



Empowering Women through Sports: Pathways to Achieve SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)

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Abstract

The current study will look into how far sports can be used as a transformational tool to address gender equality and reduce inequalities, as a part of SDGs 5 and 10. Precisely, the research assesses the impact of Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) on Women Socio- Economic Empowerment (WSE), Self-Empowerment (SE) is the mediating construct, and Institutional Policy Support (IPS) is the moderating variable. The quantitative data was collected through a structured survey that was delivered to 309 female respondents living in Lahore, Pakistan, who represent both university and community-based athletes. The analysis that was conducted using the SmartPLS 4.0 showed that ASO and SSI contribute positively to WSE indirectly and directly via SE. Additionally, IPS enhanced the mediating role of SE, which emphasizes the central role of institutional structures and enabling policy in enabling gender empowerment in sports. The results suggest that the combination of sport access in women, empowerment, and inclusive policies enables that women get confident, become leaders, and economic agents. This study augments the theoretical discussion on empowerment by bringing together Social Role Theory and Empowerment Theory thus, placing sports as a multidimensional process of social inclusion and equality. Pragmatic implications suggest that policy-makers and schools and universities should give priority to gender-sensitive sports programs so as to ultimately empower women and bolster their social inclusion.

Keywords: Sports Empowerment, Gender Equality, Social Inclusion, Institutional Policy Support, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 & 10), Women's Socio-economic Empowerment

1. Introduction

The escalating global discourse on gender equality and reduced inequalities, encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 10 respectively, increasingly recognizes sports as a potent, yet often underutilized, instrument for societal transformation ([Chong et al., 2022](#)). Sport serves as a unique arena where disparities in pay, discrimination, and opportunities between genders are frequently observed, making it a critical lens through which to examine broader societal inequities ([Indelicato, 2025](#)). However, it also presents an unparalleled platform for fostering empowerment, challenging established norms, and promoting inclusivity, thereby directly contributing to the targets outlined in SDG 5 and SDG 10 ([Rossing et al., 2024](#); [Sarabi et al., 2025](#)). This paper explores various pathways through which women's engagement in sports can be leveraged to achieve these Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing the critical role of strategic interventions and policy frameworks. Specifically, this study will analyze the impact of sponsorship, media representation, and grassroots initiatives in advancing women's sports and, consequently, gender equality and reduced inequalities within and beyond the athletic sphere. Furthermore, this research will delve into the economic implications of sponsorship disparities and their effect on the growth potential and financial stability of female athletes and teams. Despite a growing recognition of the commercial and social value of sponsoring women's sports, significant disparities in financial investment persist, hindering their development. This imbalance curtails the visibility of women's sports and limits the capacity for female athletes to achieve financial stability and growth. This disparity is particularly evident in the disproportionately low investment in women's sports compared to men's, despite the former's demonstrated potential for social impact and market growth. This review therefore aims to analyze current sponsorship trends in women's sports, identify opportunities for growth, and provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders, including athletes, sponsors, and policymakers ([Elyasi, 2024](#)). Additionally, the symposium aims to contribute to this discourse by examining how gender dynamics within sport environments are shaped by cultural norms and institutional policies, offering diverse perspectives on empowering women in sport through presentations that explore reproductive rights, identity construction, and relational transitions in coaching ([Schmid et al., 2024](#)).

Moreover, it highlights the need for a collaborative approach among key stakeholders' corporate sponsors, sports organizations, media outlets, non-profits, and athletes to strategically address existing disparities and leverage untapped markets. This includes exploring emerging regions and niche sports as avenues for strategic sponsorship, alongside the strategic use of digital platforms and social media to enhance visibility and engagement. By fostering such collaborations, the aim is to not only boost financial investment but also to drive societal change by promoting gender equality and challenging established stereotypes within the broader sports

ecosystem. Despite these advancements, persistent challenges, such as significant disparities in financial investment, media coverage, and public perception, continue to impede the full realization of women's sports potential ([Yingnan & Wang, 2023](#)). These disparities underscore a critical need for strategic interventions that go beyond traditional approaches to sponsorship, aiming to cultivate a more equitable and sustainable landscape for women's sports globally. This paper re-evaluates methodologies for addressing such inequities, proposing a multifaceted approach that incorporates insights from diverse stakeholders to identify effective strategies for advancement ([Lebel et al., 2021](#)). This includes a focus on innovative sponsorship models that extend beyond conventional branding, embracing social impact and long-term athlete development as core tenets. Such models often involve leveraging digital platforms and social media to amplify reach and engagement, thereby enhancing the visibility and public perception of women's sports. The symposium further aims to foster inclusivity and ethical practices in sport psychology by integrating cultural issues into knowledge production and practical aspects of empowerment, thereby transforming cultural norms and institutional policies ([Christensen et al., 2024](#); [Rossing et al., 2024](#)).

Central to this approach is a cultural praxis heuristic, which endeavors to transform gender dynamics within sport environments by integrating cultural considerations into both knowledge production and practical empowerment strategies ([Schmid et al., 2024](#)). This holistic framework aims to systematically dismantle existing barriers and create a more equitable sporting landscape for women, acknowledging that disparities extend beyond financial aspects to encompass media representation and public perception ([Elyasi, 2024](#)). This comprehensive strategy ensures that efforts to empower women in sports are not only financially supported but also culturally resonant and ethically sound ([Christensen et al., 2024](#)). By addressing these multifaceted challenges, stakeholders can collectively contribute to creating a sports environment where women not only achieve excellence but also inspire broader societal shifts towards gender parity ([Rossing et al., 2024](#)). This necessitates a critical discussion on theoretical and practical approaches to address the multifaceted challenges women face in their pursuit of excellence within sport. The concept of cultural praxis, therefore, becomes a pivotal tool for fostering inclusivity and addressing these systemic inequities within sports psychology, ultimately transforming gendered spaces within athletic contexts. This framework integrates cultural issues into knowledge production and practical strategies, promoting inclusivity, cultural safety, and ethical practices in sport psychology. This approach specifically recognizes systemic injustices in the creation of gendered spaces within sports and seeks to dismantle these through a comprehensive cultural praxis heuristic.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Foundation: Sports as a Catalyst for Gender Empowerment

This section examines how engagement in sports can serve as a powerful medium for challenging traditional gender roles, enhancing self-efficacy, and promoting leadership skills among women, thereby contributing to broader societal empowerment. It delves into the

theoretical underpinnings of how sport participation can foster resilience and agency, particularly within historically marginalized groups. Furthermore, this section explores how sports can act as a critical site for developing systemic resilience against gender-based discrimination and violence, fostering an environment where authenticity and inclusivity can thrive ([Rossing et al., 2024](#)). This includes analyzing how cultural sport psychology can provide frameworks for understanding and addressing the unique challenges female athletes face, moving beyond male-centric models to celebrate differences in female sport ([Fraser & Kochanek, 2023](#); [Schmid et al., 2024](#)). This expanded perspective acknowledges the intersectionality of identities, examining how race, socioeconomic status, and disability further influence the experiences of women in sports ([Seechung & Guinto, 2024](#)). It emphasizes how critical race theory and feminist mentorship practices can inform culturally competent service delivery for athletes from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, this section will investigate the efficacy of interventions designed to counteract gender stereotypes within athletic contexts, aiming to cultivate a more inclusive and equitable sporting environment for all participants ([Vázquez et al., 2023](#)). In doing so, it is imperative to acknowledge that the pursuit of inclusivity extends beyond gender, encompassing all intersecting identities that shape an athlete's experience within sport. Specifically, cultural sport psychology offers a critical lens through which to explore systemic issues such as sexual exploitation, highlighting how power dynamics and existing structures perpetuate abuse within athletic environments ([Fisher & Anders, 2019](#)). This broader understanding enables the development of targeted interventions that not only protect athletes but also promote systemic change to prevent future exploitation. Building upon this, an intersectional lens is crucial for understanding how various forms of marginalization, including race and gender, converge to shape women's access to and experiences within sport, particularly in the development of social capital ([Young et al., 2024](#)). This perspective highlights how systemic discrimination, rooted in intersecting identities, can significantly impede access to resources and opportunities within sport, thereby affecting social capital development. Moreover, a feminist analysis reveals how unchecked hierarchies reinforce harmful societal norms and contribute to the expansion of corruption beyond monetary transactions, encompassing any misuse of power within the sports ecosystem ([Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025](#)). Therefore, recognizing and addressing these multifaceted power dynamics is essential for fostering ethical governance and ensuring equitable participation in sports ([Clay et al., 2024](#)).

2.2 Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Women's Empowerment

Despite increasing participation, persistent inequities in collegiate sport access, particularly concerning gender, race, and socioeconomic status, continue to impede comprehensive empowerment ([Johnson & Newton, 2020](#)). The underrepresentation of women in highly competitive sports, despite enlarged access to general physical activities, underscores a significant disparity ([Evans & Blagdon, 2024](#)). These disparities are often exacerbated by deeply entrenched gender inequities in contemporary society, which manifest as insufficient training conditions, inadequate support infrastructure, and policies that inadvertently prioritize male-

centric models in high-performance contexts. Such systemic biases often limit opportunities for female athletes to advance their careers, acquire leadership roles, and gain equitable recognition, thereby hindering their full empowerment within the athletic sphere ([Blinde et al., 1994](#); [Wilcock et al., 2024](#)). This situation highlights how sport policy can be manipulated to serve neoliberal agendas, wherein competitive success and records are prioritized over equitable development and justice for female athletes, thereby reinforcing historical and cultural forms of oppression ([Santos et al., 2024](#)). This prioritization often overlooks the broader societal benefits of female participation in sport, such as enhanced mental and physical well-being, and perpetuates a cycle where female athletes' experiences and needs are marginalized ([Fraser & Kochanek, 2023](#)). Furthermore, power asymmetries, rooted in patriarchal and capitalist systems, not only lay the groundwork for corruption but also sustain and exacerbate existing disparities, reinforcing systemic inequities within sports. This often leads to a neglect of duty by sports entities to protect athletes, allowing abuse of power to become ingrained within sporting cultures, sometimes unconsciously replicated. Recognizing such abuse and misuse of power as outcomes of poor institutional dynamics is critical, as it allows for interventions addressing root causes rather than individual incidents ([Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025](#)). This entrenched power imbalance extends to the sponsorship landscape, where women's sports consistently receive significantly less investment than men's sports, further limiting growth and exposure ([Elyasi, 2024](#)). This disparity in investment not only hampers the financial viability of women's sports but also restricts media visibility and the professional development of female athletes, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation and marginalization. This persistent marginalization is further compounded by competitive formats in women's sports that may hinder skill development and competitiveness, thereby necessitating tailored youth programs to foster equitable opportunities and impact high performance. Such an approach requires a deconstruction of existing inequities and a critical examination of how sports systems are organized, as well as an exploration of decision-makers' perceptions regarding factors that impede performance and game development. These efforts are crucial for fostering not only competitive balance but also for ensuring the ethical governance of sports organizations and upholding responsibilities to athletes.

2.3 Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) in Promoting Gender Equality

Moreover, the ethical dilemmas inherent in seemingly "consensual" adult romantic relationships between coaches and athletes warrant specific attention due to the inherent power imbalances, which can compromise athlete autonomy and undermine the integrity of sports organizations. This necessitates comprehensive policies and educational initiatives that clearly delineate boundaries, ensuring that all interactions uphold ethical standards and prevent potential exploitation within these hierarchical structures ([Bragagnolo & Lezama, 2025](#)). This is particularly salient given the persistent issue of positioning female athletes as 'honorary males', which further reinforces problematic power dynamics and often misapplies research exclusively focused on male athletes and environments, thereby limiting true gender equality within sports.

These normative frameworks must address the ethical complexities of power differentials to prevent exploitation and uphold the integrity of athletic relationships. Furthermore, disparities in financial investment, media coverage, and public perception significantly impede progress toward gender equality, calling for a strategic and collaborative approach to sponsorship in women's sports ([Elyasi, 2024](#)). Current efforts, such as the certification process implemented by the Portuguese Football Federation, aim to foster female futsal participation by requiring first-division teams to meet specific criteria for quality high-performance sport, although such efforts may still face challenges in addressing the full spectrum of systemic inequities ([Santos et al., 2024](#)). These challenges underscore the need for ontological and epistemological diversity in research to effectively deconstruct inequities and promote justice, particularly concerning the process of becoming a female futsal athlete and towards coaching. Such initiatives must extend beyond mere participation numbers to address the qualitative aspects of athletic development, ensuring that female athletes are provided with equitable resources, coaching expertise, and competitive structures tailored to their unique needs and characteristics rather than mirroring male paradigms. This ecological understanding of athlete development is critical, necessitating a shift away from standardizing environmental changes based solely on male athlete needs and towards an approach that warrants equity over mere equality for female futsal athletes. Indeed, ensuring sport is an empowering context for all athletes requires sport leaders to acknowledge how female athletes continue to be constrained within male-dominated sport. This requires a fundamental re-evaluation of current practices, including contextualized coach education programming, to challenge ingrained biases and promote equitable opportunities for female athletes. Such an approach ensures that future coach education emphasizes individualized and athlete-centered discussions, particularly concerning emergent issues relevant to female futsal athletes. This proactive stance is vital for fostering an environment where ethical considerations are paramount, and the development of female athletes is supported through bespoke strategies that acknowledge their distinct physiological and psychological profiles. These tailored approaches should specifically address the quality of opportunities provided to female athletes across the developmental spectrum, as well as the multiple social, cultural, and political barriers that hinder their full participation.

2.4 Self-Empowerment (SE) as a Mediating Mechanism

This comprehensive strategy aims to dismantle existing gender-based hierarchies and foster an inclusive sporting culture where female athletes are recognized for their unique strengths and contributions, moving beyond an "empty ideology of sameness" to one of genuine equity. This involves a critical re-evaluation of competitive formats, moving away from those that may perpetuate stagnation and competitive gaps, and embracing innovative structures that foster greater engagement and skill development for female athletes ([Tucker et al., 2024](#)). This shift necessitates a departure from frameworks derived predominantly from male-centric sports to ones specifically tailored to the unique attributes and needs of female athletes. Furthermore, addressing disparities in training conditions and support infrastructure for female athletes is

crucial, as many current systems are ineffective due to deep-seated gender inequities within contemporary society ([Santos et al., 2024](#)). Such comprehensive athlete development programs must prioritize diversity and inclusivity, accommodating all student athletes regardless of age or gender, and should incorporate leadership styles that balance authoritarian and democratic systems to foster competence motivation ([Wu, 2024](#)). This ensures that all athletes, including those with diverse identities and backgrounds, receive equitable opportunities for growth and achievement, thereby maximizing their potential within the sporting landscape. This necessitates a re-evaluation of existing policies and organizational structures to ensure they actively promote gender equity rather than inadvertently reinforcing male-dominated paradigms. Moreover, the chronic underrepresentation of female athletes in sports science research highlights a critical knowledge gap that must be addressed to develop evidence-based training and competitive strategies specifically for them ([Welde et al., 2024](#)). This includes providing equal opportunities and investment in female athletes during development, alongside changing narratives to highlight their psychological strength and physical capabilities ([Hogue, 2020](#)). Achieving true gender equity in sports, therefore, demands a shift from simply providing equal opportunities to actively creating equitable performance environments through socially just approaches for athlete development, which includes appropriate sport policies and competitive spaces ([Sharma & Singh, 2024](#)). Such strategies must consider a "gendered environmental approach" to minimize athlete attrition in talent pathway environments, recognizing the broader environmental factors that influence female athletes' participation and retention ([Guevara et al., 2023](#)). This approach challenges the historical reliance on male-centric research and training methodologies, advocating instead for increased visibility of female athletes in talent development literature and targeted scientific inquiry into female physiology and performance. The persistent gender data gap in talent development research across various topics further accentuates the urgent need for such focused inquiry to ensure robust, evidence-based practices in female youth sports ([Curran et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, enhancing international collaboration and adopting a holistic, inclusive understanding of athlete development that integrates gender and social inclusion are crucial for advancing research and practice in this domain ([Ardha et al., 2024](#)). This includes greater awareness of athlete attrition factors, which differ by gender and socio-ecological levels, and incorporating athletes' voices to optimize training environments and accountability within high-performance pathways ([Guevara et al., 2023](#)).

2.5 Institutional Policy Support (IPS) and Sports-based Gender Empowerment

This chapter will explore the essential role of institutional policies in fostering gender empowerment within sports, examining how well-crafted regulations and organizational structures can dismantle systemic barriers and promote equitable participation and advancement for female athletes ([Santos et al., 2024](#)). Such policies should encompass efforts to increase competitive opportunities, improve the quality of facilities for women's sports, and develop inclusive competitive formats that reduce gender gaps in competitiveness. Furthermore, these institutional policies should specifically mandate the inclusion of gender-inclusive language in

all sporting documents and communications, alongside establishing clear accountability mechanisms for organizations to address and rectify gender disparities in resource allocation and athlete support ([Mehus et al., 2024](#); [Schmid et al., 2024](#)). These policies should also prioritize funding for research specifically focused on female physiology and sports performance, addressing the historical underrepresentation of women in sports science ([Welde et al., 2024](#)). Moreover, policies must facilitate increased international collaboration to ensure that long-term athlete development knowledge can be effectively adapted across diverse cultural contexts and sports systems ([Ardha et al., 2024](#)). Finally, comprehensive policy frameworks must also address the chronic scarcity of competitive opportunities for women, coupled with limitations in the quality of facilities and competitive formats, which are critical for enhancing athletic performance and boosting popularity. Such comprehensive policies, by addressing these multifaceted challenges, are pivotal in achieving the Government of Canada's objective of gender equity in sport by 2035, serving as a replicable model for other sport organizations ([Christensen et al., 2024](#)). These policies must empower ground-level stakeholders and youth athletes to participate in evaluating sporting programs, fostering mutual benefit and ensuring that the needs of those most affected are considered ([Guevara et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, a critical examination of national sports policies reveals a prevalent gender-neutral approach, which, while seemingly equitable, often inadvertently perpetuates male-dominated norms and overlooks the specific needs and challenges faced by female athletes ([Aprillia & Rachman, 2021](#)). To achieve genuine gender equity, policies must transition from gender-neutral stances to gender-responsive frameworks that actively identify and address disparities, fostering an environment where all athletes can thrive irrespective of gender ([McKenzie et al., 2022](#)). This transition necessitates a proactive approach to policy formulation, moving beyond mere non-discrimination to implement affirmative actions that specifically promote women's participation and leadership in sports.

2.6 Women's Socio-economic Empowerment (WSE)

Recognizing that gender inequality extends beyond the sporting arena, policies aimed at socio-economic empowerment can leverage sport as a tool for broader societal change, particularly by addressing the social determinants of health that disproportionately affect women ([Carducci et al., 2022](#)). This comprehensive approach acknowledges that success and participation in international women's elite sports are empirically linked to the socio-economic status of women, including their participation in the labor force ([Pegoraro & Taylor, 2021](#)). Consequently, interventions promoting women's economic empowerment, quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning are essential, as these foundational elements directly influence women's ability to engage with and excel in sports ([Seitalieva, 2024](#)). Furthermore, cash incentives to parents for girls' schooling have been shown to increase female engagement in developing nations, a strategy that could be adapted to enhance girls' involvement in physical education, such as swimming classes ([Gupta et al., 2020](#)). These initiatives, coupled with interventions that address social norms and structural barriers, can significantly contribute to advancing gender equality through increased female representation and leadership in sports.

([Işıkgöz et al., 2025](#)). Moreover, asset ownership, access to credit, and childcare provisions are pivotal factors in enabling women's economic participation, which in turn enhances their agency and decision-making power within both households and communities ([Percival et al., 2023](#)). This holistic empowerment, spanning economic and social domains, directly correlates with increased female participation and success in international elite sports, underscoring the interconnectedness of women's societal standing and their athletic achievements ([Meier et al., 2021](#)). Such multifaceted policies and interventions, therefore, extend beyond mere sporting considerations to foster comprehensive gender equality, acknowledging that women's empowerment in sports is inextricably linked to their broader socio-economic well-being and agency. Indeed, gender equality has been identified as a critical determinant for national participation and success in international women's elite sport, further emphasizing the need for policies that address broader societal inequities. This integrated approach not only boosts female athletic participation but also contributes to improved long-term health outcomes for women and girls ([Pedersen & King, 2023](#)). For instance, promoting women in sports has been shown to yield significant long-term economic benefits, including enhanced labor force participation and improved returns on education and labor outcomes ([Chia, 2016](#)). Moreover, comprehensive educational reforms, from elementary to higher education, are crucial for fostering long-term societal change by raising social awareness about gender equality and strengthening women's roles and status ([Algül, 2024](#)). This holistic educational approach, combined with the promotion of women in sports, can significantly contribute to a reduction in societal issues such as social loafing, while simultaneously improving public health outcomes including cardiovascular health and a decreased risk of chronic diseases like Type II diabetes and certain cancers. Achieving gender equality in both personal and economic status, particularly through equitable family laws governing aspects like marriage, divorce, and inheritance, is also crucial for overall societal well-being and women's empowerment. Furthermore, access to adequate healthcare resources is foundational for women's empowerment, enabling them to pursue athletic opportunities and participate more fully in the formal labor market ([Callison & Lowen, 2021](#)). These efforts collectively strengthen women's physical and mental health, reducing the likelihood of depression and increasing self-esteem among girls who engage in team sports ([Seitalieva, 2024](#)). Empowerment, in this context, signifies enabling women to realize their full potential by dismantling barriers to autonomous decision-making and action, thereby enhancing their overall well-being ([Dadras & Hazratzai, 2023](#)).

2.7 Theoretical Foundation

Recognizing that gender inequality extends beyond the sporting arena, policies aimed at socio-economic empowerment can leverage sport as a tool for broader societal change, particularly by addressing the social determinants of health that disproportionately affect women ([Carducci et al., 2022](#)). This comprehensive approach acknowledges that success and participation in international women's elite sports are empirically linked to the socio-economic status of women, including their participation in the labor force ([Pegoraro & Taylor, 2021](#)). Consequently,

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2.8 Research Model & Hypothesis

H1: Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) has a positive effect on Self-Empowerment (SE).

H2: Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) have a positive effect on Self-Empowerment (SE).

H3: Self-Empowerment (SE) positively influences Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment (WSE).

H4: Self-Empowerment (SE) mediates the relationship between Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment (WSE).

H5: Self-Empowerment (SE) mediates the relationship between Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) and Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment (WSE).

H6: Institutional Policy Support (IPS) moderates the relationship between Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Self-Empowerment (SE), such that the relationship is stronger under high IPS.

H7: Institutional Policy Support (IPS) moderates the relationship between Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) and Self-Empowerment (SE), such that the relationship is stronger under high IPS.

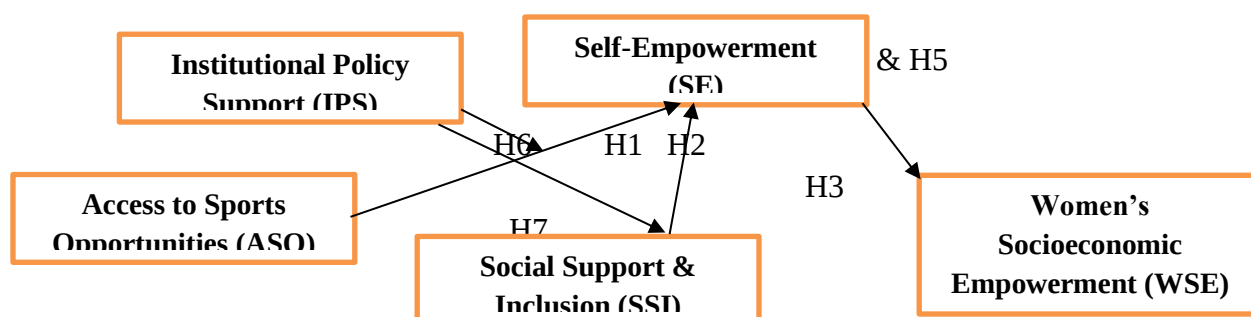


Figure 1: Research Model

3. Methodology

In this study, a quantitative and cross-sectional research design was adopted to explore the positive role of sports participation in the empowerment of women and the accomplishment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 and SDG 10). The primary data was collected within the form of a survey among the female athletes in universities within Lahore, Pakistan. The design was selected due to the fact that it allows testing relationships between various variables and could be appropriate when it comes to evaluating perceptions and behaviors of a specific population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study target population was the female university athletes who were actively involved in the organized sport programmed in the city of Lahore, Pakistan. The reason why this group was chosen is because they constitute an essential part among women who are involved in the physical and social empowerment programs through sports. A total of 309 valid responses were obtained using a convenience sampling technique. The sample is larger than the minimum sample size suggested by Hair et al., (2021) to conduct structural equation modelling (SEM), which is adequate and provides sufficient statistical power

and generalizability of the results. The questionnaire was self-administered and was used to gather data on online questionnaire; the questionnaire was sent to university sports departments and female networks of athletes in Lahore. The research participants were told the aim of the study, and confidentiality was assured, and their participation was on a strictly voluntary basis. The survey was done within a six-week period. The questionnaire was made in English language because all the respondents attend higher learning institutions where English is the learning language.

Each of the constructs was measured on the basis of already tested and validated scales that had previously been used in other studies and modified to suit the circumstances of the study of women participation in sports. All of the items were rated using a five-point Likert scale between 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). The variables and sources are as follows: Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO): the variables are measured using five items derived based on Hoye and Nicholson (2020), which are concerned with the availability of and affordability of women joining sports, as well as the institutional support of the latter. Social Support and Inclusion (SSI): assessed through six items of Sartore & Cunningham (2019), representing peer, family, and community support of female athletes. Self-Empowerment (SE): The measure is based on five items that were modified from Kabeer (1999) and Sen (1999), which evaluate autonomy, confidence, and decision-making power. Institutional Policy Support (IPS): assessed with four Hargreaves (2019) items, with the focus on gender-sensitive policies of sports, safety, and equal rights of participation. Women Socioeconomic Empowerment (WSE): a six-item scale derived based on the adoption of items in UN Women (2023), which assesses the accessibility of education, leadership, and employment opportunities with the help of sports participation. The analysis of data was carried out with the help of SmartPLS 4.0 Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The choice of this technique is because it is appropriate in predictive modelling and it can be used to accommodate complex models with mediating and moderating variables.

4. Data Analysis

The demographic information in Table 1 shows that the largest percentage of respondents (53.4%) were between the age of 18-22 years and this is a clear indication that most of the respondents were tertiary students who were undergoing athletic programmed. About 58.9 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had a bachelor degree, and 30.7 per cent had a master degree in progress or completed, hence described as highly educated female athletes. Speaking of the degree of involvement, 40.1% had played on behalf of their institution in inter-university competitions; another 29.8% at the inter-college level and 30.1% at the community/club. One-fourths of the participants (47.9 %) also had 2-4 years' experience in sports proving their long-term engagement in sporting. Sixty-five percent of the participants were depicted in team sports such as cricket, football, and volleyball, unlike individual sports that constituted 35. Moreover, the number of respondents in the public-sector universities amounted to 57.3% and those in the privates to 42.7, hence, representing diversity in the institutions. Combined, these demographic

traits indicate that the sample is a heterogeneous and representative group of female athletes who are actively involved in the sporting culture of the city of Lahore, Pakistan, and are relevant to the purpose of the study to investigate sport as the means of empowerment of women and their inclusion into the sporting culture.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 309)

Demographic Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–22 years	165	53.4%
	23–27 years	108	35.0%
	Above 27 years	36	11.6%
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree	182	58.9%
	Master's Degree	95	30.7%
	Others (Diploma/Short Courses)	32	10.4%
Sports Participation	Inter-University Tournaments	124	40.1%
	Inter-Collegiate Competitions	92	29.8%
	Community/Club-Level Sports	93	30.1%
Years of Sports Experience	Less than 2 years	76	24.6%
	2–4 years	148	47.9%
	More than 4 years	85	27.5%
Type of Sport Played	Team Sports (e.g., Cricket, Football, Volleyball)	201	65.0%
	Individual Sports (e.g., Athletics, Badminton)	108	35.0%
Institution Type	Public Sector University	177	57.3%
	Private Sector University	132	42.7%

4.1 Construct Reliability & Validity

To determine the internal consistency and convergent validity of the constructs used in this study, a reliability test was done using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR / rho) and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Table 2: Construct Reliability & Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Access to Sports	0.865	0.877	0.598

Opportunities (ASO)			
Institutional Policy Support (IPS)	0.801	0.801	0.715
Self-Empowerment (SE)	0.830	0.837	0.663
Social Support & Inclusion (SSI)	0.816	0.842	0.641
Women's Socio-economic Empowerment (WSE)	0.735	0.747	0.562

Table 2 shows that, all constructs had Cronbach alpha coefficients that were within the range of 0.735 to 0.865, which is higher than the traditionally accepted lower range of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2021) hence indicating that there is a good internal reliability among measurement items. Meanwhile, the Composite Reliability indices were ranging between 0.747 and 0.877, which supports the form of measurement model consistency and strength even further. In addition, the values of the AVE of each construct were 0.562 to 0.715 which is higher than the recommended value set by Fornell and Larcker (1981) of 0.50 and thus justifies the fact that each construct influences over fifty percent of its indicators. To conclude, the results confirm that any of the scales used in the research has a high level of reliability and validity, which confirms that the measurement model is valid and justifies its use in further structural equation modeling (SEM).

4.2 Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity ensures that the various constructs that are being studied through the empirical investigation can be empirically differentiated. In order to evaluate this criterion, Fornell Larcker technique was used, and the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) which was given in the form of diagonal elements in bold font was compared to inter-construct correlation coefficients given in the off-diagonal elements.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

Constructs	Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO)	Institutional Policy Support (IPS)	Self-Empowerment (SE)	Social Support & Inclusion (SSI)	Women's Socio-economic Empowerment (WSE)
Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO)	0.773				
Institutional Policy Support (IPS)	0.674	0.846			
Self-Empowerment (SE)	0.619	0.439	0.815		
Social Support	0.283	0.369	0.312	0.800	

& Inclusion (SSI)					
Women's Socio-economic Empowerment (WSE)	0.735	0.683	0.718	0.372	0.749

As Table 3 shows, all bold diagonal items, with a range of values between 0.749 and 0.846, are greater than the respective inter-construct correlation. As a result, all the constructs have a larger shared variance with their own indicators in comparison to any other construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). These findings can be supported by the hypothesis that the constructs, Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO), Institutional Policy Support (IPS), Self-Empowerment (SE), Social Support and Inclusion (SSI), and Women Socio-economic Empowerment (WSE), are conceptually and statistically different. In line with this, the measurement model meets the criteria of discriminant validity, which justifies the reliability and credibility of the consequent structural analysis.

4.3 Structural Model Assessment

Figure 2 displays the proposed association between the constructs, namely: Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO), Social Support and Inclusion (SSI), Institutional Policy Support (IPS), Self-Empowerment (SE), and Women Socio-Economic Empowerment (WSE). The analysis of the model was done with SmartPLS 4.0 and the results obtained are evidence of direction, strength and significance of the relationships.

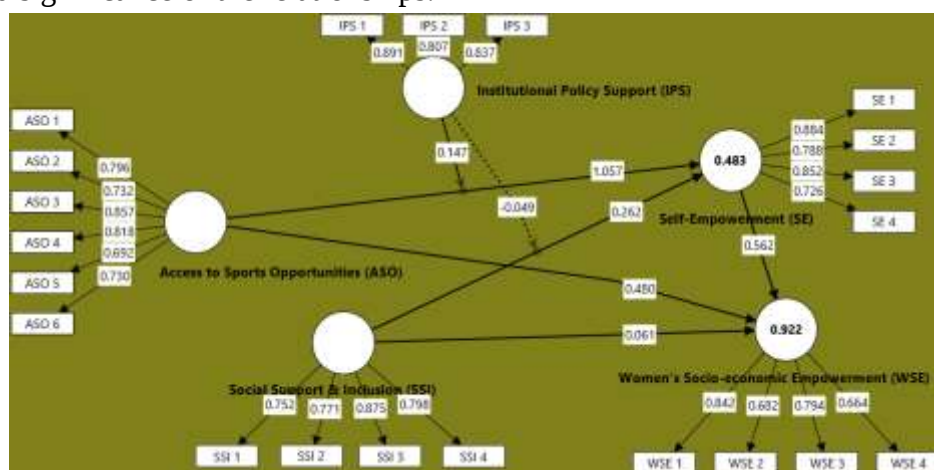


Figure 2: Structural Model

It is indicated in the model that ASO has very powerful and positive effects on SE (path coefficient = 1.057) and WSE (path coefficient = 0.480). These findings indicate that more opportunities to engage in sports increase self-belief, independence, and social presence of women, which leads to their economic and social empowerment. Furthermore, SE shows a major positive impact on WSE (path coefficient = 0.562), which proves that women who gain confidence, agency, and leadership via sports activity have greater chances to gain greater socio-

economic benefits. This mediation effect emphasizes the self-empowerment as an important mechanism between access to sports and long-term sustainable gender equality outcomes. SSI exhibits a poor direct effect on WSE (path coefficient=0.061), which can be interpreted as meaning that community and peer inclusion result in socio-economic empowerment, but probably not through individual mediating variables alone, when institutional and personal empowerment processes are in place. IPS is a controlling variable between ASO and SE. The interaction effect (path coefficient=0.147) shows that the impact of sports access on self-empowerment is more pronounced when the presence of institutional structures like university policies, the government programmed or organizational equality measures are supportive of the participation of women. On the other hand, the negative correlation between IPS and ASO (-0.049) suggests that this relationship can be undermined by the inability of institutions to be ready or the ineffective implementation of the policy. The values of R^2 show how much the model can explain: SE can explain a 48.3 percent of the variance, and WSE is able to explain 92.2 percent of the variance.

These coefficients demonstrate that the model fits well and has a high explanatory capacity, especially in the case of WSE, implying that the aggregate predictors explain a significant percentage of the variance in the outcome of women empowerment. The model in totality shows that access to sports is a central variable of empowerment; institutional policy support positively influences the empowerment pathway; self-empowerment plays a critical role as a mediator between participation and socio-economic outcomes; and social inclusion has a minor role in that, stronger community engagement and a coherent policy should be taken into account. The results highlight the importance of sports as a physical or recreational activity as well as a potent tool of gender equality, which is directly connected to the SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) objectives.

5. Discussion

The results of this research highlight the key role of Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Self-Empowerment (SE) in Women Socio-Economic Empowerment (WSE). The data shows that, as women have increased access to structured sports programmed, facilities, and opportunities to participate, they become increasingly confident, become leaders, and are better equipped in decision-making, which is in line with previous research that considers sports a means of developing life skills and social capital among women (Adams et al., 2023). The effect of Self-Empowerment is so strong, which supports the idea that the concept of empowerment is the main process by which sporting activities can be converted into quantifiable socio-economic results. Empowered women through sports tend to seek education, employment, and leadership enhancing gender equity (Khan and Ahmed, 2024). This argument is strengthened by the moderating role of the Institutional Policy Support (IPS) that implies that institutional structures, i.e., gender-inclusive policies, funding, and equitable access programs, enhance the positive effects of engaging in sports. Therefore, the findings demonstrate the necessity of organizational preparedness and policy action to perpetuate gender-equity goals. On the contrary, the rather

insignificant impact of Social Support and Inclusion (SSI) indicates that community support is not that strong without the presence of structural institutional support, and individual empowerment procedures. Altogether, this paper confirms that sport is not just a form of physical activity, it is a strong social tool that helps to include genders, self-determine, and promote economic development, which are primary pillars of SDG 5 and SDG 10.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that the involvement of women in sporting activities has much more far-reaching consequences than the growth of the sporting aspect, and this is a great source of empowerment and equality. Access to Sports Opportunities (ASO) and Self-Empowerment (SE) become the most potent predictors of Women Socio-Economic Empowerment (WSE) which confirms sports involvement in Women, improves their confidence, leadership, and financial access. The fact that the Institutional Policy Support (IPS) moderates the role supports the need to have supportive policies that can guarantee accessibility and empowerment opportunities. With the inclusion of sports in empowerment models, education institutions and policy makers can speed up the achievement of gender equality and inclusivity.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

By extending the Social Role Theory and Empowerment Theory into the sports field, the study will contribute to the theoretical development of the empowerment and gender equality research. It shows that the involvement in sports is a resource involvement and self-determination which enhances the capabilities and social identity of women. Besides, the model emphasizes the importance of institutional arrangements in mediating empowerment channels thus, filling the gap between the agency of individuals and systemic facilitation. The combination of micro-level (self-empowerment) and macro-level (policy support) mechanisms has the benefit of deepening theoretical insight into how the empowerment of gender can be realized using sports.

6.2 Practical Implications

In practical terms, this study provides a number of practical guidelines to policy makers, sports administrators and learning institutions. Institutional Reforms: Universities and sports organizations are urged to formulate and implement gender sensitive policies to increase the access of women to training, resources and leadership. Empowerment Programs: Programs that aim to enhance skills, mentorship, and self-efficacy may help transform the outcome of sports participation into empowerment. Community Inclusion: The social inclusion campaigns can be reinforced to normalize the roles of women participating in sports and this will minimize cultural and social barriers. Policy Integration: Government agencies ought to coordinate the sports development programmed with national gender-equity frameworks in order to promote SDG 5 and SDG 10. Such measures all combine to make sure that the role of sports is an inclusive and empowering, sustainable environment of personal and socio-economic growth of women.

6.3 Future Research & Limitations

In spite of its contributions, the study is prone to various limitations. To begin with, the sample was gathered among the women group in Lahore, Pakistan, and this might restrict the

generalization to other areas or cultures. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow making causal inferences about the observed relationships. In future studies, longitudinal or mixed-method research design might be utilized to assess the longitudinal development of empowerment by sports. Further research should also permit the future researchers to broaden the framework by introducing variables like psychological resilience, family support or economic independence as mediators or moderators. Further research on gender inclusivity in sports situations may be enhanced by cross-national comparisons or inclusion of male counterparts.

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