

A ranking of barrier factors affecting the participation of Iranian females in sport activities

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Although women constitute more than half of the population of each country, their participation in sport is commonly much lower than men's.

Aim of Study. The general objective of the present study was the identification and ranking of factors hindering the female staff of Shahid Chamran University (Ahwaz, Iran) from participating in sport activities.

Material and Methods. The research was based on a descriptive survey. The study sample ($n = 211$) was selected from the entire female staff of Shahid Chamran University ($N = 420$) on the basis of random cluster sampling. The data was collected using a personal questionnaire as well as a researcher-made questionnaire containing 35 items covering four different domains of barrier factors. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were assessed using the exploratory factor analysis ($KMO = 0.80$) and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.88$), respectively. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the research variables, while the inferential statistics was applied to test the hypotheses.

Results. The findings revealed that only 40.8% of subjects were involved in sport activities. The ranking of the barrier factors using the Friedman ranking system demonstrated that economic factors (mean = 3.35), socio-cultural factors (mean = 2.84), personal factors (mean = 2.32), and family factors (mean = 1.49) were the most significant barrier factors affecting the participation of the university female staff in sport activities.

Conclusions. Considering the findings of the present study it is strongly recommended that university authorities should support recreational and sportive programs for the entire university faculty, and especially for its female members.

KEY WORDS

barrier factors, sport participation, female staff, Ahwaz.

Introduction

Sport is now perceived as a fundamental need of all societies [1]. As an active leisure activity, sport plays a determining part in the maintenance and promotion of mental and physical health [2]. Although women form more than half of the population of each country, their participation in sportive activities is, however, lower than that of the male population [3]. Different factors lead to the fact that a considerable number of young people in Iran avoid or at least exhibit little interest in sports and sportive activities. The Iranian female population especially enjoys far fewer opportunities to take part in sportive events than the male population, mostly due to religious and socio-cultural limitations [4]. Despite the considerable increase in the number of highly educated female experts in all fields of life, and in their participation

in many social, financial, cultural, and political areas, the sex restrictions in Iran are still barriers hindering the females from participation in many different activities. It is evident that women as well as men need to enjoy recreational and sportive activities. Nevertheless, Iranian women have unfortunately much fewer opportunities to express their happiness, interests, competitiveness, ambition, self-improvement and vitality. They face different barriers not only as professional athletes, but also as spectators and recreational practitioners of sports for promoting and maintaining health, and gaining mental and physical exhilaration [5]. In general, the depression rate has been reported to be two times higher for women in comparison with men, not only in developing countries but also in highly advanced societies [6].

Professional life normally accounts for mental pressures and work-induced fatigue. Despite acceptable salary rates

in most organizations, factors such as occupational stress, exhaustion, and low motivation to fulfill responsibilities have been reported, which result in the lower efficiency of employees and dissatisfaction of customers [7]. In this respect, sports are strongly recommended by experts in behavioral sciences as effective means to raise the spirit of employees, which would not only result in the improvement of their working efficiency, but also would lead to the growth and promotion of the moral, mental, and social aspects of their lives [8]. Research shows that behavioral problems such as laziness, fatigue, low commitment, and impatience at work are more common in organizations which do not provide their employees with adequate sportive and recreational programs [9]. Numerous investigations have been made to identify the reasons of the limited participation of women in sportive activities both in Iran and abroad. The most important identified barrier factors include lack of company, unawareness of the benefits of sports, shyness, family commitments, unavailability of public means of transportation, and physical incapability [10]. Mirghafoori et al. [4] considered the shortage of facilities as well as financial and social limitations as the most essential barrier factors for the participation of women in sportive activities. Romesa et al. [11] and Henderson et al. [12] reported that shortages of interest, time, facilities, and finances are the most highlighted factors hindering women from taking part in sportive activities. King [13] identified the shortage of sportive areas as a barrier factor of utmost importance. In another investigation, Mannel et al. [9] classified the barrier factors in three different categories: intra-individual, inter-individual, and structural. The results of their study suggested that although lack of interest and knowledge can hinder the female population from participating in sports, the social structures along with cultural limitations are the most important barrier factors.

Research has shown that though Iran has one of the youngest populations in the world, Iranian women suffer from early aging. It is, therefore, absolutely urgent that the government consider new strategies for the optimization of their leisure time [3]. Since women are mostly employed with low levels of physical activities such as organizational employees, secretaries, and so forth, it is of vital importance to incorporate sports into their daily life, to provide them with good health, active lifestyle, and mental and physical exhilaration. It is evidently quite complicated to involve the Iranian female population in sportive activities, given the various numbers of factors influencing the matter, and the fact that sexual differences work as a barrier hindering the women from participating in sports. This highlights the necessity of comprehensive investigation into this issue. Considering the positive effects of sports and physical activities on the general health and hygiene of all members of society, it seems essential to identify and study factors hindering individuals, especially the female population, from participating in sports. Although these barrier factors have been already studied, little research has been dedicated to the identification and investigation of these factors with regard to working women, who face certain limitations due to their occupational responsibilities and lack of time. In this regard, the purpose of the present research was to identify

and rank barrier factors hindering the female staff of Shahid Chamran University (Ahwaz) in Iran from participating in sportive activities. The authors hope that the findings of the current study will guide both the university executives as well as managerial boards of other organizations to provide the working female population with the possibility to participate more in sportive activities, which in turn will lead not only to the improvement of organizational efficiency but also to the promotion of the physical and mental health of female employees and the society in general.

Material and Methods

The present research was based on a descriptive questionnaire survey. The statistical population consisted of female employees of Shahid Chamran University Ahwaz in 2011 ($N = 420$) of which 211 were chosen via random sampling. The data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire that included personal data and 35 items regarding barrier factors on a 5-point Likert scale in four different categories: socio-cultural, economic, personal, and familial factors. The formal validity of the questionnaire was approved by twelve faculty members of the physical education department, while the construct validity was calculated with the use of exploratory factor analysis ($KMO = 0.80$), and reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$) was estimated with Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive statistics was used to examine personal data and research variables, and the Friedman non-parametric test was applied to rank the identified barrier factors.

Results

Table I shows that 123 respondents (58.3%) reported that they did not participate in sportive activities, while only 86 of them (40.8%) were to some extent involved in sports. Considering the level of significance, the results of the Friedman test (Table II) significantly differentiated the effectiveness of different subscales of barrier factors (socio-cultural, economic, personal and familial). Tables 3-7 present the research results in the form of ranking of these subscales.

Table I. The frequency of respondents' participation in sporting activities

Participation rate	Number of respondents	Percent of respondents
I exercise	88	41.7
I don't exercise	123	58.3

Table II. Results of Friedman test on ranks of subscales of four categories of inhibitory factors

Variables	Sample size	Chi-square	Degree of freedom	p
Socio-cultural factors	203	548.49	10	0.001
Economic factors	206	98.13	5	0.001
Personal factors	195	682.35	11	0.001
Familial factors	206	434.83	5	0.001

Considering the ranking mean of the subscale of socio-cultural barrier factors (Table III), the respondents regarded "Lack of support for university officials for women's sports" with an average of 7.91 and "Considering exercise a masculine activity" with a mean of 3.27 as the most and the least important subscales of socio-cultural barrier factors, respectively.

The subscale ranking means of economic barrier factors (Table IV) clearly indicate that in respondents' view, "Lack of free sports classes at the university for female personnel" (4.27) and "Expensive sport clothing and facilities" (2.09) were the most and the least important subscales of this group of barrier factors, respectively.

The subscale mean values of the personal barrier factors (Table V) reveals that the participants indicated "Lack of time due to work overload" (10.47) as the most important barrier factor in this category, while "Suffering from a disease" (4.44) was determined to be the least important.

The mean values from Table VI show that "Fatigue after work" (4.54) and "Objections from parents or husband to participation in sports activities" (1.89) were considered the most and the least important familial barrier factors, respectively.

Table III. Subscale ranking of socio-cultural inhibitory factors

Rank	Subscale	Mean	SD
1	Lack of support from university officials for women's sports	7.91	1.129
2	Lack of special sports programs in non-office hours of female personnel	7.68	1.099
3	Prioritizing work over sport in all circumstances	7.46	1.185
4	Lack of security	6.60	1.513
5	Lack of a companion for participation in sports activities	6.57	1.198
6	Lack of support from society for women's sports	6.41	1.290
7	Lack of proper media promotion of women's sports	5.81	1.179
8	Improper socio-cultural beliefs	5.51	1.440
9	Lack of proper media coverage of women's sports	5.40	1.249
10	Fear of getting bulged muscles	3.37	1.286
11	Considering exercise a masculine activity	3.27	1.241

Table IV. Subscale ranking of economic inhibitory factors

Rank	Subscale	Mean	SD
1	Lack of free sports classes at the university for female personnel	4.27	1.008
2	Lack of financial support from the university	3.59	1.194
3	Low income of the personnel	3.56	1.212
4	High fees for sports classes	3.28	1.204
5	High prices of transportation to outside sports classes	3.10	1.268
6	Expensive sports clothing and facilities	2.90	1.304

Table V. Subscale ranking of personal inhibitory factors

Rank	Subscale	Mean	SD
1	Lack of time due to work overload	10.47	1.143
2	Lack of motivation to exercise	7.85	1.269
3	Laziness and torpidity	7.68	1.285
4	Lack of knowledge about different types of sports	7.46	1.195
5	Lack of exercise habits	6.95	1.277
6	Lack of awareness about benefits of exercise	6.77	1.282
7	Fear of inability and lack of skills for doing sports	6.42	1.199
8	Shyness	5.28	1.159
9	Unfit body	5.03	1.043
10	Fear of physical injuries	4.97	1.014
11	Fear of derision from others	4.68	1.034
12	Suffering from a disease	4.44	1.049

Table VI. Subscale ranking of familial inhibitory factors

Rank	Subscale	Mean	SD
1	Fatigue after work	4.54	1.254
2	Spending a lot of time housekeeping and taking care of children	4.29	1.531
3	Fatigue of doing house chores	4.22	1.345
4	Lack of exercise among family members	3.34	1.314
5	Lack of support (help and encouragement) from parents or husband	2.71	1.304
6	Objections from parents or husband to participation in sports activities	1.89	0.954

Table VII. Ranking of four groups of inhibitory factors

Rank	Inhibitory factors	Mean	SD
1	Economic factors	3.35	0.928
2	Socio-cultural factors	2.84	0.743
3	Familial factors	2.32	0.680
4	Personal factors	1.49	0.909

The Friedman test was applied to rank the four groups of barrier factors (socio-cultural, economic, personal, and familial). The results of the test in Table VII demonstrate the following order of importance for these subscales: 1) economic factors (3.53); 2) socio-cultural factors (2.84); 3) familial factors (2.32); and 4) personal factors (1.49).

Discussion

Over the past three decades most developing countries have accounted for more occupational participation of their female population in organizational structures as well as higher demands of equal rights with men in different social aspects. However, women are still confronted with sexual restrictions in many areas of life such as sports

and recreational activities [8]. In Iran, where women form as much as half of the population and are responsible for the upbringing of the next generation and working jobs along with men, their exposure to potential physical and mental damage is inevitable [14]. It is, therefore, evident that if society does not provide its women and especially working women with the possibility to participate in constructive recreational and sportive activities, the outcome will be the loss of motivation and physical strength, and consequently, inefficiency in the upbringing of future generations.

The present study was carried out to identify and rank barrier factors hindering the female employees of Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz from participating in sportive activities. The findings of this research indicate that in respondents' view, the economic factors with six subscales are the most important of the constraints discussed above. Amongst the subscales of this group of factors, "Lack of free sport classes for the employees" was marked as the most important. This supports the findings of Motamedin et al., [17] who reported the expensiveness and high fees of gyms and shortage of sport facilities as the most important factors hindering the citizens of Tabriz from participating in public sports. In addition, the results of present study are in accordance with the findings of Mozafari et al., [18] who ranked the financial factors at the top of the list of constraint factors, Sedarati et al., [16] who identified high fees and lack of facilities as the most important barrier factors, and Salami [15] who reported financial situation and lack of appropriate facilities as the most important barrier factors. Also Mirghafouri et al., Romesa et al., Henderson et al., and King, reported financial shortages and lack of facilities as the most crucial of barrier factors hindering the female population from participating in sportive activities [4, 11, 12, 13]. However, our results are in contrast with the findings of Attarzade et al., [19] who considered laziness, apathy, and impatience in sports as the most important barrier factors. It seems that the best way to overcome the problems in this regard is the building of new sport fands allocating certain hours for sports activities for the female employees. Furthermore, it will be also helpful to provide the university female staff with free sportive facilities and courses.

The findings of the current study indicate that the respondents regarded the socio-cultural factors (2.84) as the second most important category of factors constraining the participation of female employees in sports. Amongst the 11 different subscales of this group "Lack of support from university officials for female personnel's sports" with a mean value of 7.91 was recognized as the most important subscale. These results support the findings of Mirghafouri et al., [4] who reported the significant effect of the socio-cultural factors on the participation of women in sports, Manel et al., [9] who considered the social structures and cultural limitations to be the top barrier factors, as well as Darabi et al., Palmer et al., Brodenson, and Williams et al., [1, 20, 21, 22]. Nevertheless, the results are not in accordance with the findings of Hamedinia et al., who rated the personal reasons at the top of the list, and Samadi et al., who pointed to the unavailability of appropriate sport sites [23, 24]. The socio-cultural factors are associated with traditions, beliefs,

opinions, and the dominant culture as well as with social interactions between individuals. These barriers affect the presence of the Iranian female population in sports most dramatically. The dominance of the male-centered culture in Iranian sport, negative ideas about the effect of sports on the female appearance, fear from damage to religious beliefs and so forth are the most important cultural components in this respect.

According to the respondents, the familial group of constraint factors with 6 subscales and a ranking mean of 2.32 came third in the order of importance. In addition, the subscale "Fatigue after work" was considered the most essential in this category. This result supports the findings of Mozafari et al., [18], but remains in contrast with the findings of Mirghafouri et al., Bagherzadeh et al., Darabi et al., Salami et al., and Sedarati [1, 4, 15, 16, 25]. The possible reasons for this discrepancy are the differences in the statistical population, age, cultural level, geographical location, and educational level of respondents. The ranking of the subscale "Objections from parents or husband to participation in sports activities" as the least important barrier factor is interesting as it signifies an increase in the awareness and acceptance of the male population and parents of the significance of the role of women in Iranian society. This phenomenon, which might be due to the instructive and persuasive impact of the mass media, especially television, and cultural institutions, is of great importance to the development of sport culture in Iran.

The respondents in our study considered personal factors the least important factors hindering university female employees from taking part in sports. Amongst the 12 different subscales in this category "Lack of time due to work overload" was rated most essential. This result does not correspond with the findings of Attarzadeh [19], who reported personal factors such as falling behind the daily schedule, lack of interest, being unaccustomed to sportive activities, and laziness at the top of barrier factors; Motamedin et al., who found expensiveness, high fees, and lack of facilities the most important barrier factors; and Bagherzadeh et al., who indicated lack of free time, fear from educational failure, lack of adequate knowledge about sports, and lack of interest in sports as the most important reason for student inactiveness in sports [17, 25]. The observed contrast might be due to differences in respondents' education and age as well as differences in statistical populations. The personal barrier factors originate from people themselves. Since the respondents considered factors such as shyness or fear from being ridiculed as the least important, it seems that the Iranian female population is becoming stronger in terms of personality and character development.

Conclusions

The findings of the current investigation are promising, and it is possible to see bright prospects for the promotion of women's sport, especially recreational activities, among Iranian families and society at large. Given the fact that the respondents considered the personal and familial factors to be of little importance in regard to the participation of women in sports, it is evident that the attitude of parents

and husbands toward female recreational sport programs in Iran is improving. Certainly, the participation of women in different social activities such as recreational and sportive events is one of their absolute social rights and is displaying a significant increasing trend. This tendency observed in Iran as well as in other parts of the world results from the socio-cultural changes highlighting gender equality. In today's society parents share a similar viewpoint toward the participation of their sons and daughters in educational, cultural, social and economic activities. For example, more than 60% of available places in the national universities in Iran are occupied by women, which can be an indication that the Iranian families consider the progress of their sons and daughters equally important. Furthermore, the allocation of certain sportive facilities to women enables them to participate in athletic activities freely wearing appropriate clothing while abiding by the Islamic rules and regulations (though the number of these facilities should be increased considering the size of the Iranian female population). Moreover, supervision by female coaches and referees has also accounted for Iranian women's participation in sports. Under such circumstances, even the most traditional families not only do not contradict the participation of their wives and daughters in sportive activities, but also encourage them to pursue this goal. This constitutes a good prospect for the future, in which the participation of women in sportive and recreational activities will definitely rise.

Moreover, since the female employees of Shahid Chamran University considered economic factors as the most important reason for inactiveness in sports, and given the relatively low income of people involved in organizational jobs, high costs of commuting to sports venues and facilities, and high fees of sport courses, most of the female employees will be practically unable to attend sport events outside their organization. It is, therefore, recommended that the university authorities consider the provision of facilities and allocation of finances to the organization of free sport programs for female employees, so that their physical and mental promotion and consequently the improvement of organizational efficiency can be guaranteed.

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