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# Identification and Evaluation of Factors Affecting Gender Inequality and Women's Participation in Sports Activities

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A B S T R A C T

**Objective:** The aim of this research is to explain gender inequality and women's participation in sports activities based on the Three-Branch Model.

**Methods and Materials:** The research method is mixed, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative section, data were collected through in-depth interviews, and after coding the concepts and categories based on the Three-Branch Model, the final model was developed. The interviews reached theoretical saturation after 15 interviews. Then, to test the quantitative model, a sample size of 200 women, including managers, assistants, and athletes associated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, was selected using Cochran's formula. The exploratory results of this model indicate that improving existing structures, increasing the availability of sports facilities, reducing the costs of amenities, and enhancing safety levels can lead to increased sports participation and reduced inequality in sports participation.

**Findings:** In the inferential analysis, the Three-Branch Model was tested using structural equation modeling. Structural factors (β = 0.88), environmental factors (β = 0.53), and behavioral factors (β = 0.28) have a direct and significant effect on gender inequality and sports participation.

**Conclusion:** It is recommended that relevant organizations take the mentioned factors into account in efforts to address gender inequality and women's participation in sports activities.

***Keywords:*** *Gender inequality, sports participation, women, Three-Branch Model.*

## 1. Introduction

Today, women are increasingly interested in participating in society. However, gender discrimination within society limits women's involvement in related activities. One reason for the lack of progress toward gender equality is the prevalence of negative gender stereotypes, which may facilitate discrimination in women's

activities across various fields and reduce their career advancement opportunities (Casad et al., 2021). This discrimination is also evident in the field of sports. Findings indicate that cross-cultural differences regarding gender inequality exist. Awareness of gender inequality in media and sports is crucial, as awareness is the first barrier to overcome when striving for social change. Awareness of gender inequality can be raised in higher education by focusing on knowledge gaps, such as the underrepresentation of women in coaching or refereeing roles, lower-ranking professional roles that conform to traditional gender norms, and the use of quota systems (Schaillée et al., 2021).

Identifying discursive practices that may hinder actions to increase gender balance in sports governance at national and international levels should be examined. Board members justify their resistance to gender balance using discourses of meritocracy, neoliberalism, silence/inactivity, and diversity. Resistance to gender balance in sports governance may partly stem from the sports capital and habitus of board members and their ability to normalize judgments that may exclude women (Knoppers et al., 2021). Despite a 0.5% annual increase in women authorship in the field of sports over the past two decades, women remain significantly underrepresented in leading authorship and editorial board positions in sports science. The underlying mechanisms of these findings and the necessary actions to mitigate potential gender inequalities require further investigation (Martínez-Rosales et al., 2021). Women, particularly in leadership roles within sports organizations, do not participate substantially, and findings indicate that sexism is the most significant barrier. The dominant culture in sports organizations perpetuates gender discrimination. Sexism occurs in women's daily interactions with their supervisors, colleagues, and those they encounter as part of their jobs. Such experiences lead to professional behaviors where women confront them using tactics that ensure their survival in the sports industry (Chang, 2024). In 2019, the development of women's sports was reported. Increased participation rates, media coverage, investment, and support for women's activities were observed during this period.

After the global spread of COVID-19, which halted most forms of sports, there were frequent concerns about the future of women's sports. Many women compared their sports to men's in terms of media coverage and financial support, and women's sports, in a subordinate position with fewer resources and support, experienced severe consequences after the pandemic. However, there were considerations that the halt in sports could foster personal development, increase participation upon the return of sports, and create space for reconfiguring sports. Those involved in sports are encouraged to critically engage with the narratives of progress in women's sports (Bowes et al., 2021).

Piggot et al. (2024) stated in their research that sports organizations possess significant ideological power to display and reinforce dominant cultural ideas about gender. The organization and portrayal of sports events and spaces continue to promote and reinforce a gendered hierarchy, where forms of heroic masculinity are privileged. Organizations can address this gender discrimination (Piggott et al., 2024). Alsarve (2024) in his research, identified three fundamental issues related to achieving gender equality: quota systems, overcoming gender equality as a side project, and how Sweden's democratic sports infrastructure reinforces the continued dominance of men. Cultural interventions alone limit the chances of achieving gender equality. To implement transformative interventions, cultural and economic resources must be equally identified and redistributed to deconstruct gender order in organizations and ensure participation based on recognized conditions (Alsarve, 2024). Espedalen & Seippel (2024) in their research identified six reasons why youth quit sports concerning three types of social inequalities: socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender. Their results demonstrated that gender differences often relate to individuals' ethnicity (Espedalen & Seippel, 2024). Haxtrum et al. (2024) stated in their research that schools, by fostering and rewarding a sporting habitus associated with men, white individuals, and affluent tendencies, create unequal structures of sports opportunities. These processes mask the advantages and successes in sports as earned competencies and restrict individuals—especially women—from benefiting from individual and social participation in sports (Hextrum et al., 2024).

Addressing inequality against women has always been a crucial issue in societies. One of the unequal areas for women is their participation in sports activities. Sports have always been more than a social activity and are considered one of the most valuable social tools for connecting people across local and global landscapes. Current backgrounds and past theoretical literature suggest that family pressures, overcrowding, lack of time, lack of companionship, financial issues, and distance from sports facilities limit women's participation in sports activities. Some studies have grouped these challenges into physical, economic, and socio-cultural


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issues. Others have identified a lack of energy or time as one of the most significant challenges preventing women from participating in sports. Moreover, other research has emphasized that income level may be one of the limiting factors for women's growth in sports, as income plays a more critical role in sports participation than age, gender, education level, and race. Based on what has been mentioned, it is necessary to provide the conditions and settings required for more active participation of women in the field of sports. In this regard, preliminary investigations have identified the issues, problems, existing barriers, gender inequalities, and the social, political, and economic culture of Iran in this path, and addressing these barriers can significantly promote sports and women's participation in society.

Another necessity for conducting this research relates to expanding existing knowledge on gender inequality and sports participation. Due to the increasing participation of women in society, which is a fundamental need of any modern society, and the benefits of physical activity, which reduce healthcare costs for women, mothers, and all members of society, and the role of the mother as a life-giver, requiring physical and mental readiness to fulfill this critical responsibility that maintains and enhances societal health, the need and importance of conducting this research is felt. Additionally, decision-making and policy-making organizations related to women's sports in the country can benefit from the findings of this research for better planning. Therefore, this research identifies and analyzes the factors affecting gender inequality and its relationship with the level of women's participation in sports activities.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### *2.1. Study design and Participant*

The present research is applied in terms of its objective, aiming to improve policy-making related to women's participation in sports. From a classification perspective, this research is mixed or combined (qualitative + quantitative), with the qualitative part being exploratory and the quantitative part descriptive and analytical. Methodologically, in the qualitative section, qualitative content analysis based on the Three-Branch Model was employed, while in the quantitative section, a correlational approach using structural equation modeling (SEM) was used. This research is categorized as a field study, based on real-world observations and aimed at discovering unknowns to achieve fundamental solutions.

In the qualitative section of the research, qualitative data were initially collected through semi-structured interviews, followed by data analysis and the development of a qualitative model. The qualitative method used in this research is qualitative content analysis based on the Three-Branch Model. In the quantitative section, the survey method was used, with a researcher-designed questionnaire to confirm the qualitative findings and to determine the weight of each factor identified in the qualitative model. To test and validate the final qualitative model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed. This research seeks to examine the structural, behavioral, and environmental factors influencing gender inequality and women's sports participation.

The qualitative population includes a limited number of female managers, deputies, and athletes affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth. The quantitative population includes a larger group of female managers, deputies, and athletes affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth. In this study, the researcher reached theoretical saturation after conducting 15 in-depth interviews. The sampling method was snowball sampling, where each participant helped identify other potential participants. The second part of the research, which is quantitative and survey-based, followed a more defined sampling process, and based on the identified population size, Cochran's formula was used. According to Cochran's formula, 200 individuals were selected as the sample size. The data collection tools differ for the qualitative and quantitative sections.

In the qualitative section, data were collected using semi-structured interviews, where the researcher posed qualitative questions in three specific areas: structural, contextual, and behavioral. If the interviewees deviated from the topic, they were redirected to focus on women's sports participation in the context of gender inequality. In the quantitative section, based on the Three-Branch Model, a quantitative questionnaire was developed with three main components—structural, contextual, and behavioral—and their subcategories to gather quantitative information from the respondents. In the qualitative section, interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and coding. During the coding process, the data were analyzed and transformed into concepts, which were later combined to create new concepts that contributed to explaining the topic. In the quantitative section, data analysis was conducted at three levels: description, explanation, and prediction. At the descriptive level, frequency distributions of variables were obtained, and a picture of the study population was produced


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using cross-tabulation tables. The use of statistical techniques was based on the nature of the variables in the hypotheses and the research model. At the explanatory level, tests comparing the mean of the dependent variable between respondents were used. Finally, the developed model was tested using structural equation modeling with Amos Graphics software.

Since there is no precise consensus on the concepts of validity and reliability in qualitative research, trustworthiness has been introduced as a criterion replacing validity and reliability. In this research, all steps were completed, demonstrating the trustworthiness of the qualitative findings. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by supervisors, advisors, and experts in the field. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using SPSS software, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.7 indicates that the questionnaire adequately defined and measured the research variables.

## 3. Findings and Results

To extract the theoretical model or conduct the theory-building process, the researcher conducted interviews with 15 female managers, deputies, and athletes affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth. The key topics discussed with them were noted. It is important to mention that all stages of theory extraction and coding processes in this section were conducted manually. The interview texts were carefully read multiple times, and the codes and statements were extracted.

The total number of these extracted statements amounted to 208. In the next stage of coding and analysis, all 208 statements were categorized into 36 themes. Finally, the findings were reduced into three main categories, based on the rules of the Three-Branch Model: structural, behavioral, and environmental.

**Table 1**

*Selective Coding and the Three-Branch Model*

| Selective Coding | Axial Codes |
|---|---|
| Structural | Insufficient and unequal infrastructure and facilities, Inconsistent media policies, Inequality in education, Wage inequality in sports, Legal rights inequality, Patriarchy, Historical roots of inequality, Lack of social structure reform, Conflict between traditional and modern views |
| Behavioral | Women's lack of personal motivation and motivational barriers, Value and normative barriers in sports, Lack of women's demands and social inactivity, Women's negative experiences and low managerial skills |
| Environmental | Environmental insecurity and a discriminatory cultural environment, Lack of equal opportunities in the environment, Lack of social support and unaddressed fundamental demands of women |

The analysis of the threefold categories and the identified indicators shows that explaining gender inequality in sports or sports participation is a product of three main areas: structural, behavioral, and environmental.

In the qualitative section of this study, based on the sample size formula, 202 female managers, deputies, and athletes affiliated with the Ministry of Sports and Youth were selected, and data were collected and analyzed using cluster sampling. The research findings show that among the sample, 46.5% (94 participants) were women, and 53.5% (108 participants) were men. It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents were male, which is significant in relation to the high volume of male leadership in women's sports and may be a key reason for inequality in women's sports. Before inferential analysis, a normality test of the data was required and performed.

**Table 2**

*Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Tests for Normality*

| Factor | Component | K-S Statistic | K-S Level | Significance | S-W Statistic | S-W Level | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structural Factors | Insufficient and unequal infrastructure and facilities | 0.255 | 0.201 | | 0.769 | 0.234 | |
| | Inconsistent media policies | 0.267 | 0.152 | | 0.880 | 0.321 | |
| | Inequality in education | 0.250 | 0.363 | | 0.868 | 0.343 | |
| | Wage inequality in sports | 0.239 | 0.156 | | 0.864 | 0.341 | |
| | Legal rights inequality | 0.267 | 0.287 | | 0.823 | 0.333 | |
| | Patriarchy | 0.341 | 0.341 | | 0.921 | 0.216 | |
| | Historical roots of inequality | 0.334 | 0.255 | | 0.943 | 0.384 | |
| | Lack of social structure reform | 0.278 | 0.218 | | 0.897 | 0.527 | |
| | Conflict between traditional and modern views | 0.206 | 0.238 | | 0.799 | 0.383 | |



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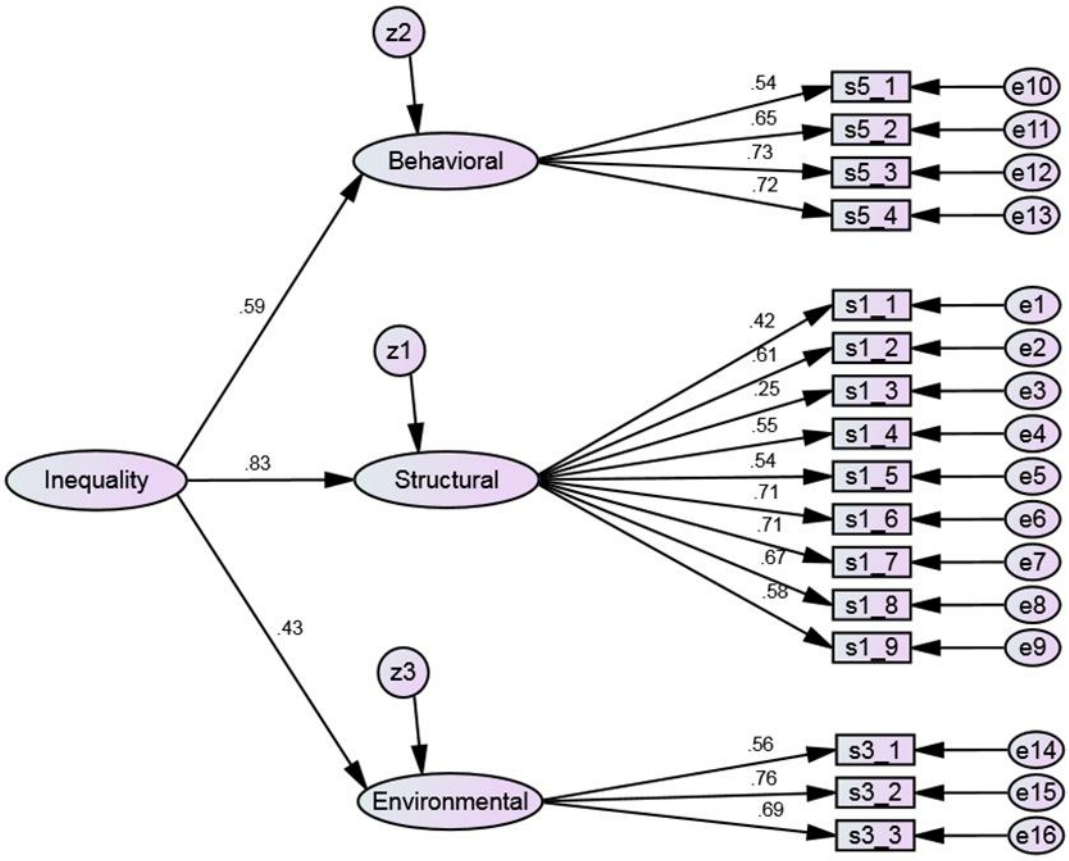
| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Behavioral Factors | Women's lack of personal motivation and motivational barriers | 0.196 | 0.329 | 0.726 | 0.477 |
| | Value and normative barriers in sports | 0.287 | 0.280 | 0.854 | 0.350 |
| | Lack of women's demands and social inactivity | 0.256 | 0.355 | 0.882 | 0.341 |
| | Women's negative experiences and low managerial skills | 0.222 | 0.287 | 0.900 | 0.219 |
| Environmental Factors | Environmental insecurity and discriminatory cultural environment | 0.274 | 0.151 | 0.860 | 0.337 |
| | Lack of equal opportunities in the environment | 0.265 | 0.288 | 0.820 | 0.329 |
| | Lack of social support and unaddressed fundamental demands of women | 0.331 | 0.339 | 0.911 | 0.233 |

Based on the results from Table 2, it can be concluded that the research variables are normally distributed, and normal statistical tests were used for inferential analysis. The KMO value is 0.927, indicating the suitability of the sample size for factor analysis and sufficient sampling adequacy, allowing for factor analysis to proceed. In this section, the results of confirmatory factor analysis for each research variable were performed separately using Amos software. The positivity of all factor loadings provides acceptable results for the above model.

According to the results of the factor analysis of the qualitative section, 16 components related to the main factor of explaining gender inequality and sports participation were identified. Therefore, the model consists of 16 indicators, three components (structural, behavioral, and environmental factors), and one final category (explaining gender inequality and sports participation). When a large construct is composed of several latent variables, second-order confirmatory factor analysis is used. In second-order confirmatory factor analysis, the relationship between observable variables and latent variables, as well as the relationship between latent variables (structural, behavioral, and environmental factors) and the main construct (explaining gender inequality and sports participation), is examined.

**Figure 1**

*Second-order factor analysis model for explaining gender inequality and sports participation*



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In the above model, the final estimation of the components explaining gender inequality and sports participation is specified. The results indicate that the defined patterns for conceptualizing the main construct of the research (explaining gender inequality and sports participation) have high validity and can serve as a solid foundation for future research. Based on the findings from second-order confirmatory factor analysis, each of the structural factors (β = 0.83), behavioral factors (β = 0.59), and environmental factors (β = 0.43) have the highest explanatory power for gender inequality and sports participation, making them appropriate indicators for defining the intended construct.

To determine the strength and direction of the influence of independent variables on the explanation of gender inequality and sports participation, a second-order factor analysis model was employed. Table 3 presents the goodness-of-fit indices along with acceptable and obtained values for the research model. These indices demonstrate the model's fit.

**Table 3**

*Goodness-of-fit indices for the final model*

| Fit Index | Symbol | Obtained Value | Acceptable Fit | Results |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Goodness-of-Fit Index | GFI | 0.888 | Greater than 0.7 | Confirmed |
| Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index | AGFI | 0.839 | Greater than 0.7 | Confirmed |
| Non-Normed Fit Index | TLI | 0.767 | Greater than 0.7 | Confirmed |
| Comparative Fit Index | CFI | 0.783 | Greater than 0.7 | Confirmed |
| Incremental Fit Index | IFI | 0.867 | Greater than 0.7 | Confirmed |
| Parsimony-Normed Fit Index | PNFI | 0.728 | Greater than 0.5 | Confirmed |
| Root Mean Square Error of Approximation | RMSEA | 0.918 | Less than 0.1 | Confirmed |
| Chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio | CMIN/df | 2.09 | Value between 1 and 3 | Confirmed |

Since the model is confirmed by the goodness-of-fit indices, the model can be used to test the research hypotheses. The results of the hypothesis testing, calculated using Amos software, are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Research hypothesis testing results*

| Path From | Path To | Estimate | Standard Error | Critical Value | Significance Level | Hypothesis Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Structural Factors | Gender inequality and sports participation | 1.274 | 0.225 | 5.653 | <0.001 | Confirmed |
| Behavioral Factors | | 0.734 | 0.277 | 2.681 | 0.007 | Confirmed |
| Environmental Factors | | 0.520 | 0.197 | 2.643 | 0.008 | Confirmed |

The hypothesis analysis shows that all three variables—structural factors, behavioral factors, and environmental factors—have a significant impact on explaining gender inequality and sports participation.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

According to the World Health Organization, a quarter of the global population is considered physically inactive, failing to meet the official guidelines set by the WHO. However, systematically, women are more likely than men to engage in insufficient physical activity. One of the key social determinants closely related to these differences is gender inequality, which is linked to desirable scenarios in terms of human rights, equality, freedom, and social aspects such as economic development, work, and better health conditions. The exploratory findings of this model show that improving existing structures, increasing access to sports facilities, lowering costs, and enhancing safety levels can increase sports participation and reduce inequality in sports participation. Furthermore, gender inequality in sports participation is influenced by both individual and environmental factors. Built environmental features, such as proximity to sports facilities, perceived social security, and economic factors like the cost of sports facilities, contribute to explaining gender inequalities in sports participation. The qualitative model highlights the interaction between these



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three branches, meaning that structural, behavioral, and environmental factors can influence each other. In the inferential analysis of the study, the Three-Branch Model was tested using structural equation modeling. In this model, there are 36 observable variables and 4 latent variables. Structural factors, with ten indicators, have a direct and significant effect (β = 0.88) on explaining gender inequality and sports participation, followed by environmental factors with three indicators (β = 0.53). Behavioral factors, with four indicators, also have a direct and significant effect (β = 0.28) on gender inequality and sports participation. Ultimately, based on the coefficients of the second-order factor model, the impact of the three factors—structural, behavioral, and environmental—on explaining gender inequality and sports participation has been confirmed. The hypothesis analysis indicates that all three variables have a significant impact on explaining gender inequality and sports participation, showing how much gender inequality and sports participation in society are influenced by these factors.

The structural, behavioral, and environmental explanation of inequality in sports can occur under various conditions, but the most critical aspect of the production and reproduction of gender inequality in sports relates to the existing structures in society. The relationship between sports participation and existing structures is reciprocal. Through the study of existing structures, it is demonstrated how sports reflect and reinforce broader hierarchical structures, and even sports ultimately serve as a space for the reproduction of social inequality and stratification. As a result, inequality in sports participation is shaped by a system where individuals and the environment interact. The exploratory findings of this model indicate that improving existing structures, increasing access to sports facilities, lowering costs, and enhancing safety levels can lead to increased sports participation and reduced inequality in sports participation.

Moreno-Llamas et al. (2022), in line with this study, noted that living standards are a determinant of the physical activity of the population. However, women are insufficiently active, highlighting the social gender inequality factors, with economic and health factors playing a significant role (Moreno-Llamas et al., 2022). Similarly, Talebpour et al. (2020) concluded that socioeconomic status, values, social norms, parental role models, women's education, and media consumption have the most significant impact on gender inequality. Evidence consistently shows that adults with lower socioeconomic status are less likely to participate in physical activities and sports than their peers (Talebpour et al., 2019). Hence, increasing socioeconomic inequalities affects the promotion of sports among individuals in different social groups. Strandbu et al. (2020) identified four possible explanations for the gender inequality gap: (1) culture, (2) religion, (3) discrimination/racism, and (4) social class and socioeconomic resources. Initially, among boys, there is no difference between minority and majority groups (Strandbu et al., 2020). However, considering socioeconomic resources, minority boys tend to have a slightly higher participation rate than majority boys. Among girls, those from minority backgrounds are significantly less likely to participate in sports clubs than those from majority backgrounds. Analyses suggest that socioeconomic resources affect both boys' and girls' sports participation, with religion somewhat explaining the minority-majority gap found among girls.

Gender inequality in sports participation is also influenced by individual and environmental factors. Cognitive individual factors, such as the intention to participate in sports derived from behavior change theories, are significant determinants of sports participation and vary according to individuals' tendencies and even age. However, as suggested by social environment models, the larger environmental and social contexts where behaviors are formed and sustained play a crucial role. Built environmental features, such as proximity to sports facilities, perceived social security, and economic factors, like the cost of sports facilities, contribute to explaining gender inequalities in sports participation.

Storr et al. (2022), consistent with this study, noted that sports environments have long been key sites of gender discrimination and exclusion (Storr et al., 2022). Sports are associated with well-being, and increasing physical activity among disadvantaged groups is a key target for many governments, with a lack of well-being hindering participation and reinforcing gender bias. Poorer access to facilities and infrastructure influences participatory behaviors, and environmental features are likely to have a direct impact on existing structures and individual behaviors. Tandon et al. (2021), in line with this study, indicated that access to physical activity opportunities and sports, and thus the potential benefits of participation, are unequally distributed across society, with many lacking access to sports facilities (Tandon et al., 2021). Increasingly, it is recognized that many of these determinants interact and feed back into each other, creating a complex causal network. For example, individuals are somewhat classified


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into neighborhoods based on characteristics like age, income, and spatial clustering. Individual and residential neighborhood characteristics influence sports participation behaviors. As a feedback mechanism, the availability of sports facilities in the neighborhood may change, which subsequently affects sports participation behaviors, altering social norms that may influence participation. Simultaneously, environments reinforce individual cognitive factors and regulate behaviors, determining how individuals interact with each other and the environment.

From a behavioral perspective, Coley et al. (2021), in line with this study, stated that women are significantly underrepresented in sports science research and physical activity. As such, most sports science research and physical activity findings currently apply only to men. Therefore, researchers and practitioners must be aware of the ongoing gender data gap in the current literature and address this in future studies. For example, stronger tendencies towards sports are associated with greater access to sports facilities. These complexities illustrate that sports participation arises from a system with multiple levels that are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

To identify optimal ways to promote sports participation and reduce inequalities in sports participation, simultaneous attention to three levels—structural, behavioral, and environmental—is necessary. The Three-Branch Model is suitable for explaining gender inequality and sports participation due to its focus on these three factors. The findings of this study, based on the Three-Branch Model, have identified three key determinants of gender inequality in sports.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

Thus, the first recommendations focus on infrastructure development as the most critical structural factor. Building sports venues in various neighborhoods and parts of cities would increase access to sports venues for all groups, resulting in higher sports participation among women. This action not only allows women easier access to sports facilities but also increases their participation in sports. In Iran, infrastructure development is typically the responsibility of the government; however, due to the government's numerous service-related challenges, it would be better to strengthen the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, the activities of sports NGOs, which can promote greater sports participation, should be supported and strengthened. Governmental and non-governmental organizations, by engaging in sports participation, not only enhance others' participation in sports but also contribute to this participation themselves.

Given the importance of structural factors, it is recommended that structural and executive factors in the domain of women's sports be reviewed, with a shift in favor of women's sports structures. Efforts should also be made to increase women's involvement in sports management, and some managerial programs for women should be considered to provide the necessary motivation for women and allow them to experience more diversity and a higher quality of life. This, by providing a positive outlook for women, improves sports participation and raises awareness, encouraging them to engage more actively in sports. Ultimately, the development and strengthening of sports in rural areas of the country are essential for preparing infrastructure to support women's sports participation. Sports participation among women in rural areas is significantly lower than in urban areas.

When sports programs are implemented in rural areas and small towns, more talent is drawn into sports, resulting in increased sports participation.

Based on the research recommendations, stakeholders are advised to apply the research findings in practical settings to address existing issues and problems. That is, the research problem, which represents the gap between the current and ideal states, must be resolved. For better utilization of scientific findings, other researchers should examine and compare similar topics among other elite groups. Additionally, this research should be conducted in a different elite community to assess the importance of qualitative work by comparing the findings.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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