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## Gender disparities in physical education participation: Causes and solutions

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### Abstract

Gender disparities in physical education participation remain a significant concern, with girls facing numerous barriers to equal involvement. This study aims to explore the underlying factors contributing to these disparities and provide evidence-based recommendations for creating a more inclusive and equitable environment in physical education. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and institutional barriers hindering equal participation. Historical context reveals the long-standing nature of gender inequalities in sports, with societal attitudes and cultural norms reinforcing stereotypes that discourage girls' involvement. Socioeconomic influences, lack of female role models, and differences in family support further exacerbate the participation gap. The consequences of these disparities extend beyond the gym, impacting physical health, psychological well-being, and future career opportunities in sports. To address these issues, the study proposes implementing inclusive curricula, promoting female leadership, encouraging community and parental involvement, and utilizing media to challenge stereotypes. By adopting a multifaceted approach that combines policy changes, community engagement, and targeted interventions, we can work towards bridging the gender gap in physical education and fostering a more equitable and inclusive environment for all students.

**Keywords:** Gender disparities, physical education participation, barriers, inclusive environment, equitable participation, social factors

### Introduction

Physical education is very important for helping students grow physically, socially, and emotionally. But there are still big differences in how boys and girls participate. These differences come from many factors like societal norms, stereotypes, and school practices that make it harder for everyone to participate equally. For example, traditional ideas often link physical skills and sports interests to boys, causing girls to feel left out or not supported in taking part in physical education. Therefore, it is crucial to tackle these issues to promote inclusivity and equal chances for all students, and to improve overall health and self-esteem. This essay will look into the reasons behind the differences in gender participation in physical education and suggest possible solutions to make the environment better and fairer for all students. Gender differences in physical education (PE) mean that different genders do not get the same participation, treatment, and chances in school physical activities. These differences show up in many ways, such as unequal access to resources, stereotypes about athletic skills, and varied levels of support from teachers. For example, studies show that social norms and cultural beliefs often make it harder for females to take part in sports, which limits their involvement in PE programs (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) <sup>[2]</sup>. Furthermore, these differences are made worse by factors like socioeconomic status and health issues, highlighting the complex nature of inequality in this area (Carter 2018) <sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, to understand these gender differences, it is important to analyze both systemic systems and personal experiences, which can help create effective strategies to encourage equal participation in physical education for all genders.

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**Objectives of the study**

The primary objective of this study is to explore the gender disparities in physical education (PE) participation and to identify the underlying factors contributing to these differences. The study aims to understand the social, cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder equal participation for all genders, with a particular focus on girls. By examining these factors, the research seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for physical education, ensuring that both boys and girls have equal opportunities to engage in physical activities. Additionally, the study intends to highlight the significance of addressing these disparities for improving physical, social, and psychological outcomes for all students.

**Purpose and significance of the study**

Fixing the differences in how boys and girls participate in physical education is important for creating a fair school environment that supports every student’s health and well-being. Addressing this problem goes beyond just looking at numbers; it aims to encourage inclusion so that every student, no matter their gender, has the same chances to take part in physical activities. Participation is key not just for building physical skills but also for developing teamwork, leadership, and self-confidence. By identifying and dealing with the obstacles that cause these differences, teachers can use specific methods that match the suggestions found in the collection of recommendations, which highlights the need for equal access and resources in physical education (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) [2]. Moreover, increasing participation can result in better health outcomes and greater social equality, emphasizing the need to address gender differences as a wider community issue (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) [2].

**Methodology**

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to gender disparities in physical education.

**Quantitative Data Collection:** Surveys will be distributed to students across various schools to collect data on their participation rates, experiences, and perceptions of physical

education. The survey will include questions about socio-economic background, family support, involvement in sports outside of school, and self-perceptions of athletic ability. This data will be analyzed statistically to identify trends and significant differences in participation between genders.

**Qualitative Data Collection:** In-depth interviews will be conducted with physical education teachers, students, and school administrators to gather insights into the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that contribute to gender inequality in PE. These interviews will allow for a deeper exploration of personal experiences, the impact of societal attitudes towards gender and sports, and the effectiveness of current educational practices in addressing gender disparities.

**Data Analysis:** Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns and correlations. The qualitative data will be analyzed thematically, using coding techniques to identify recurring themes related to gender roles, participation barriers, and potential solutions for promoting inclusivity in PE. The combination of these methods provides a holistic view of the issue and facilitate the development of targeted strategies to reduce gender disparities in physical education.

**Overview of current participation statistics**

The participation in physical education shows big gender differences, with current data pointing to the need to look closely at the reasons behind this. New studies show that girls take part in physical education less than boys, and this involvement is often shaped by social and cultural factors as well as how they see their own identities. This gap is worsened by economic issues, since the quality of physical education can differ a lot depending on money and community backing (Carter 2018) [3]. Also, health issues, both physical and mental, influence girls’ confidence and their desire to join sports and fitness activities (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) [2]. Knowing these participation figures is key to finding effective ways to close the gender gap, as it reveals the complex nature of the problem and shows where educational policies and practices can improve. Tackling these differences will help create a fairer environment in physical education.

**Table 1:** Current Participation Statistics in Physical Education by Gender

Year	Male Participation Rate (%)	Female Participation Rate (%)	Total Participants
2019	65	50	1500
2020	68	52	1600
2020	70	54	1650

**Historical Context of Gender Disparities**

The history of gender gaps shows there has been a long time of unfair access and chances in many areas, such as physical education. For a lot of history, society had clear roles for men and women, often putting women in a lower position, especially in sports. This separation comes from views on femininity, where being strong was often considered not feminine, which made women less likely to join in (Anon 2011) [1]. Also, rules and cultural views in education have

kept these inequalities going, causing a big gap in who participates in physical education. Studies show that social inequality connects with other issues, like health and politics, making the situation more complicated (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2014) [17]. Knowing this historical context is very important for creating ways to encourage equal participation in physical education, dealing with the cultural views that impact involvement and the ongoing systemic barriers.

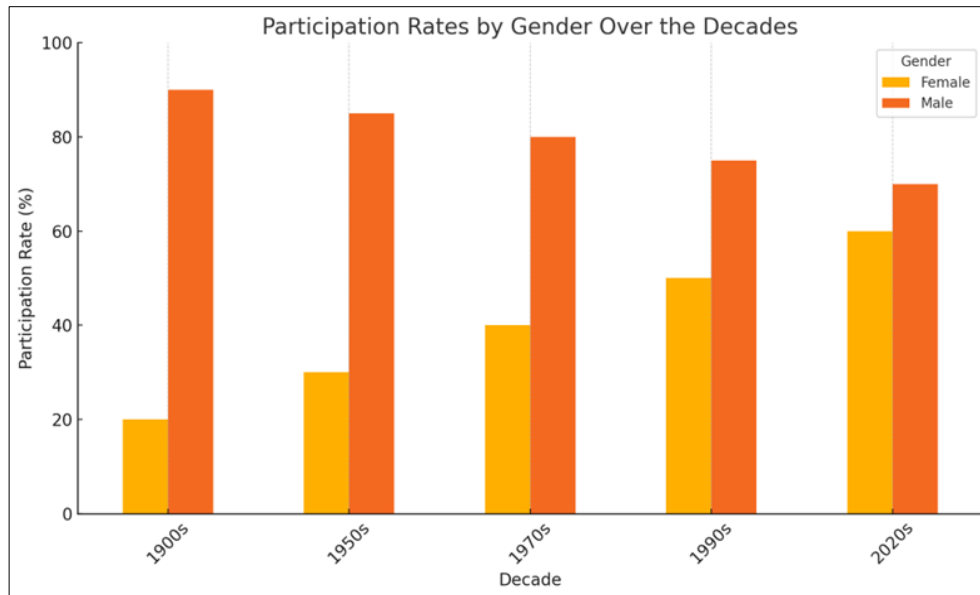


Fig 1: Participation rates of males and females across different decades from the 1900s to the 2020s in bar chart illustration.

**Evolution of physical education programs**

The changes in physical education programs show larger social shifts, especially regarding differences between genders in taking part. At first, physical education was mostly for males, focusing on sports that left out or pushed aside female students. As time passed, the push for fairness in education led to changes, creating programs that are more inclusive and offer a wider range of activities. Still, there are problems, since societal views on gender roles still affect how many participate. For instance, research suggests that boys and young men of color meet special challenges that affect their physical and emotional growth, which may come from economic struggles (Sandstrom, H., & Lauderback 2019) [12]. Additionally, studies reveal that female students usually show more determination in physical education than male students, showing they could participate more when they get the right support (Islam Dip 2017) [6]. Knowing these factors is important to create effective plans to encourage equal participation in physical education programs for all genders.

**Societal attitudes towards gender and sports**

The way society views gender and sports greatly affects how much people participate in physical education. Traditionally, sports are seen as mainly for men, which creates stereotypes that make it harder for women to join in. This bias not only affects how eager young girls are to take part in physical activities but also keeps harmful ideas about masculinity and femininity alive in sports. It is important to tackle these deep-seated views; research shows that building health-focused environments through sports can help young

people develop positively, especially when those who lead sports programs focus on educational efforts to change these societal beliefs (Malete *et al.* 2022) [10]. Also, focusing on changing behavior and norms in environments can help create a fairer sports scene, challenging current gender inequalities (Parks, Cohen, and Kravitz-Wirtz 2007) [11]. Understanding and changing these societal views is crucial for building inclusive places that promote diverse participation in physical education, which will help create a healthier society overall.

**Impact of Title IX on gender equality in sports**

The use of Title IX has changed the situation of gender equality in sports, making a more welcoming space for women athletes. This important law required that schools getting federal money offer equal chances for both men and women, leading to a clear rise in women's participation in sports. Before Title IX, sports programs usually focused on men's sports, giving women fewer resources and chances. But this law started a change, causing a large increase in women's sports programs throughout the nation. As (Kevin Namiro Kuteesa, Chidiogo Uzoamaka Akpuokwe, and Chioma Ann Udeh 2024) [7] shows, the struggles faced by marginalized groups, like African American girls, highlight the ongoing issues in achieving real fairness in sports, especially in schools that lack funding. Additionally, (Smith and Smith 1996) [14] supports the need to tackle both racial and gender inequalities in athletics, calling for ongoing changes to ensure that Title IX's goals are completely met and continue to promote gender equality in all sports settings.

Table 2: Impact of Title IX on Gender Equality in Sports Participation

Year	Total Female Athletes	Total Male Athletes	Total Athletes	Female Participation Percentage
1972	295	3	3	9.5
1982	1	3	3	2.5
1992	5	5	5	5
2002	1	5	1	1.3
2012	4	5	1	2.8
2020	10	3	10	2.5

**Historical barriers faced by women in physical education:** In history, women in physical education faced many problems that made it hard for them to take part and have access to facilities and chances. From the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, society viewed women as weak, which kept them out of sports and physical education roles. This view was made worse by few female role models and not enough money for women's sports programs, leading to very little participation. (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) [2] Points out that inequalities, based on economic issues, continued these problems by limiting access to resources needed for women's physical education. Additionally, social and cultural ideas-like traditional views of femininity-have often weakened women's physical skills and interests, as mentioned in (Carter 2018) [3]. It is important to tackle these past issues to create a fair space in physical education where everyone, regardless of gender, can succeed and take part.

**Factors Contributing to Gender Disparities**

The reasons for gender differences in physical education go beyond personal choices and include deep-rooted societal influences and institutional biases. Cultural views often show physical activity as mainly for boys, which results in less encouragement for girls to join sports and physical education. Also, not having enough female role models in these areas can lower girls' motivation and involvement, creating a cycle of low participation. Studies show that when schools do not use a race equity perspective, such as

outlined in (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) [2], they might unintentionally overlook marginalized groups, including girls. Moreover, (Sullivan *et al.* 2015) [16] highlights that using inclusive practices in all parts of program development can greatly increase girls' participation rates. This emphasizes the need for a thorough approach to removing obstacles and creating equal chances in physical education. By tackling these connected issues, we can work towards a more balanced engagement in schools.

**Socioeconomic influences on participation rates**

Socioeconomic factors are important in affecting how many students join physical education classes, especially regarding gender differences. Studies show that students from lower-income families often experience problems like not having enough recreational facilities, difficulties with transportation, and little chance to engage in organized sports (Lee and Ransom 2011) [8]. These issues tend to hit girls harder, as they might already deal with societal expectations tied to traditional gender roles. Also, differences in money can impact the quality and types of physical education programs at schools, making the gender gap even bigger (Anon 2011) [1]. When girls see sports settings as less accessible or friendly, they are less likely to participate. Thus, it is crucial to tackle socioeconomic challenges to build fair conditions that motivate both boys and girls to take part in physical education, leading to a more equal and inclusive environment.

**Table 3: Socioeconomic Influences on Physical Education Participation Rates**

Year	Socioeconomic Status	Participation Rate	Source
2020	Low Income	45%	National Center for Education Statistics
2020	Middle Income	65%	National Center for Education Statistics
2020	High Income	85%	National Center for Education Statistics
2021	Low Income	50%	Institute of Education Sciences
2021	Middle Income	68%	Institute of Education Sciences
2021	High Income	87%	Institute of Education Sciences
2022	Low Income	48%	Pew Research Center
2022	Middle Income	70%	Pew Research Center
2022	High Income	89%	Pew Research Center

**Cultural norms and stereotypes regarding gender roles**

Cultural norms and stereotypes about gender roles greatly affect differences in participation in physical education, as society often decides what activities are appropriate for each gender. These norms can support the idea that being good at sports is mainly a male trait, which stops girls from being encouraged to take part in sports and physical activities. As noted in (Carter 2018) [3], these societal ideas mix with social and health issues, making the situation around gender participation in sports more complicated. Additionally, research focusing on different groups, like the study mentioned in (Solmon 2014) [15], shows that men of color face special difficulties in dealing with gender roles, making the participation gap in physical education worse. By recognizing and examining these stereotypes, those involved can start creating solutions to help make physical education more inclusive and support all students, no matter their gender.

**Lack of female role models in physical education**

The lack of female role models in physical education is a big problem for fairness between genders in this area, affecting how many girls participate and what people think

about women in sports and physical activities. When students see mostly men as instructors, it can strengthen stereotypes that link sports skills and leadership only to males, which can turn girls away. Studies show that having female role models greatly increases girls' interest in physical activities and their confidence in pursuing sports (Dwivedi *et al.* 2023) [4]. Additionally, these role models can change societal views on women in sports, as students often seek out relatable figures to motivate and lead them (David R. Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019) [18]. Therefore, improving female representation in physical education not only increases girls' involvement but also creates a more welcoming and supportive environment that encourages all students to thrive in physical activities.

**Differences in encouragement and support from families**

Family support and encouragement play a big role in how much kids take part in physical education, often making gender gaps worse. Usually, boys get more support from their families to play sports and do physical activities, as parents often see these as important for building masculinity or strength. On the other hand, girls might get less support, with families usually favoring more traditional female roles.

This difference can create a clear gap in confidence and physical ability between boys and girls. Studies show that when families actively support their children-like going to games or helping with sports training-it can increase participation in physical activities, which impacts their involvement in school settings (Lee and Ransom 2011) <sup>[8]</sup>. Additionally, systems that reinforce these family norms contribute to these trends, highlighting the need for community programs focused on providing equal support for all genders in physical education (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007) <sup>[2]</sup>. Tackling these family influences can help reduce gender gaps in participation in physical education.

### **Consequences of Gender Disparities in Participation**

The results of differences in gender in physical education participation go beyond just the gym, affecting wider social and health issues. When girls don't get enough encouragement to take part in physical activities, they often miss chances to build important skills, self-confidence, and healthy habits that last a lifetime. This lack of involvement can lead to more sedentary behavior, raising the chances of health problems like obesity and heart diseases, which more often impact women as they get older. Additionally, the social effects of these differences are significant; by restricting girls' involvement, society strengthens traditional gender roles that undervalue women's contributions in sports and physical activities. Such structural problems create a situation where women's health and empowerment are weakened, further continuing gender-based health issues (David R Williams *et al.* 2019) <sup>[19]</sup>. As conversations about gender inequality grow, it is vital to tackle these effects and develop plans to create inclusive settings in physical education.

### **Impact on physical health and fitness levels**

Gender disparities in physical education significantly impact students' health and fitness, with girls facing more social and institutional barriers to participation. These challenges contribute to higher obesity rates and long-term health issues among girls. Addressing this requires creating inclusive and equitable programs, as highlighted by studies on health equity and childhood obesity.

### **Psychological effects of exclusion from physical activities**

Exclusion from physical activities harms mental health, especially for marginalized gender groups. It negatively affects self-esteem, social identity, and mental well-being, leading to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Inclusive initiatives in physical education are essential to mitigate these psychological impacts and promote mental health equity.

### **Long-term implications for career opportunities in sports:**

Limited access to physical education for girls restricts their growth, life skills development, and career prospects in sports. Stereotypes and institutional barriers disproportionately affect marginalized groups, especially African American girls. Equal participation is crucial to enhance their future opportunities in sports and related fields.

### **Influence on social skills and teamwork development**

Participation in team sports fosters essential interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, and conflict

resolution. Gender disparities in physical education hinder these developments for girls, often leading to social exclusion. Inclusive environments are necessary to ensure all students gain these skills while promoting gender equality in schools.

### **Solutions to Address Gender Disparities**

To address gender participation gaps in physical education, a multifaceted approach is essential, combining policy changes and community involvement. Strategies include creating equitable programs that promote female participation, challenging stereotypes about physical activity, and fostering inclusivity by addressing racial fairness. Tools like race audits can identify inequities and inform local solutions, emphasizing innovative methods to bridge gaps. Sustained community support and open dialogue about gender roles in sports are crucial for fostering a culture of equal access and opportunities for all students.

### **Implementing inclusive physical education curricula**

Creating an inclusive physical education curriculum is crucial for addressing gender-based participation disparities among students. Such curricula should cater to the diverse needs of all students, especially those from underrepresented groups, like transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals. Research highlights the lack of educator training on TGNC issues, which can lead to unwelcoming or unsafe environments for these students. Similarly, public health education emphasizes including content on disabilities, which also applies to physical education. Implementing inclusive policies fosters a sense of belonging, enhances the educational experience, and improves participation across diverse student groups.

### **Promoting female leadership in sports and education**

Promoting women in leadership roles in sports and education is essential to addressing gender gaps in physical education. Limited female representation in leadership can hinder participation and fair practices. Encouraging female leaders creates a more inclusive environment for young girls, aligning with research that supports health-promotion education for positive youth development. Initiatives to boost female leadership and drive systemic changes can shift social norms, increasing participation among girls and women in sports. Empowering women as leaders not only bridges gender gaps but also enhances the overall education and sports experience.

### **Encouraging community and parental involvement**

Community and parental involvement play a key role in addressing gender gaps in physical education participation by creating a supportive environment. Collaboration between schools, parents, and local groups helps promote positive attitudes toward physical activity, particularly for girls who face social barriers. Initiatives that engage parents in physical education efforts enhance opportunities for girls and emphasize the importance of health and fitness. Addressing family challenges, such as those highlighted by (Sandstrom, H., & Lauderback 2019) <sup>[12]</sup>, and reducing risks like juvenile justice involvement, further remove barriers to participation. Overall, involving parents and communities is essential for fostering equitable physical education opportunities.

**Utilizing media to challenge stereotypes and promote equity:** Using media thoughtfully is crucial for challenging stereotypes and promoting fairness in physical education, particularly concerning gender differences. Media can shift public perceptions by highlighting diverse role models and breaking traditional norms. For instance, campaigns featuring successful female athletes can inspire young girls to participate in sports, reducing gender biases. Research, such as studies by (Lungaro *et al.* 2023) and (Seiter 1986)<sup>[9]</sup><sup>[13]</sup>, emphasizes the importance of tailored, inclusive content. These studies show how positive messaging about family dynamics and community engagement can foster equitable participation in physical activities across different audiences.

### Conclusion and future direction

In summary, fixing gender gaps in physical education is important for creating a welcoming space that encourages all students to participate equally. The look into why these gaps exist shows that social norms, lack of resources, and weak teaching support are major barriers to female students' involvement in physical activities. Specific solutions, like making curricula that consider gender and highlighting female sports role models, can help reduce these gaps. Additionally, programs focused on boosting awareness and training for teachers are necessary to stress the value of equal participation. According to the State of Health Equity Movement, the recommendations highlight the need for focused actions that improve physical education chances and promote overall health fairness in schools (Barr-Anderson *et al.* 2007)<sup>[2]</sup>. Ultimately, building a fair environment is not just about access; it is also a crucial step in nurturing well-rounded, empowered individuals. It is very important for teachers and decision-makers to work on the gender gaps in physical education, especially for underrepresented groups. By putting in place specific policies that break down stereotypes and ensure fair access to resources, we can build welcoming spaces that encourage all students, particularly girls of color, to participate more in physical activities. Studies show that structural problems, like poorly funded schools and a lack of support systems, greatly limit participation among African American girls and other minority groups (George, Duran, and Norris 2014)<sup>[5]</sup>. Furthermore, recognizing that each group faces unique challenges means we need a careful approach to find solutions (Lee and Ransom 2011)<sup>[8]</sup>. Decision-makers should not only push for better facilities and funding but should also focus on creating inclusive programs that promote a positive view of physical education participation for all students. These proactive steps are crucial for developing a generation that values and enjoys being active and healthy.

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