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Harassment and Safety Concerns as Barriers to Women's Sports Participation in Public Spaces in Pakistan

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Keywords: Barriers, Harassment, Public Places, Safety, Women's Sports, Participation

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Contents

- [Introduction:](#)
- [Objectives of the Study](#)
- [Hypotheses of the Study](#)
- [Literature Review:](#)
- [Gaps in the Literature](#)
- [Methods and Materials:](#)
- [Validity and Reliability](#)
- [Data Analysis](#)
- [Ethical Considerations](#)
- [Discussion:](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [Recommendations](#)
- [Further Research](#)
- [Acknowledgment](#)
- [References](#)

Introduction:

Background of the Study

Sports and games play a vital role in the development of physical fitness and psychological well-being of youth. Those who participate in sports regularly have better physical, mental, and psychological well-being Mahmood et al., [2024](#)). According to WHO (2020), women's

participation in sports, particularly in public places disproportionately low, especially in South Asia. The factor contributing to this low participation is sports is harassment and safety concerns, which discourage women from using these recreational and athletic facilities (UN Women, 2022). Women reported experiences of harassment and safety concerns in public



sports areas such as parks, grounds, and jogging tracks in Pakistan (Khan, 2022; Samad *et al.*, 2023).

These malefic environments reduce the participants because of restricted access to the physical and emotional benefits of sports. These hostile environments reduce their willingness to participate, thereby restricting access to the physical and psychological benefits of sports. Studies by Mahmood *et al.* (2024); Eime *et al.* (2023) indicate that athletes who participate in sports have a higher psychological level compared to non-athletes. These studies reinforce the importance of sports and equal participation in sports among males and females.

The harassment and safety concerns create barriers for the limited participation of women in sports and freedom of movement (Raiz & Javed, 2024). These issues can be addressed through policy reforms, protective measures, peace sporting environments, and awareness campaigns to equal access to sports facilities and promote women's holistic development.

Statement of the Problem

Sports have important physical, social, psychological, and emotional benefits for women. In Pakistan, women face barriers that restrict their participation in sports, particularly in public places. The most critical challenges facing women are harassment and safety concerns; many women report harassment, unwanted attention, and a sense of insecurity in public areas such as parks, grounds, and jogging tracks. Such experiences demotivate women to participate in sports. Where the facilities are available, fear and safety concerns reduce women's participation in sports. This situation highlights the urgent need for safer and more peaceful environments to promote women's participation in sports.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the impact of harassment and safety issues on women's engagement in sports in public settings.
2. To ascertain the categories and prevalence of harassment encountered by women during athletic activities in public settings.
3. To examine the correlation between safety apprehensions and women's propensity to participate in outdoor activities.
4. To highlight the need for safer and more inclusive public spaces that encourage women's participation in sports.

Hypotheses of the Study

1. H1: Harassment and safety concerns statistically significantly affect women's participation in sports in public places.
2. H2: Types and frequency of harassment statistically significantly influence women's participation in sports activities in open environments.
3. H3: Safety concerns statistically significantly reduce women's willingness to engage in outdoor sports.
4. H4: The availability of safer and more inclusive public places statistically significantly increases women's participation in sports.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant as it sheds light on an often-overlooked dimension of gender inequality in sports, spatial and psychological exclusion due to fear and harassment. By focusing on public spaces, the study highlights the environments that are intended to be universally accessible but, in practice, are gender-biased due to safety concerns. Findings from this research can inform policymakers, urban planners, sports authorities, and women's rights organizations about the structural and behavioral reforms needed to make sports inclusive and safe for all.

Delimitations of the Study

This study will focus on female participants aged 15–35 who engage or wish to engage in recreational or competitive sports activities in public spaces such as parks, running tracks, and outdoor gyms. The research is limited to urban areas within a selected region (5 provinces of Pakistan: Baluchistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh) to ensure contextual relevance. It will not cover professional athletes who train in secured, institutional facilities, as the safety dynamics differ in such controlled environments.

Literature Review:

Harassment in Public Sports Spaces

Various research shows that women are often subjected to verbal, physical, and non-verbal forms of harassment in public areas, especially when they are engaged in physical activities. Gardner (2004) explains that street harassment may include behavior such as catcalling and intrusive staring. Offensive remarks and acts of physical intimidation, which become more evident in settings where women are visibly active, for instance, during

jogging or exercising in open parks. Supporting this, Delany *et al.* (2019) reported that many women involved in outdoor sports experienced significant discomfort due to unsolicited male attention, frequently compelling them to alter their exercise routines, shift their training schedules, or, in some cases, withdraw from participation. Likewise, Kearn (2020) noted that even the fear or expectation of such harassment generates psychological pressure that discourages women from accessing or returning to public sports environments.

Safety Concerns and Fear of Violence

Women's fear of violence in public places remains a widespread concern that directly influences their involvement in sports. Day (2001) highlights that the fear of crime, particularly sexual assault, greatly limits women's freedom of movement and their utilization of urban spaces. Such fear stems not only from personal experiences but also from prevailing cultural narratives and gender norms that frame public areas as unsafe for women. Valentine (1989) elucidates that spatial behaviors are influenced by gender, as women's access to outdoor areas is significantly determined by perceptions of safety, sufficient illumination, visibility, and the availability of protective measures. Sports facilities devoid of monitoring methods, appropriate limits, or amenities conducive to women inadvertently hinder female participation. Jackson & Scott (2022) discovered that insufficient illumination, isolated walkways, and the lack of female personnel in sports parks significantly prevent women from using these facilities. These data reveal that harassment and safety concerns are the main hurdles to women's involvement in sports in public areas.

Social and Psychological Impact of Harassment

Harassment and safety-related difficulties not only restrict women's physical engagement in sports but also adversely impair their mental health, self-confidence, and overall well-being. McMahon & Farmer (2011) explain that when women are often exposed to such incidents, it can result in fear conditioning, a psychological state where individuals remain consistently aware of likely threats in public environments. This continual experience of worry typically pushes women toward avoidance behaviors, preventing their involvement in outside physical and recreational activities that may otherwise increase their empowerment and health. In addition, even when women continue to participate in dangerous or

unpleasant circumstances, they typically express sentiments of heightened concern, increased attention, and problems concentrating, which ultimately impair both their performance and enjoyment (Swim *et al.*, 2001).

Gendered Access to Public Sports Spaces

The layout and organization of public areas typically reflect male-centered values, restricting women's feeling of inclusion and safety. Whitzman (2007) underlines that recreational locations such as parks and sports facilities are usually planned without fully addressing the requirements of female users, which inadvertently produces situations that exclude or marginalize women. This coincides with Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the creation of space, where urban design practice promotes social power relations and gender hierarchies. Even in shared communal settings, women frequently see their participation as less appreciated or even discouraged, especially when male groups dominate the usage of these areas. Research by Forde and Lee (2020) further reveals that women in such contexts are more likely to encounter unwelcome looks or direct exclusion, which reinforces the view that they do not actually belong in these sports venues.

Institutional Responses and Policy Gaps

Although several efforts have sought to increase safety in public areas, key legislative solutions remain weak and sometimes disregard gender-specific issues. Pifitzner *et al.* (2021) point out that urban safety initiatives typically fail to combine measures suited for women, such as accessible panic buttons, female security personnel, or gender-sensitive facilities. In addition, the enforcement of harassment-related legislation in public sporting situations is often inadequate. Lewis *et al.* (2018) showed that relatively few women officially report harassment occurrences, mostly owing to fear of being terminated, an ineffective reporting system, or social victim-blaming views. Globally, programs like safe parks for women have shown some effectiveness by enhancing lighting, boosting monitoring, and fostering community involvement; nevertheless, such efforts remain restricted in scope and lack sustainable support.

The Role of Social Support and Resistance

Despite the barriers, some studies also highlight the role of social support, community initiatives, and resistance strategies that empower women to reclaim public sports spaces. For instance, women-only running groups, safe hours, and female-led fitness classes are forms of

collective resistance that reduce isolation and create protective environments (Chaudhuri, 2017).

Research also shows that visibility and normalization of women in public sports can challenge cultural norms over time. The more women participate and assert their presence, the more inclusive the spaces can become, though this requires structural support and long-term policy commitment.

Gaps in the Literature

While the literature highlights the intersection of gender, safety, and space, there are several gaps:

- Most research is based in Western contexts, with limited data from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.
- Few studies use mixed-method approaches that combine quantitative data (e.g., frequency of incidents) with qualitative insights (e.g., lived experiences).
- There is limited exploration of intersectionality, how age, socioeconomic status, disability, or religious identity further compound safety challenges.

Methods and Materials:

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of harassment and safety concerns on women's participation in sports within public spaces. The approach was selected to allow for the collection of measurable, statistical data from a broad sample of participants. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool, designed to quantify participants' experiences of harassment, perceptions of safety, and the resulting influence on their sports participation. The questionnaire included Likert-scale items to ensure consistency in responses and facilitate statistical analysis. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and inferential statistics, including the Chi-square test, to examine relationships between variables. This design enabled the identification of patterns, trends, and statistically significant associations relevant to the research objectives.

Population of the Study

The target population consisted of female individuals aged 15 to 35 years who engage in recreational or competitive sports activities in public spaces (e.g.,

jogging tracks, open gym parks) throughout Pakistan. This age range was selected to capture both adolescent and adult experiences related to sports and personal safety.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who met the inclusion criteria: females who either currently participate in sports in public spaces or have withdrawn due to safety concerns. The sample size included 150 respondents. The 30 participants from five provinces, Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan. Pakistan (using structured questionnaires). Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of socio-economic background, location, and types of sports engaged in.

Data Collection Instruments

A self-designed questionnaire was developed, drawing upon the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to ensure relevance and content validity. The instrument comprised four main sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age, education, occupation, and frequency of sports participation. The second part of the questionnaire examined participation in encounters with harassment, focusing on its nature, frequency, setting, and seriousness. Third evaluated their sense of safety by addressing environmental elements such as the availability of lighting, crowd presence, visibility of security staff, and general perception of safety in public sports areas. The fourth section analyzed how these safety concerns influence women's engagement in sports, including modifications in exercise routines and impacts on psychological well-being. To gather answers, a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree was employed throughout the survey questions.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire had a pilot test with 15 participants to assess its validity and reliability. In addition, input from topic specialists in gender studies and physical education was used to develop the instrument. The internal consistency of the Likert scale item was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a reliability value of 0.70 or higher considered as good.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, permission and ethical consideration were gained from the involved institutional review committee. To enhance accessibility

and participation, the questionnaire was distributed using online platforms such as Google Forms. Informed permission was gained from all participants, and interviews were performed in safe and private contexts. All replies were recorded only after gaining clear consent from the participants.

Data Analysis

SPSS software (version 27) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means percentages) and inferential statistics (e.g., Chi-square test) were used to assess relationships between variables.

Analysis of Results

Table 1

Demographic Information

Variable	Category	Frequency (n= 150)	Percentage (%)
Age	15–20 years	42	28.0%
	21–25 years	58	38.7%
	26–30 years	33	22.0%
	31–35 years	17	11.3%
Frequency of Participation	Daily	28	18.7%
	Weekly	51	34.0%
	Occasionally	44	29.3%
	Rarely/Never	27	18.0%

The majority of participants are in the 21–25 age group and participate in sports weekly. However, the fact that 47.3% (Occasionally + Rarely/Never) of participants are

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly followed all ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that personal information remained protected. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any penalty. Additionally, psychological support referrals were offered to individuals who experienced distress as a result of recalling past incidents of harassment.

not consistently involved in sports suggests underlying challenges such as harassment and safety concerns that limit women's engagement in physical activity.

Table 2

Reliability Statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) for Pilot Study (n = 15)

Section of Questionnaire	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Harassment Experience Scale	6	0.81	Good Reliability
Perceived Safety in Public Sports Spaces	5	0.78	Acceptable Reliability
Impact on Sports Participation	5	0.84	Good Reliability
Overall Questionnaire Reliability	16	0.83	Good Reliability

The table shows the reliability analysis of the questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha. All three sections, Harassment Experience, Perceived Safety, and Impact on Participation, demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency, with alpha values ranging from 0.78

to 0.84. The overall reliability of the 16-item scale was 0.83, indicating a well-constructed and consistent instrument. Since all values exceed the 0.70 threshold, the questionnaire is considered reliable for the main study.

Experiences of Harassment in Public Sports Spaces

Table 3

Types of Harassment Reported

Type of Harassment	Frequency (n= 150)	Percentage (%)
Verbal Comments/Catcalling	111	74.0%
Staring/Leering	98	65.3%
Unwanted Physical Contact	27	18.0%
Photographing without Consent	34	22.7%
Online Harassment (after posting sports content)	19	12.7%

The table presents the types and frequency of harassment experienced by female participants (n=150) concerning their involvement in sports. Verbal comments and catcalling were the most commonly reported form of harassment, experienced by 74.0% of respondents, followed by staring or leering, reported by 65.3%. Less frequent but still notable were instances of photographing without consent (22.7%) and unwanted physical contact (18.0%), both of which indicate serious

breaches of personal boundaries. Additionally, 12.7% of participants reported experiencing online harassment after posting sports-related content, highlighting that harassment extends beyond physical spaces into digital environments. These findings suggest that multiple forms of harassment are prevalent and may significantly deter women from participating freely in public sports activities.

Table 4

Frequency of Harassment

Frequency of Harassment	Percentage (%)
Always or Often	37.3%
Sometimes	41.3%
Rarely or Never	21.4%
Total	100.0%

The table illustrates the frequency of harassment experienced by female participants in the context of public sports participation. A significant portion, 37.3%, reported experiencing harassment “Always or Often”, while 41.3% stated they faced it sometimes, indicating that the majority nearly 79% have encountered harassment to some degree. In contrast, only 21.4%

reported experiencing harassment “Rarely OR Never”. These figures highlight the widespread and recurring nature of harassment in public sports spaces, suggesting that safety concerns are a substantial barrier to women's consistent and confident participation in physical activities.

Perceptions of Safety in Public Sports Spaces

Table 5

Respondents were asked to rate their perception of safety in various public sports environments.

Safety Factor	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Parks are adequately lit	39.3%	22.0%	38.7%
Presence of security personnel	28.7%	26.7%	44.6%
Feel safe exercising alone	19.3%	18.0%	62.7%
Prefer male-free spaces for exercise	66.7%	15.3%	18.0%

The table presents participants' perceptions of safety-related factors in public sports spaces. Only 39.3% agreed that parks are adequately lit, while a nearly equal

38.7% disagreed, indicating divided opinions on lighting conditions. Regarding the presence of security personnel, less than a third (28.7%) felt their presence

was sufficient, whereas 44.6% disagreed, reflecting a general lack of confidence in existing security measures. Most notably, 62.7% of respondents reported that they do not feel safe exercising alone, highlighting a strong sense of vulnerability in public spaces. Additionally, a significant majority (66.7%) preferred male-free spaces

for exercise, emphasizing the perceived link between male presence and discomfort or threat. Overall, these findings underscore critical safety concerns that may discourage women from participating in outdoor sports activities.

Table 6

Impact of Harassment on Sports Participation

Statement	Agree (%)
I avoid certain areas due to fear of harassment	72.0%
I have reduced my participation due to previous bad experiences	54.7%
Harassment affects my motivation to continue exercising	61.3%
I prefer exercising only in groups	43.3%

The table highlights the negative impact of harassment on women's sports participation. A majority (72.0%) avoid certain areas due to fear, and 61.3% report that harassment affects their motivation to continue

exercising. Additionally, 54.7% have reduced their participation due to past experiences, while 43.3% prefer exercising only in groups for safety.

Table 7

Statistical Analysis Chi-square Test

Test Statistic	Value
Chi-square (χ^2) value	11.78
Degrees of Freedom (df)	2
p-value	0.003

The table presents the results of a Chi-square test conducted to examine the association between variables, likely related to harassment frequency and its impact. The Chi-square value (χ^2) is 11.78 with 2 degrees of freedom, and the p-value is 0.003. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the result is statistically significant, indicating a meaningful association between the variables being tested, suggesting that experiences of harassment vary significantly among participants and are not due to chance.

link between experiences of harassment and lower frequency of sports participation.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations:

Findings

A majority of women reported experiencing harassment in public sports spaces, particularly in verbal and visual forms. Safety concerns, such as poor lighting and a lack of security, significantly affect women's willingness to participate in outdoor sports. Psychological impacts include anxiety, fear, and self-imposed restrictions on movement and exercise. Institutional responses are inadequate, and most women rely on peer support or avoidance strategies. There is a statistically significant

Discussion:

Prevalence and Nature of Harassment

The study revealed that a majority of women (over 70%) experience verbal harassment, such as catcalling and inappropriate comments, while engaging in sports activities in public spaces. Staring, unwanted physical contact, and non-consensual photographing were also commonly reported. These findings align with previous research by Gardner (2004) and Delaney et al. (2019), which documented widespread harassment faced by women in outdoor environments, particularly during physical activities that increase visibility. The frequent and varied forms of harassment contribute to an environment of hostility and discomfort, discouraging women from participating in sports freely or consistently.

Perception of Safety

The study found that more than 60% of respondents do

not feel safe exercising alone in public spaces, and over 40% disagreed that security personnel or adequate lighting were present in parks and open gyms. These perceptions are significant because the feeling of safety—not just actual incidents—affects behavior. This supports the argument made by Valentine (1989) and Day (2001), who assert that perceived risk can be as restrictive as actual threats.

Furthermore, the finding that two-thirds of respondents prefer male-free spaces underlines the discomfort many women feel due to the lack of protective infrastructure and the social dynamics in public sports environments.

Impact on Sports Participation

A significant number of respondents (72%) stated that they avoid certain areas due to the fear of harassment, and 54.7% have reduced their sports participation due to previous negative experiences. These results indicate a clear correlation between harassment and a decline in physical activity, supporting the study by McMahon and Farmer (2011), which found that recurring exposure to unsafe environments leads to long-term behavioral changes like avoidance. This reduction in physical activity not only affects women's physical health but also their mental well-being, social interaction, and confidence, contributing to broader gender inequality in sports and public life.

Statistical Significance

The Chi-square test confirmed a statistically significant relationship between experiences of harassment and decreased frequency of sports participation. These findings reinforce the quantitative evidence backing the hypothesis that issues of harassment and safety significantly hinder women's involvement in public sports spaces.

Institutional Shortcomings

The research also found that institutional efforts to address these challenges remain adequate. A majority of women claimed a lack of sufficient security arrangements and institutional processes for raising concerns. These findings correspond with the observation of Lewis *et al.* (2018) and Pfitzner *et al.* (2021), who stressed the gap in gender-responsive urban design and insufficient enforcement within public recreational programs.

Conclusion

The findings of the research emphasize that harassment and safety concerns constitute substantial hurdles to

women's involvement in sports in public areas. These difficulties are multifaceted, combining direct experiences of harassment, poor safety infrastructure, limited institutional support, and restrictive societal norms that hinder women's freedom of movement. As a consequence, many women either restrict or entirely withdraw from outdoor sports activities, losing key possibilities for physical health, psychological well-being, and personal empowerment. The results underline the compelling need for comprehensive reforms, regulatory measures, and cultural adjustments to build safer and more inclusive conditions that allow women to engage in sports without fear or constraint.

Recommendations

Based on findings, it is advised that suitable lighting, surveillance cameras, and emergency warning systems be established in public sporting grounds. Increase the presence of trained, gender-sensitive security staff. Provide gender-segregated exercise zones when suitable. Develop and implement anti-harassment regulations tailored to public sporting areas. Establish anonymous and accessible complaint methods for reporting harassment. Include women in decision-making processes related to sports and urban planning. Launch public campaigns to raise awareness about women's rights to occupy public spaces.

Conduct community-based workshops focusing on respectful behavior, bystander intervention, and gender sensitivity. Encourage the formation of women-only running and fitness groups to provide safe and supportive environments. Offer time slots in public parks or gyms exclusively for female users. Subsidize programs that aim to increase women's participation in physical activity.

Women's sport arrangements should be made separate from men's sport arrangements for cultural reasons and comfort to women, who'll feel secure from the inappropriate comments and gazebo males (Kamal & Khan, 2014; 2015).

Awareness and education also play a crucial role in fostering long-term cultural change. Public campaigns should be launched to promote women's rights to access and occupy public spaces without fear. Community-based workshops can further educate citizens on respectful behavior.

Further Research

Expand future studies to include rural areas, non-binary identities, and disabled women to gain a more intersectional understanding. Utilize longitudinal data to

assess the long-term impact of safety improvements and policy implementation on women's participation.

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