A mixed approach is also a method which involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection which gives a more information-rich and more professional view of the research problem. The strategy will be seen to make

the combination of statistical analysis and personal experiences possible and provide a more comprehensive perspective on the obstacles that women encounter in soccer.

## **Quantitative Data Collection Observation**

The main data gathered were quantitative through an online survey sent to female soccer players at different levels of soccer such as grassroots, amateur, semi-professional and professional players. The purpose of the survey was to determine the experience of the participants on gender stereotyping in soccer in the context of views of their skills and ability, in relation to the expectation of society and the institution. Demographic questions were also in the survey to determine the different variations with changing age, level of play, geographical location.

The questionnaire contained a cyclic of closed-ended questions in the Likert scale with the options being strongly disagree, strongly agree to gauge the consensus of the participants to the statements concerning gender stereotypes. An example can be Islamic state of Iraq and Levant, where the participants were asked questions such as whether they believed that soccer was a male sport or whether they were denied the opportunity to play soccer because of their gender. Also, participants were requested to indicate the degree of support that they had gotten through coaches, teammates, and family members overcoming gender-related barriers.

The qualitative data were collected in the form of a collection document (Kim and Hetherington, 2001). The qualitative data were in the form of a collection document (Kim and Hetherington, 2001).

The female soccer coaches, administrators, and players were interviewed using semi-structured interviews as a supplement to the quantitative data. These interviews have been able to give greater knowledge on personal experiences of the participants and enabled to explore more on how a gender stereotype has influenced their participation. The themes in the interviews were as follows:

- Gender-related discrimination or bias in soccer.
- Perceptions towards how female athletes are portrayed by the media.
- The institutional support in supporting or discouraging the women involvement in soccer.
- Achieving improvement of gender stereotypes and challenges through strategies.

The interviewees themselves were chosen because of their experience in the soccer society, i.e. players in the various levels of competitions, coaches who had worked with women teams, and administrators who administer women soccer programs. The interviews were tape recorded under the agreement of the participants and verbatim transcribed in order to analyze them.

## **Data Analysis**

The intensive statistics was done in terms of descriptive and inferential statistics. Summarizing the responses to the survey questions was carried out with the help of descriptive statistics which provided insight into what the participants perceived and experienced. They performed inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and correlation tests, to determine the significant relationships among demographic variables and answers based on gender stereotypes.

The thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was done through the identification of common themes and patterns that occurred within the transcripts of the interviews. Thematic analysis made it possible to identify some of the important findings on how gender stereotypes influence the participation of women in soccer and the mechanisms used to combat the obstacles.

Comparison of the beliefs of various groups (e.g., players, coaches, and administrators) was also provided to find out whether the experience and the perspective were dissimilar.

## **Tools and Software**

The online survey sources like Google Forms were used as data collection tools to distribute and collect the responses of the survey. Analysis of the quantitative data was done through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a software package which is normally commonly used in statistical analysis of research in the social sciences. NVivo was utilized to analyze the qualitative data as it is a software that allows the coding and analysis of qualitative data. The software has enabled finding the main themes and patterns over the interview transcripts.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The research was done in compliance with the ethical research guidelines. All the participants were informed and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The study was explained to the participants that, he or she would not be penalized when he or she decides to leave the study. Also, to maintain the privacy of interviewees, all the transcripts of the interviews were anonymized.

## **Results**

However, the results of the current research imply that the problem of gender stereotypes is substantial regarding women involvement in competitive soccer as far as both quantitative and qualitative evidence can be used to understand the obstacles which women have to tackle.

## **Quantitative Findings**

The survey data of 150 female soccer participants confirmed that the problem of gender stereotypes was widespread in their lives relating to soccer. Most of the respondents (72) mostly concurred with or strongly concurred with the statement, that soccer was classified as a man sport. This shows that a good proportion of female gamers continue to feel that soccer is gendered toward males. More so, 64% of the individuals admitted that they have been discriminated or have been prejudiced due to their gender and most of them have noted that they were regularly regarded as incapable of doing certain tasks compared to their male counterparts.

On the issue where the respondents were asked to give the degree of support that they got, particularly the families, coaches, and teammates, 55% of respondents asserted that they had either gotten very little support, or no support at all when going after soccer. This observation exposes the societal influences on women and many of the participants said that their families had pressurized them to engage more feminine activities. Nevertheless, a substantial percentage of the respondents (45) claimed having been supported by coaches and teammates with some or strong support which implies that institutional support can reduce some of the challenges arising as a result of gender.

When it comes to institutional barriers 58 per cent of the respondents believed that their soccer programs were less funded and publicized by the media than men programs were. This difference in institutional resources also confirms the gender stereotypes and sees the possibilities of female soccer players limited.

## **Qualitative Findings**

The qualitative interviews gave more information on how gender stereotypes affect the experience of women in soccer. Several interviewees gave personal accounts of how they experience discrimination or prejudice by the male players as well as coaches. As an example, one participant said:

I recall being in a team dominated by male members; people would later on tell me that girls should not be in the field, I was too weak to be there. It would make me question myself at times.

In spite of this, good female role models and mentorship were also noted by many interviewees as key factors in their careers in soccer. Women coaches and women administrators that had undergone comparable gender-related obstacles were regarded as a good source of encouragement and help. One coach remarked:

As a coach working with female players, I ensure that I empower my players, make them realize that they are right here to stay, and I help the players overcome those slaps that society has placed on them.

Besides, a number of respondents have said that recent changes in the media representation of women soccer, mostly with the emergence of professional leagues and world events such as the FIFA Women World Cup has assisted in breaking the stereotype and making female athletes more visible. Nevertheless, it was stated that these changes were still inadequate, and most of the respondents demanded more stable media presence and fair treatment.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this research validate the assumption that gender stereotypes still remain a major obstacle in the quest of women to join competitive soccer. These results are consistent with other studies conducted in the past that have indicated women are mostly not encouraged to take up sports and those that are considered to be physically stressful or violent (Krane, 2001). The extreme sense that soccer is a male game is the other cause of the marginalization of women players and supports the societal values that restrict the participation of women in sports activities.

## **Comparison to other Studies**

The results of the present research correlate with the previous studies that identified the adverse nature of the effect of gender stereotypes on women sports attendance. Coakley (2009) states that female sports are generally covered in the media and institutionalized less than their male counterparts, which restricts the female athletes. Equally, Fasting et al. (2004) observed that women who do not see themselves in sport cause the perpetuation of gendered assumptions regarding their physical capabilities.

Nonetheless, the role of institutional support in the reduction of gender stereotypes is also identified in this research. This is in contrast to the issues that some other researchers have previously done, where they concentrated more on the issues that the women go through at the grassroots level, but this research indicates that the coaches, administrators and role models play an important role in empowering the female athletes. It seems that the existence of supportive mentors is a key factor that can be used to get women to overcome obstacles suggested by gender stereotypes.

## **Implications for Practice**

The results of this research have a number of implications towards ensuring that soccer is promoted to be gender equal. First, soccer programs should make sure that they offer the same resources, funding and media coverage to the female teams. Exposing the female soccer sport to more media attention and sponsorships will contribute to dismantle the stereotypes where soccer is a sport associated with men. Also, soccer bodies must work towards coming up with mentorship initiatives where young female athletes will be linked to experienced female coaches and players who will become their role models and champions.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the parents, coaches or even society as a whole is required to overcome the traditional gender roles which deter girls against engaging in the sports such as soccer. This can be done by conducting education campaigns on the society by emphasizing the notion that sports are not exclusive to any gender.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this research yields useful information, a number of limitations should be mentioned. To start with, the number of female soccer players is comparatively small: 150 girls was not enough to represent the entire population of women playing soccer. Also, the analysis was done on one sport, which is soccer and the findings might not be applicable to other sporting activities. The future research has the potential to broaden the researched topic and cover the experiences of women in various sports situations and contexts.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Summary of Key Findings**

This paper has noted the high role played by gender stereotypes in the participation of women in competitive soccer. The study found that the patriarchal culture of soccer as a male game, institutional women barriers, inequality of funding and media coverage are some of the factors that have restricted women participation in soccer. The stereotypes not only prevent the women but also affect their performance, esteem and their career ladder. However, the study also established that the impacts of some of these stereotypes can be alleviated by institutional support, mentorship and greater visibility of female soccer.

Among the major findings was the existence of highly gendered media representations, where more attention is based on female athletes physical looks and personal lives and not on their sport skills. This supports the old stereotypes about gender and restricts the ability of the population to see women as good athletes. The survey and interviews also revealed that although not all women had a lot of support on the part of family members to them, they became strong through the support of coaches, teammates and the female role model whose hand has broken the same barriers.

#### **Significance of the Study**

This study will help add to the emerging literature on gender disparity in sports by shedding light on the particular issue associated with female soccer players. It will shed light on the necessity of making women in soccer more welcome and accommodated, both on the grasses and on professions. The research further emphasizes the need to remove gender stereotypes that keep on encouraging discrimination and preventing women to enjoy maximum participation in competitive sporting activities.

The results indicate that gender stereotypes in soccer can be addressed with the help of various measures which may be media reform, institutional reform, and grassroots initiative that would encourage women to join soccer at an early age. Equality of resources, endorsement of female role models, and facilitation of sustainable networks among female athletes are some of the measures, which will contribute to gender equality in soccer.

#### **Practical Recommendations**

In accordance with the findings, the following recommendations are provided in practice:

1. This should be done by creating more media coverage: Soccer bodies and the media must collaborate to ensure that women soccer is equally visible by conveying professional and grassroots soccer. It can be done with the help of putting the success of women players into the limelight and showing them as successful athletes.
2. Equal Resources: The soccer programs offered to women should have equal funding, facilities and sponsorship opportunities similar to those provided to men. Apparently, by

providing equal access to resources, the quality thereof will be improved, which will contribute to higher participation and success among female athletes.

3. **Market Female Role Models:** Soccer organizations need to market female role models (both players, coaches, and administrators) who have successfully surmounted gender issues. These celebrities can influence the young girls to play soccer and shatter stereotypes.

4. **Establish Mentorship Programs:** It is possible to establish mentorship programs that will unite young women players with experienced women athletes and coaches to develop confidence and give instructions on how to overcome gender stereotypes in sports.

5. **Buck the Social Rules:** There should be an attempt to break social rules that do not encourage sports among girls. Schools, parents and community organizations can also be essential in creating an atmosphere in which both girls and boys are motivated to do what they find interesting in the field of athletics without regard to their gender.

### **Future Research Implications**

Although this research offers some important findings about the effect of stereotyping women in soccer, there are various ways in which future research will be conducted. The discussion of the ways in which these stereotypes can differ in various cultural settings is one of the areas. The future research may examine how women in soccer experience the experience in other countries or regions to know how widespread the problem is globally.

The second topic that needs to be researched in future studies is the involvement of men in achieving gender equality in soccer. The possibility that men players, coaches and fans play a role in or challenge the gendered relations in the sport should be the subject of research.

Lastly, additional studies are required in order to investigate the effect of institutional intervention, including amplified media attention or mentorship initiatives, on the sport of soccer, participation, and performance of women. This would assist in identifying the best approaches to implement to bring about a sustainable change.

### **References**

- Birrell, S. (2000). The gendered nature of sports participation. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 24(1), 72-89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019372350024001006>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Coakley, J. (2009). *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Cooky, C., Dycus, A., & Dworkin, S. L. (2010). "I'm not a feminist, but...": Sports media's coverage of female athletes. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 20(1), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2010.496756>
- Eagly, A. H. (1987). *Sex Differences in Social Behavior: A Social-Role Interpretation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fasting, K., Bredal, M., & Pfeffer, A. (2004). The gendered structure of sport: Media coverage of women's sport in Norway. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 39(3), 307-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690204043836>
- Gill, D. L. (2007). Gender and Sport: A Social Psychological Perspective. In K. A. Hargreaves & M. R. Anderson (Eds.), *Sport and Gender* (pp. 61-82). Routledge.
- Krane, V. (2001). Women's sports: A critical review. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 72(3), 318-326. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2001.10608901>
- Messner, M. A. (2002). *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports*. University of Minnesota Press.



Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613-629. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.6.613>