Gender and Discrimination: A Study About Female Athletes

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to investigate gender and discrimination among Iranian female athletes.

Method: This research was conducted using grounded theory with a structuralist approach of Charmaz (2006). The theoretical and purposive sampling methods were used to conduct in-depth interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews until theoretical saturation was reached with 15 women and girls aged 19 to 55 who exercised professionally or recreationally. In this way, coding was used in three stages, including primary coding, theoretical coding, and centralized coding.

Results: Finally, 91 primary codes were extracted, of which 15 codes were centralized and, finally two theoretical codes of gender discrimination, and stereotypes were obtained. The results showed that the existence of issues such as gender patterns in the segregation of sports disciplines, patriarchal culture in sports, media avoidance of women's sports, and inequality in women's sports investment have led to gender discrimination in women's sports.

Conclusion: The findings showed that gender discrimination and stereotypes affect the development of women's sports. By examining social norms and attitudes, it is possible to understand how these biases limit women's progress in sports. Considering the need to improve the status of women's sports and increase their participation, research in this field can identify the existing barriers and provide solutions to improve the conditions.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Social norms, Media and women, Gender segregation, Patriarchal culture

Introduction

As a global social phenomenon, sport strives for excellence, fair play, and solidarity in societies. Sport is a prominent area for showcasing individual abilities and achievements, and it plays an essential role in improving health, increasing self-esteem, and creating social and economic opportunities (Coakley, 2004). Despite many efforts to eliminate gender discrimination in all areas and levels of sport and physical activity, there are still stereotypes about women's physical abilities and social roles (Omrčen, 2017). Gender discourses, policies, and belief systems in sports tend to favor men and to the detriment of women, with athletes displaying super masculine or ultra-competitive traits considered superior (Messner, 1988). However, many influential women in sports have paved the way for other women to be present in this environment. They have tried to influence the sports world so that traditional patriarchal thinking recognizes their talent (Rowan, 2017). Since men usually tend to evaluate sports as a masculine activity (Xu et al., 2021), Women need to work exponentially harder to prove themselves as valuable members of the sports industry (Michel-Krohler & Turner, 2022). Recently, in the sports sector, there has been a greater focus on increasing the number of women as athletes (Dadswell et al., 2022). Even though sports participation among girls and women is currently at the highest level, they show remarkable athletic performances (Fink, 2015). There is still a long way to go to achieve gender equality in sport (Michel-Krohler & Turner, 2022).

Future trends show that the world is moving towards a future with a feminine approach (Movafaq et al., 2023), However, to combat violence against women and reject gender discrimination, it is necessary to create equal opportunities to participate in sports activities(Gholi Poor & Keshkar, 2021), However, in Asian culture, attention is paid to gender roles, and women's status is limited to caring roles, which perpetuate gender stereotypes and hinder women's professional development in sports (Rim & Kim, 2024).

Women have always experienced gender discrimination in various forms, including unequal pay, limited access to managerial and leadership roles, and less media coverage (Kim & Oh, 2022).

Although this unequal attention may seem insignificant to some, it is still a form of discrimination and can have negative consequences such as a decrease in women's motivation and self-esteem (Scheadler & Wagstaff, 2018). The reason for these discriminations is that sport is a gender institution and has always been seen as a male institution, and all its processes operate within a hegemonic male norm, and women are seen as trespassers of male boundaries (Senne, 2016).

This has led women to play only supportive roles, or if they wish to participate in sports, they can only participate in women's sports (Sartore-Baldwin, 2012). Maintaining such norms and procedures may cause women to stay away from sports(Cohen et al., 2014) Especially at an early age, social norms affect the participation of girls and women in sports(Messner et al., 1993)

Eccles and Barber (1999) showed that girls who participate in team sports can strengthen their social life skills and individual decision-making and resist gender discrimination (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Participation in various sports, especially mixed sports (women and men), also establishes a pathway to facilitate social relationships and change cultural attitudes towards the sexes(Messner, 2002) In addition to the existing norms in society, sports¬ federations are also among the places that reinforce traditional gender roles and male privileges and dominance. In general, women are placed less in leadership positions and are typically underpaid for their work and marginalized in the workplace. In fact, gender issues continue to play an important role in the day-to-day functioning of sports organizations (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). The existence of stereotypes and stereotypes prevents women's optimal participation in the field of sports (Kiani &

Nazari, 2023). Also, the small number of studies on women's sports (Johnston & Weatherington, 2018), reinforces the stereotype that women are not as athletic as men (Joseph et al, 2022). Given the problems that women still face in the field of equality in sports, it is necessary to examine how¬ to promote equity in sports.

In 2004, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) established the Commission on Women and Sports, and a fundamental principle was added to the Olympic Charter that ¬prohibits various discriminations, including gender discrimination. The Olympic Charter was amended in 2007 to explicitly give the IOC the task of encouraging and supporting the promotion of women's sport at all levels and in all structures with the aim of implementing the principle of equality between men and women (Krech, 2017) In Iran, despite the many discriminations that still exist, women's sports have witnessed a growing trend ¬ in recent decades. One of the serious problems in women's sports is the lack of an appropriate number¬of managerial positions as well as the lack of specific and objective models of female coaches and managers in the field of sports(Gulshani et al., 2017)

Entrusting the management of women's sports to their hands before the merger plan (merging women's sports associations with federations due to lack of funds and using the funds of the federations to promote women's sports) made women able to gain self-confidence and self-confidence, gain many experiences and competencies in the field of management and sports, and in this field of management, They should show successful role models. Increasing gender diversity in the governing boards of sports organizations ¬leads to better performance of the organization¬ (Dehkordi et al., 2023). Rastegari et al (2017) in examining the ¬challenges of women's management in Iranian sport acknowledged that cultural barriers have the most impact and personal and personality barriers, organizational barriers, environmental and social barriers, and religious and legal barriers have the second priority (Rastegari et al., 2017). The culture that

governs people is also influenced by various social factors and can affect beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The media in any society is a necessary condition for the development of the social culture of that society , and by introducing sports models, it has caused young people around the world to take acceptable people as (Miryousefi, 2019)

A clear example of a change in attitude can ¬be seen in the broadcasting of women's sports. Broadcasting women's sports plays a great role in shaping people's perceptions of the successes of¬ women's sports (Bagchi et al., 2020). It seems that facilitating success in women's sports(Nazari et al., 2022), improving views about it and progress in the future(Eydi et al., 2019), and sustainable and prominent media coverage (Pope et al., 2023), play a vital role. Identifying cultural and social challenges, challenges (Shayegan et al., 2023), and cultural gaps in society (play an important role in reducing stereotypes and creating gender equality(Zand et al., 2022).

In recent years, there has been an increase in public attention to gender issues and women's rights equality, and many countries and organizations have focused on these issues. This research can help to identify and analyze the challenges in women's sports and to investigate the effects of social and cultural changes on this field. This research also serves as a scientific basis for the development of new support programs and policies, and helps to improve women's health and well-being by increasing their participation in sports. In addition, scientific and educational research in this field can help fill the gaps in the scientific literature and provide better tools to researchers, coaches, and sports managers. It can also lead to public awareness and positive social change, and provide the conditions for the development and success of female athletes.

Since previous research has focused mainly on the role of the media or barriers to the development of women's sports and has not comprehensively examined the issue of gender discrimination in women's sports specifically, the researchers decided to analyze the role of

gender in sports. This research aims to fill in the gaps in previous studies and provide new perspectives on the effects of gender discrimination on women's participation and success in sports. In this study, an attempt is made to examine various dimensions of gender discrimination, including cultural, social, and economic effects on women's sports, and to provide effective solutions to deal with these issues.

Considering the above, the purpose of this study is to investigate the gender discrimination in women's sports in Iran to answer the following questions: 1) What is the discrimination faced by female athletes in Iran? and 2) What are the sports experiences related to gender discrimination of female athletes in Iran?

Materials and Methods

The current research is a qualitative study that was conducted using the method of grounded theory, the construction approach of Charmaz. This approach is focused on the communication between the mind of the writer and the participant in the way of creating meaning. The researcher evaluates and analyzes the feelings of the participants based on their experience of any phenomenon or process (Charmaz, 2017). The intended field of study is Iranian women who do sports recreationally or professionally. The purposeful sampling method with the most variety was also used, the purpose of which is to mention extensive evidence from the text of the interviews, and this work helps to increase the transferability of the results.

From the point of view of Charmaz, the focused interview is a way to generate data in qualitative research. The focused interview usually means a one-way conversation that is guided slowly and explores the perspective of research participants in the context of their personal experience in relation to the research topic (Charmaz, 2017). In the current research, first, an interview guide was prepared to conduct the interview so that the researcher could help in raising questions and addressing all aspects of the subject; Second, the interview questions were asked from general to detail;

third, the text of the interviews, after being written, was analyzed simultaneously and continuously with the data collection, and the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and before this, the topic, the purpose of the article, the work process, compliance with ethical principles, etc. were explained to the participants.

On average, the duration of each interview lasted between 30-70 minutes, and analysis of the obtained data was done using primary, focused, and theoretical coding methods. In the initial coding, the text was coded line by line, and categories were extracted; then, in the centralized coding process, these categories were compared with each other, and codes were devised to relate these categories to each other; then, in the stage of theoretical coding, the core or central category of the research was determined. In this study, to confirm the results and increase the accuracy of the research, as well as to validate the findings and analyses, four key indicators including credibility, trustibility, verifiability, and transferability were used to assess the coherence and strength of qualitative data. To check the acceptance of the data, the principal investigator and members of the research team were actively involved in the data collection, analysis, and interpretation stages. This active participation helped improve understanding of participants' experiences and increase data credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Also, in the present study, the intra-the-subject agreement method of two coders (evaluators) was used to calculate the dependability of the interviews. In this regard, a Ph.D student of sports management was asked to participate in the research as a research colleague (coder), in each of the interviews, codes that were similar in the eyes of both people were identified as "agreement" and non-similar codes as "disagreement". Then, the researcher and this research colleague coded three interviews, and the percentage of intra-subject agreement that is used as an indicator of the dependability of the analysis was calculated using the following formula, according to which the dependability value was equal to 90%, which was higher than

60%, so the dependability of the coding is confirmed(Rezaei & Salehipoor, 2018).

$$\text{Subject within Agreement Percent} = \frac{\text{Number of Agreements} \times 2}{\text{Total Number of Codes}} \times 100$$

Table 1. Primary and focused codes extracted from the interviews

Row	Interview Number	Total Number of Data	Number of Agreements	Number of Disagreements	Retest Dependability
1	3	13	6	1	92%
2	6	11	5	2	90%
3	9	9	4	2	88%
Total		33	15	5	90%

Also, to evaluate the transferability, there was an attempt to have more diversity among the participants and the process continued until data saturation was reached (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data and information were collected over a period of 3 months and with the researcher's conversation with the participants. Finally, the extracted theoretical codes are reported as research findings.

Results

The age range of the participants was from 19 years to 55 years, 7 of them were married and 8 were single, 6 of the participants were national level coaches and athletes who worked in the national team in different disciplines and 9 of them were amateur athletes. Regarding the level of education, 2 people had master's degree, 8 people had bachelor's degree, 3 people were undergraduate students and 2 people had diploma. The obtained data has been analyzed by the coding method of Foundation Data Theory with Charmaz approach. The most important codes extracted as primary codes and focused codes are well specified in Table 1.

Table 2. Results of the Dependability Study between the Two Transition Encoders

Theoretical codes	focused codes	Primary codes
	Social and cultural attitude	Less support for female athletes in society, The low social status of female athletes, Cultural limitation is the cause of motivation of female athletes, The prevalence of fear of lack of support, The low status of Iranian female athletes compared to foreign female athletes, Women's restrictions in Islam, The constant challenge of women in the role of athletes with customary and religious issues (Islamic covering), Restriction of women to enter some sports
	Glass ceiling	The governing policy of the federations regarding the reduction of women's power, The need to change the statutes of federations for the realization of women's rights, The need to choose competent women in managerial positions, The presence of women in national federations without the right to vote
Gender discrimination	Development of Foundational Movement Skills	Exercise in childhood is the key to exercise in old age, Consequences of aging; Preventing exercise in middle age, The escape of female sports talents as a result of neglecting

		sports, Children's sports education; The key to identifying hidden talents, Quitting sports due to abuse and lack of support, Lack of access to the club in different areas
	The lack of media interest in women's sports	The lack of media coverage of women's games; an obstacle to fame and myth making, The need to focus on the positive representation and capabilities of women in the media, The need to create media strategies to respect and strengthen women's values, Inadequate and inappropriate media advertising, Distorting the image of women's sports in the media, Wrapping women's sports in a halo of ambiguity in the media
	Inequality in women's sports investment	The lack of financial support for women's sports is the cause of its lack of prosperity, The small budget for women's sports, The small salary of female coaches, Neglecting to invest in the advertising of women's sports fields, Low financial income of female coaches from sports
	social norms	Broadcasting women's games is a taboo in the country, The society's view of women's physical attractiveness instead of sports performance prevents the public broadcasting of games (objectification of women), The heavy acceptance (non-acceptance) of the sports profession for women in the society, Using images of men in posters and billboards, The need to change environmental conditions for women's sports, Social cultural norms around women's bodies, Compulsion to use hijab despite restricting the performance to avoid unpleasant encounters with athletes
	Gender pattern in the separation of sports disciplines	Identifying some specific strength sports for men (weightlifting, bodybuilding), Short-sightedness towards some non-normative disciplines such as cycling, The inappropriateness of martial arts for girls
	Male dominance over sports (infrastructures)	Allocating wasted time to women's training in gyms, Not allocating facilities to female athletes, Allocating special and dead times of the halls to women, Separation of women's and men's sports, The decline of women's sports after taking women's sports under the supervision of men
	The patriarchal culture of sports	Differences in advertisements for male and female athletes, Not looking specifically at women's sports, Underestimating the importance of women's sports compared to men's sports, Different valuation of the medals of male and female athletes, The lack of women entering the international fields in recent years, Obvious disregard for women and failure to introduce women to international forums, Giving completely different prizes to male and female athletes with the same field and competition conditions, Giving more

		power to men's sports
	The culture governing open sports spaces for women	Not being able to exercise outside the stadium and closed environments, Men and boys Negging at female athletes in parks, Nterrogate the athlete due to the loss of hijab due to natural events in outdoor sports, It is difficult for women to exercise in parks and open spaces
	Family support, women's sports development	Preferring lessons and studying instead of sports, Encouraging and supporting the family to continue studying and playing sports for fun, not championship and professional, The family's negative experience of the sports profession/ the lack of professional sports for women in Iran, The extreme sensitivity of the family towards their daughter's training by men, Disgrace in the family due to sports/type of clothing among relatives, Common misconceptions of not exercising (a child should not exercise because he will not understand), The family's fear of physical injury as a result of exercise, The view of the family towards male teachers and the thoughts of honor in traditional families, The disproportion of clothing for some fields and male trainers (martial clothing compared to male trainers), Restricting girls in the family because of what others think
	Demand for feminine norms	Preferring to say the word plump instead of fat, Women's sensitivity to other people's comments about their bodies, Sports contradicting the duties of femininity, The contrast between exercise and pregnancy in the public mind, The fear of physical damage and the loss of beauty causes people to stay away from sports, Using the words 'fat' and 'fat' to humiliate, Paying attention to the female athlete first as a woman and then as an athlete, The sexualization of sports by celebrities, Fear of damage to the girl's face and beauty in combat sports, Abandonment of some disciplines in the field of women in Iran is the reason for not attending professional sports, The change in the appearance of girls with martial arts and the desire to continue sports, The rule of female norms such as fashion, pose, makeup, appearance, style, etc.)
Gender stereotypes	Breaking the norms of women in sports	Sports break traditional norms, Women's efforts to remove the stereotype of sports as leisure (sports beyond leisure), Medals for women in fields where men do not excel, Tendency of teenage girls to show strength with strength sports, Tendency to violent sports due to the bitter experience of the lack of security in the place of residence, Female athletes wearing sportswear in society

	Gender segregation of governance	Police force dealing with female athletes in public, The attack or protest of a group of people (fire by choice) against women's sports in public, A blind look at women's clothing in sports fields, Not appreciating sports (underestimating its importance), Not installing photos of female athletes in the city in Muslim countries, Keeping women behind the veil, the need to keep women in a safe place by keeping the hijab
	Lack of health literacy, breaking the wings of women's sports	Women's fear of being injured in sports due to lack of awareness, Quitting exercise due to the fear of spreading the disease, Fear of losing a girl's virginity through martial arts, Cultivation for men about the role of sports on the health of women and girls (health literacy)

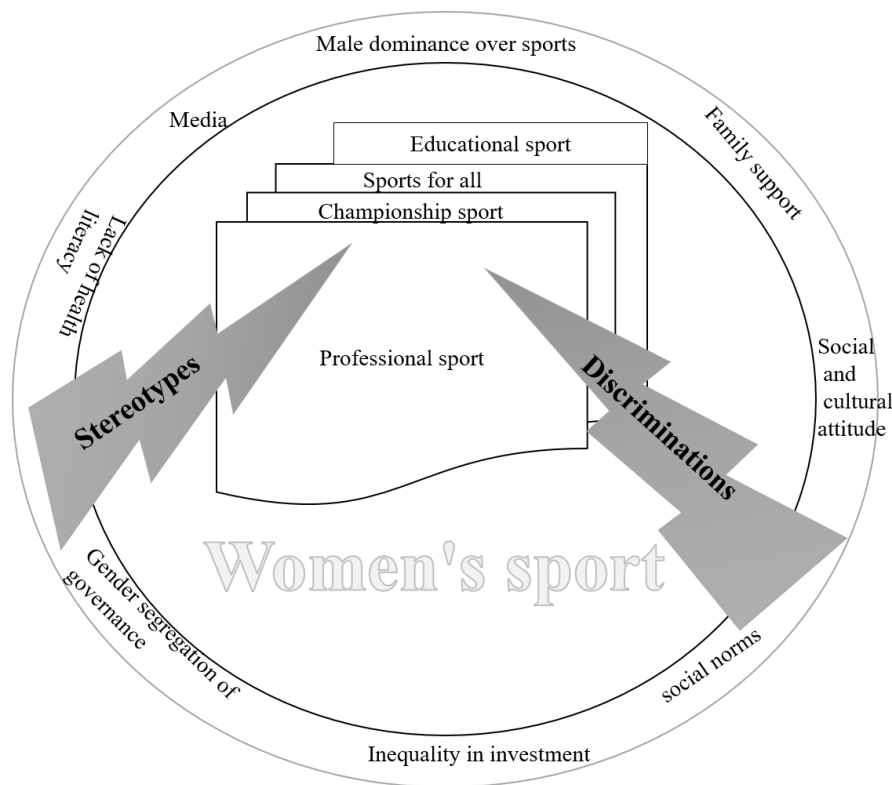A construction pattern of field codes is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A constructed pattern of factors affecting the creation of discriminations and stereotypes in women's sports

Based on the analysis of the research data with the Charms approach, the extracted theoretical codes including gender discrimination and gender stereotypes in women's sports were obtained, which have been analyzed separately.

Discrimination against women is not limited to sports. Rather, it is a concept that has been challenged and fought for years, women trying to be seen as equals to men. Sports is a field that is traditionally male and dominated by male concepts, therefore it leads to the escalation of discrimination (Rowan, 2017).

The concept of gender discrimination in sports, codes of cultural restrictions, management structures, reducing the power of women in sports, not paying attention to the infrastructure of women's sports, lack of media coverage of women's sports, lack of investment in women's sports, social norms, strength sports dominated by men, dominance Men's sports took over society's sports (infrastructures), patriarchal sports culture, the culture that dominates sports open spaces. In general, gender discrimination in sports means the existence of restrictions, and obstacles that prevent women from having equal access to sports opportunities and resources, and this issue creates inequality in sports. There is a common belief among all feminist currents that gender discrimination against women is abhorrent and its roots are found in patriarchal culture and beliefs of traditional societies and should be condemned(Larijani et al., 2018).

Extracted codes related to the concept of gender stereotypes, families' negative view of girls' sports, family prejudices, social and cultural norms around the body, girls' sports participation experiences, fighting against the norm of girls being weak in society, gendering some disciplines, implementing rigid norms of beauty in women. (objectification of women), breaking taboos in sports by women, power systems ruling the society, mistrust towards female athletes and the stigma of girls being weak, low knowledge of athletes, family, and coaches (factors in the formation of negative thoughts towards sports). Stereotypes do not recognize women as human beings with full rights, they prevent the establishment of harmonious and equal relationships between people of both sexes and the full participation of women in the development of their society, thus preventing women from flourishing in all their human capacities (Moghadam, 2018).

Discussion

Based on the codes extracted from the data analysis, the two categories of gender stereotypes in women's sports and gender discrimination in sports were able to represent and explain a high level of factors affecting women's sports, which are discussed below.

Gender discrimination in women's sports

The results of the research showed that many factors in sports cause gender discrimination, and these factors affect the participation of women and girls in sports. Although many women and girls participate in sports both recreationally, and professionally their number is increasing day by day (Fink, 2015). Some factors lead to their boredom, disappointment, and demotivation in such a way that it can be said that it limits the amount of interest and promotion of sports among them. The category of sports should create a platform for a better world and an opportunity to promote gender

equality. According to the research conducted (Joseph et al., 2022). Many efforts have been made to promote gender equality in sports, however, there is still a long way to advance this category, especially in Iranian sports. Common gender discrimination can be derived from the existing culture in society, family, or management systems governing sports. The findings of the research showed that cultural restrictions are one of the main factors creating gender discrimination in sports. The entire history of culture is full of various prohibitions and restrictions (Gushchina et al., 2019). Such restrictions can be within any family or society.

The participants in the current research have issues such as the existence of customary challenges with the issue of clothing in sports environments and, fear of lack of support, which has led to a sense of discrimination and inequality in women and they also attributed the low status of female athletes to the common culture in society. In this regard, one of the

participants says: " Now many places have free entrance for men, but women are told no, they don't have the right to go and exercise…. Every girl in Iran who does sports is really doing something very strange, because it is really hard because there is pressure on girls from all sides, from our society, from the environment around us, especially those who are a national team and do professional sports" .(p10)

Another thing that leads to gender discrimination is the existing management structures in sports in the country, which leads to a decrease in the power of women in sports. As the findings show, the policy governing the federations has led to the lack of promotion and advancement of women, a phenomenon known as the glass ceiling. And it includes all kinds of job discrimination that prevent women from reaching high jobs and power (Mehrara et al., 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to change the constitution of federations for the realization of women's rights and also, the need to choose competent women in management positions is more visible than ever. Involving women and preventing gender discrimination requires investment by policymakers and planners in this field (Movafaq et al., 2023), (Shayegan et al., 2023). In this case, one of the women says: "There are men in all decision-making positions... And the maximum number of votes is for men. When this is the case, women will no longer have the opportunity to vote. When there are only three women in an assembly of approximately 45 people, well, those women will not be heard at all, nor will they be seen... Now I don't care about the behind-the-scenes stories... after women are not allowed to decide at all (louder opportunity) Now you look at the fact that they are vice presidents in national women's federations, right? But they don't have the right to vote, well, this position doesn't help... In your opinion, what's the point of this? You physically participate in an environment, give opinions, make suggestions, but when they want to vote, you don't have the right to vote".(p1)

Among the other factors that have caused the feeling of discrimination in women is the lack or absence of gyms and sports halls at appropriate hours and assigning the worst possible hours to women, i.e. from 8 am to 4 pm And this is one of the reasons for the decrease in the presence of women in sports environments. This neglect has consequences such as; Quitting sports due to the difficulty of accessing gyms, facing taunt (quiet hours of the city), and being labeled by people around you for going to sports clubs in other areas of the city it leads to a lack of physical activity in youth, followed by the fear of doing sports at an older age. If officials and policymakers pay special attention to the creation of sports infrastructure in all regions so that sports are institutionalized from childhood this will not only lay the foundation for the promotion of culture, followed by society's acceptance and better understanding of the society's girls and women athletes rather, none of the girls will face negative looks for going to clubs and gyms. In this case, one of the girls says:" The time between 12:00 and 2:00 or 3:00 to 4:00 in the afternoon when the sun is so hot and the weather is so bad that no one comes there to visit. The weather is so hot and they tell us that you can come in the summer season. Why can't we come another time? Because all the hours of the gym have been given to male footballers they don't have time for women to practice. After the follow-ups, the officials allow you to come at the specified time only on even days. And they don't understand that a runner should train every day, how to train on different days, and we had to train on the street...".(p7)

Among other research findings that can help to promote the culture of women's sports and prevent the increase of gender discrimination, the media are the perfect mirror of the general culture of society, many social institutions, especially the media, can play an essential role in promoting and developing the country's scientific, cultural, social, and economic development, but radio and television as the

national media have a more effective role because television usually brings significant cultural-social effects in different dimension(Khajenoori & Zadfaraj, 2022). Inadequate coverage of women's competitions leads to the lack of sponsorship and the reluctance of sponsors to support athletes and different sports teams. The media has many opportunities to influence society's acceptance of female athletes and can develop sports by creating opportunities to show them and cause the elimination of discrimination (Eydi et al., 2019; Kiani & Nazari, 2023; Nazari et al., 2022; Zand et al., 2022). By influencing the culture of families and society, the media spreads women's sports and destroys patriarchal culture. Less representation of female athletes in the media makes this group less admired for their athletic abilities Fink (2013) this itself is a factor for the lack of mythmaking in women's sports, which eventually causes disappointment at the professional levels and grounds migration or leaving the sport. In this case, one of the girls says:" When the news of winning first place in the Asian Games was broadcast, at that time they said what is Kabaddi, where is it? We want to come and do Kabaddi, where did the interest come from? From being seen on TV, when it is shown more, women are more attracted to sports, I struggle so much in sports, I say to myself, I wish I could go too (referring to immigration), Everyone here (workplace, club) tells me why don't you leave Iran when you can, Since we have an Asian position, we can go easily".(p3)

Inequality in the investment of women's sports is one of the other variables affecting the development of women's sports, according to the codes extracted in the present research, while strengthening economic factors and creating suitable economic platforms, efforts should be made to resolve this inequality. One of these factors is not paying proper and equal salaries to the coaches of women's national teams. One of the trainers says about this:" Telling me, come on, we need to get Olympic

quota for the first time, Saying you can come, Well, I came and spent a lot of time without getting paid, no man here does that (without pay), I made a mistake, I came and didn't get paid".(p9)

Among the other primary codes extracted in the interviews are the common norms in society around women's bodies, challenges for women to exercise in parks and open spaces, and fewer images of professional female athletes installed in the city. Social norms are one of the factors of gender inequality and discrimination. Also, the dos and don'ts of social life include certain principles and rules that people are expected to follow(Ofoghi & Sadeghi, 2010).

This is an issue that has been mentioned in previous research(Abad et al., 2021; Nazari et al., 2022). In this case, one of the girls says:" We were practicing on the same hot asphalt in the direction of Mother Park, someone called the police and they took us to the police station.... These people do not seem to have seen even if you wear long sleeves with a scarf and they get stuck in our cover while our outerwear is not so free and long, and this bothers a runner while running" (p7). One of the national trainers says:" I don't see any photos of women in the city, only pictures of male athletes "(p12)

Another identified code refers to the patriarchal culture in sports and it indicates the dominance of men in this area because the sport has power and aggression and at the same time it is considered a male activity hence, it gives limited access to women (Xu et al., 2021). Gender segregation in sports has existed for a long time. Some sports are played exclusively by men (rugby, American football, etc.) while some others are mostly performed by women (ballet, synchronized, etc.) (Heidrich & Chiviacowsky, 2015). Differences in advertisements for male and female athletes, the large gap in the social status of male and female athletes in society, underestimating the importance of women's sports compared to

men's sports, and different valuing of male and female athletes' medals were among the most important codes that were extracted from the words of women who participated in this research which indicates the dominance of men over sports and the existence of a patriarchal culture in this field and the cause of discrimination and inequality. Such discrimination in women's sports is important since women, as half of the population of society, play an important role in the mental health of the society and the family. Regarding the extracted codes, one of the athletes says: 'They don't look at the children of the national team to at least consider a massager for them..."(p5)

Another says, 'When we say that women are the teachers of human society, why shouldn't we consider the head of a sports caravan to be a woman? How long should the leader of the caravan be a man? The leader of the delegation to the Paralympic Games, the leader of the delegation to the Student Games, and the leader of the delegation to the Student Games. Well, isn't it enough!?(p1)

Mass media has become one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values in modern culture(Kane, 1988) . Therefore, they can destroy or strengthen gender stereotypes, the main focus of the media is on their physical appearance and femininity, and they look at women in terms of gender and this view creates and at the same time reinforces gender stereotypes, which can hurt society's understanding of women's capabilities. All these things should be effective in strengthening women's self-confidence and empowering them.

Gender stereotypes in women's sports

Stereotypes reflect public expectations about members of certain social groups (Rodríguez Sánchez et al., 2023) stereotypes such as families' negative view of girls exercising and family prejudices against girls have been

common among Iranian families for a long time. Since sports were considered a male category, there are bigotry and blind views towards girls and their sports among ethnicities with different cultures. Families always encourage their sons to participate in sports while denying the right to girls and women. Also, the implementation of rigid norms of beauty in women, stigmatization of female athletes, and the lack of knowledge of people have caused the formation of negative thoughts about sports for girls and women. Gender stereotypes are usually created in early childhood and have a deep impact on children's sense of self and usually affect their behavior and future (Jhuremalani et al., 2023). Stereotypes that are common among Iranian girls since childhood and have affected their sports performance and their choice of sports fields. Fear of physical injury as a result of exercising fear of girls losing their virginity in sports such as gymnastics or riding or a change in appearance such as a broken nose in martial arts limiting girls in this case says one of the female athletes:" In the beginning, they said that girls get hit, this discipline is not good at all (referring to the karate discipline) (p2). These are just a few examples of the long list of gender stereotypes mentioned by the interviewees. These stereotypes ultimately lead to gender discrimination. Therefore, identifying the factors influencing their formation and promotion can be considered an important step in preventing gender discrimination (especially against women) and highlight their role in the development process of women (Riahi, 2007)

Stereotypes are one of the most important facts of social life it is some thinkers believe that stereotyping is the main phenomenon of social life. The possibility of reducing stereotypes with the presence of female sports superstars is not far from expected. Since women find such models less than men in their favorite sports, as a result, they face more stereotypes than men (Midgley et al., 2021), which causes poorer performance in sports (Flore & Wicherts,

2015).

The more gender stereotypes there are about women's sports, such as when a sport is considered 'masculine', the women face more gender stereotype threats (Gentile et al., 2018) . In this case, one of the martial arts girls says:" Everyone told my father why your daughter should do a man's sport, they said she will get hurt because the girl is stretching (referring to the loss of virginity) and she will get hurt, Then the coach is male, why do you let him exercise with a male coach? Their clothes are not suitable!!".(p2)

Conclusion

The results of this research and other research conducted in this field have well shown the existence of stereotypes regarding the female gender (Heidrich & Chiviacowsky, 2015; Mateo-Orcajada et al., 2021) and this issue indicates that there is a need for culture building by the media, officials and cultural planners. Also, the efforts of women themselves to show their abilities and excellent performance in the evaluation can lead to the elimination of stereotypes (Sullivan et al., 2022) (Sainz-de-Baranda et al., 2020). Participants stated that they resisted gender stereotypes in their family or place of residence. As Malloy Klein's research (Mulvey & Killen, 2015) has also shown, girls resist stereotypes and try to destroy them. In this case, one of the women says:" Female athletes are more patient and better women because they learn to be patient and bear these words and all these things".(p14) Also, efforts to eliminate gender discrimination should be systemic and structural in all societies and all parts of each society (Smith & Sinkford, 2022).

The research had some limitations. First, athletes from all levels (professional, championship, and beginner) were interviewed in general, and there was no distinction between these groups. It is suggested that in future research, each of these groups should be examined separately. Also, in this study, age segregation for athletes was not done and women and girls from all over Iran were studied in general. In addition, due to the cultural differences in the country, it is suggested that in future research, the perspectives of women and girls in different cultures should be examined separately.

It seems that a more detailed analysis of the role of the media and social networks in promoting or confronting gender discrimination in sports, including examining the published content, the way female athletes are represented, and the impact of these media on public attitudes, as well as analyzing the individual experiences of female athletes in the face of gender discrimination, through in-depth interviews and the study of specific cases, can help to accurately identify their challenges and successes slowly. These data can help develop targeted and effective strategies to reduce discrimination and promote women's participation in sports. Also, among other proposed solutions in this study, establishing cooperation with international and national organizations that are active in the field of promoting gender equality and the development of women's sports, can lead to the exchange of knowledge, resources, and useful experiences. These collaborations can help strengthen joint initiatives and improve the conditions of women's sports globally. Finally, it is also important to encourage and support future research that addresses various aspects of gender discrimination and contributes to our understanding of the issue.

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