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Women's empowerment: Current trends and the overlooked issue of physical activity participation

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Abstract

This paper utilizes bibliometric analysis of reviewed literature on women's empowerment to delve into the components that constitute women's empowerment. Through word frequency analysis, co-occurrence network mapping, and thematic evaluation, it unveils prevalent themes including gender equality, education, health, autonomy, and economic empowerment. Recent years have witnessed a growing focus on health-related themes such as reproductive health, nutritional status, sexual behavior, child health, mental health, and maternal health. A noteworthy gap in the literature pertains to the under explored role of physical activity participation in promoting health and addressing gender disparities. This gap calls for an assessment of why the efficient and cost-effective strategy of disease prevention through physical activity and exercises remains largely uninvestigated in most research contexts related to health and empowerment. The limited participation of women in physical activities and exercises, compared to men, further accentuates existing gender disparities, contradicting the core principles of women's empowerment. The study advocates broadening the scope of women's empowerment research beyond conventional topics like education, health and economic autonomy. Integrating physical activity participation as a dimension alongside traditional and most robust indicators like reproductive and sexual health, nutritional status and child health expands the understanding of women's empowerment and well-being.

Keywords: Physical activity, bibliometric, women empowerment, review

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment is a pivotal and multidisciplinary subject that has gained prominence across cultures and academic disciplines. The concept encompasses various dimensions of power and agency, as highlighted by the influential scholars Kabeer (1999) ^[20], who defines it as the expansion of individuals' ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where such choices were previously limited. Rowlands (1997) ^[39] emphasizes empowerment as a process through which women enhance their self-reliance and assert their independent rights to make choices and control resources, challenging their own subordination. The World Bank and Malhotra & Schuler (2005) ^[24] articulate it as the process of enhancing the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes, focusing on agency, control over resources, and decision-making ability. The women empowerment of this form helps the family and child immensely (Chakraborty & Anderson 2011; D'Souza and Bryant 1999) ^[8, 12].

Frameworks like CIDA (1996) outline legal, political, economic, and social empowerment, while others incorporate psychological aspects, family dynamics, marital equality, and societal participation. These diverse dimensions underscore the complexity of women's empowerment and highlight the need for a comprehensive, context-specific approach.

This review paper is guided by a curated selection of non-overlapping sources and aims to contribute to the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment by analyzing the themes and dimensions researched in academia. It seeks to uncover how many themes and contexts have been explored in relation to women's empowerment. Understanding the range of themes and directions associated with women's empowerment is crucial for policymakers and women themselves as they strive for self-empowerment.

Utilizing bibliometric indicators and word analysis, this study examines current trends and themes related to women's empowerment. The paper focuses on identifying research gaps and missing areas that require further exploration. In order to uphold the thematic focus of this paper, analysis of bibliometric indicators of authors, countries and sources have been intentionally omitted. It's important to note that previous bibliometric studies on women's empowerment in connection to other themes have already explored these aspects. The utilization of bibliometric performance indicators within this research serves to unveil emerging trends and provide valuable insights.

2. Research Gap

The purpose of conducting a literature review is to gain a comprehensive understanding of a particular subject. While the practice of reviewing reviews is not widely prevalent in research, it holds the potential to be a potent method for analyzing emerging trends and uncovering the multitude of factors that contribute to the landscape of any subject. In this context, a review of review articles can shed light on the various dimensions and variables that encompass women empowerment. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of complex subjects (Maniglo, 2009) ^[27] and helps identify gaps and inconsistencies, enhancing comprehension of intricate issues (Ekeland, Bowes, & Flottrop, 2010) ^[14]. Interestingly, only seven results are yielded by a Google Scholar search for review of reviews, mainly related to health domains, suggesting an unexplored research gap beyond health-related contexts.

The presence of only seven search results on Google Scholar when combining the keywords “review” and “review” indicates a significant scarcity of articles. This scarcity in results highlights a notable research gap, especially considering that the existing articles are primarily centered on health-related topics. This emphasizes the untapped potential for new and diverse investigations beyond the scope of health-related analyses.

Another research gap lies in the form of an overall bibliometric analysis solely focused on the subject of women's empowerment that is specifically conducted through review articles. Although certain bibliometric studies have been carried out in the domain of women's empowerment, they often adopt an approach where women's empowerment is linked with other dimensions. This can be observed in the instances presented in Table 1. However, an overarching bibliometric analysis that delves into the various facets of women's empowerment as a standalone topic remains lacking. Only one paper authored by Priya, Venkatesh & Shukla in 2021 delves into women's empowerment as a broad subject. However, this particular study predominantly centers on author, countries, and source analysis. Their focus is on gender equality and measurement, as well as the consequences of women's empowerment. But this study aims to comprehensively identify the various dimensions under which women's empowerment is being studied. Additionally, it addresses potential gaps or areas that require further exploration in the field.

Table 1: Previous Bibliometric Studies on Women Empowerment

Author and Year	Title
Kumar & Mishra (2022) ^[22]	Exploring Future Research Agenda for Rural Mother's Empowerment: A Study at the Intersection of Bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review
Kaushal, Sanjoli, Jain, & Ghalawat (2021) ^[23]	Microfinance Institutions and Women Empowerment Trends and Future Research Directions: A bibliometric Analysis
Raman, Subramaniam, Nair, Shivdas, Achutman, Krishnashree, & Nedungadi (2022)	Women Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Development: Bibliometric Analysis and Emerging Research Trends
Mahato, Jha, Naayak, & Kaushal (2022) ^[23]	Empowerment of women through participation in self-help groups: a bibliometric analysis and systematic review
Hassan, Alshater, Hasan, & Bhuiyan (2021)	Islamic microfinance: A bibliometric review
Kabil, Ali, Hasan, & Bhuiyan (2022) ^[21]	Gender Perspectives in Tourism Studies: A Comparative Bibliometric Analysis in the MENA Region
Vieira, Madaleno, & Teodosio (2023)	Management and gender in the global labor market: A bibliometric analysis
Gora, Dhingra, & Yadav (2023)	A bibliometric study on the role of micro-finance services in micro, small and medium enterprises
Bhardwaj & Madan, (2023)	Drift in research in women empowerment and NGOs: A bibliometric analysis of scopus indexed publications (1993-2022)

3. Methodology and Data Collection

The researcher has adopted a review approach for this study, focusing on reviewed articles pertaining to women's empowerment. This review paper has employed the “Review of Review” methodology. The methodology employed here aligns with Grant & Booth's (2009) ^[17] categorization of different review methodologies and embraces the attributes of rapid, mapping, critical, and systematic reviews to ensure a comprehensive and repetitive understanding.

This study focuses on conducting a bibliometric analysis of reviewed articles related to women's empowerment. The reviewed articles were obtained from the Scopus database using the search string: TITLE (“women” AND

“empower*”) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, “j”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE, “final”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “re”)). The researcher conducted a series of meticulous string queries to refine the search results and ensure the inclusion of the most relevant articles. Initially, a search using the string “TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Women” AND “empower”) AND KEY (review)” was executed, yielding an initial set of 200 results. However, upon closer examination, a significant portion of these results was deemed irrelevant to the study's focus. Subsequently, the string “TITLE (“women” AND “empowerment” AND “review”))” was employed, which led to the identification of 60 relevant results. But the selected string proved to be the most

effective in capturing a collection of articles that exhibited utmost relevance to the study's scope and objectives.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary Statistics

The extracted dataset encompasses a timespan from 1992 to 2023 and aggregates insights from 128 sources, including journals and books, contributing to a total of 147 review papers. With an annual growth rate of 8.63%, these papers carry an average document age of 8.78 years, indicating their sustained relevance. Impressively, each review paper garners an average of 24.76 citations, a testament to their impact within the scholarly community.

In terms of content, the dataset reveals a robust collection of keywords. A total of 646 Keyword Plus and 330 Author's

Keywords are utilized to categorize and characterize the review papers. Turning to authorship dynamics, the collaborative nature of academic discourse is evident. A cohort of 409 authors collectively contributes to the corpus, with 48 papers attributed to single authors. Collaboration extends across geographical boundaries, with an average of 2.9 co-authors per paper and international co-authorships constituting 18.37% of collaborative efforts. In line with the genre, all documents fall under the review category, with a total count of 147.

4.2 Analysis of Most Frequent Words

The analysis of the most frequent words was conducted on Keyword Plus.

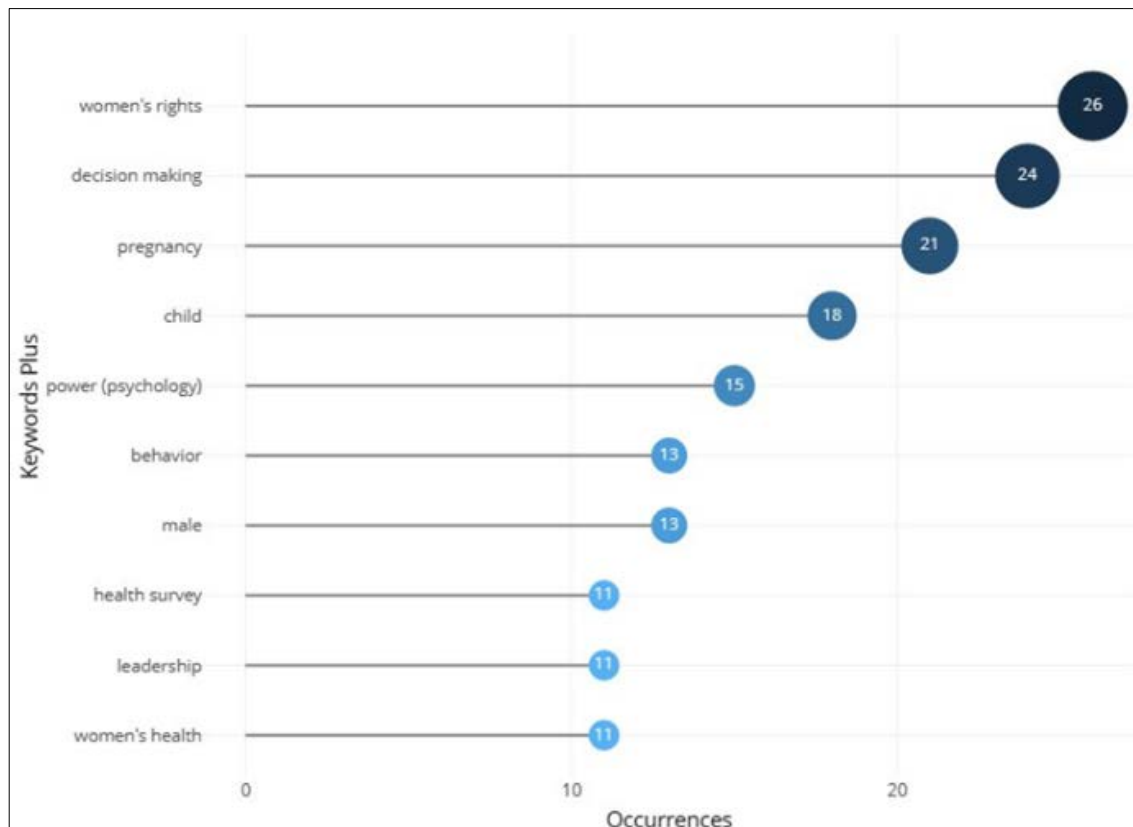


Fig 1: Frequent Words

The Figure 1 illustrates the prevalent terms after eliminating specific stop words such as “empowerment,” “review,” “adult,” “human,” “humans,” “systematic review,” and “female.” These predominant topics form the core of analytical focus. Subsequently, the forthcoming paragraphs encompass an exhaustive examination of the analysis involving the most frequent words.

- Gender-related keywords like “Female” (84), “Women's Rights” (26), “Women's Health” (11), “Women” (7), “Gender-Based Violence” (2), and “Gender Relations” (2) underscore the centrality of gender. “Gender Identity” (8) and “Gender Equity” (3) shed light on the exploration of gender dynamics and equality. The inclusion of terms such as “gender-sensitive material,” “gender-sensitive tool,” “gender disparity,” “gender equality,” “gender issue,” and “gender role” signifies the depth of gender-related discourse within the context of women's empowerment.

“Women's Status” (10) points toward women's societal standing and empowerment prospects.

- Economic independence has always been the robust predictor of women's empowerment and autonomy. The words “empowerment” (55), “decision making” (24), “economic empowerment” (15), “employment” (3), “personal autonomy” (6), “professional development” (3), “skill” (3), “working women” (2), “career” (1), “personal income” (1), and “income” (2) and its synonyms, as revealed through word analysis, highlight the profound impact of economic and financial freedom on women's empowerment.
- The frequent appearance of terms related to children, such as “child” (18), “child health” (6), “child preschool” (2), “childhood mortality” (2), and “child nutrition” (2), highlights the critical intersection between women's empowerment and the well-being of children. These terms collectively emphasize the

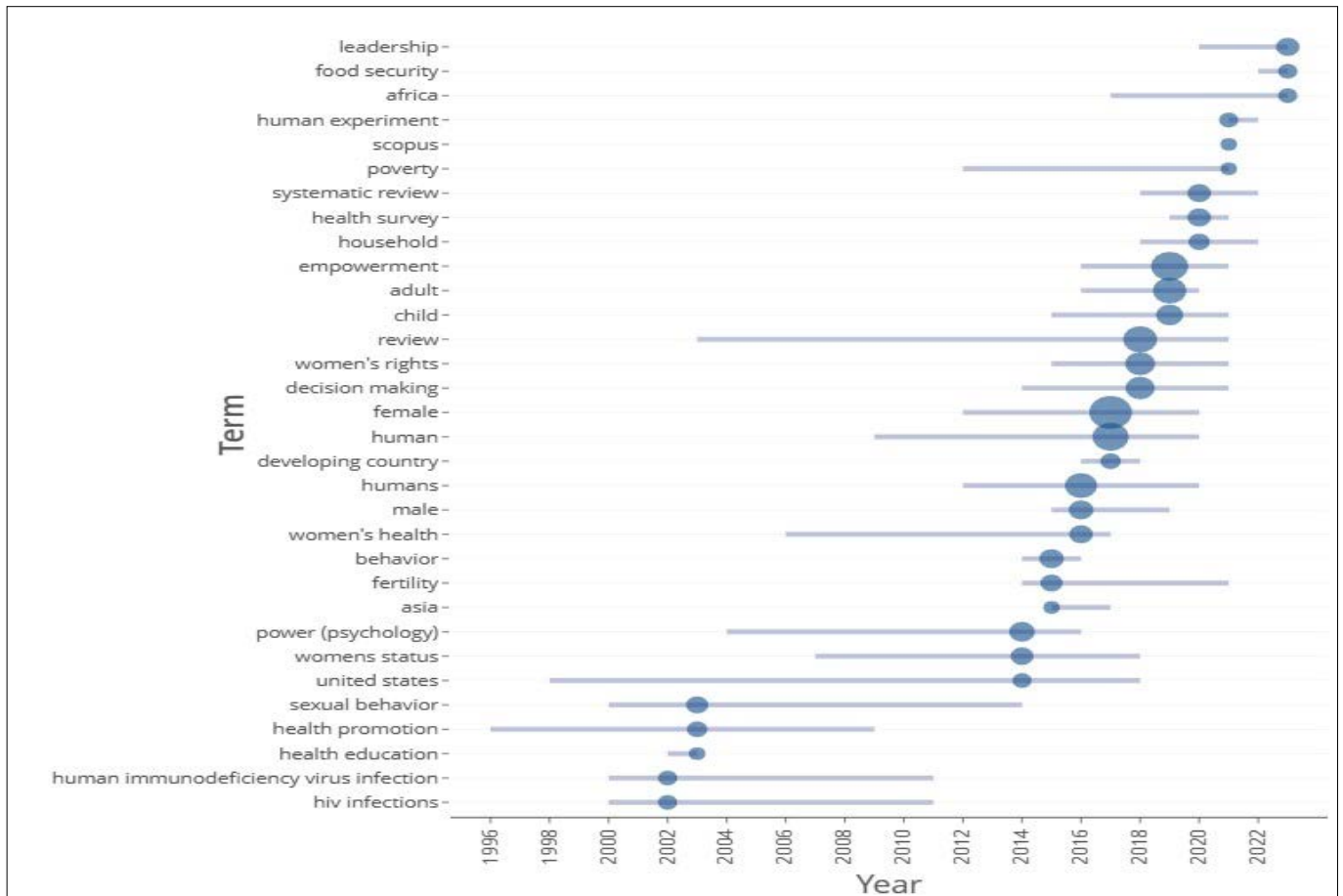


Fig 5: Trend Topics

4.6 Theme Evolution

The analysis of theme evolution presents a comprehensive analysis of co-occurrence patterns between different terms across different time periods. This has been presented in Figure NO. 6. The co-occurrence of “female” and “empowerment” across distinct time frames signifies an evolving narrative. The presence of overlapping terms like “human,” “review,” “adult,” “empowerment,” and “women's rights” underscores the persistent global need for women's empowerment. The linkage between “female” and “gender” over time signifies a continuous emphasis on gender-related discussions. This indicates that addressing gender-related issues remains a consistent theme within the discourse on women's empowerment, reaffirming its significance in various contexts.

The association between “female” and “infant” underscores a connection between women's empowerment and child health. The co-occurrence of terms like “child health,” “infant,” and “diet” suggests that women's empowerment is intricately linked to maternal and child well-being.

The co-occurrence of “female” with “nutritional status” and “pregnancy” alongside terms like “India” and “contraceptive behavior” highlights the importance of addressing women's needs and empowerment in various regions, such as India,

and recognizes the intersection of empowerment with reproductive health. The consistent co-occurrence of “women's status” with “empowerment” indicates that discussions on women's empowerment encompass broader aspects of their social, economic, and personal status. The link between “health education” and “leadership” reflects a potential focus on leadership within health-related educational programs. The presence of terms like “male” and “young adult” in conjunction with “empowerment” highlights the recognition of men's roles in advancing women's empowerment. This implies that involving men and young adults is deemed important in promoting gender equality and empowerment.

The co-occurrence of “sexual behavior” with “empowerment” and “risk factors” suggests a concern for addressing the intersection of women's empowerment with sexual behavior and associated risks. This point towards efforts to empower women in making informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being. The pairing of “women's health services” with “empowerment” and “partner violence” signifies the role of accessible health services, non-abusive and supportive partners in fostering empowerment and safeguarding women's well-being.

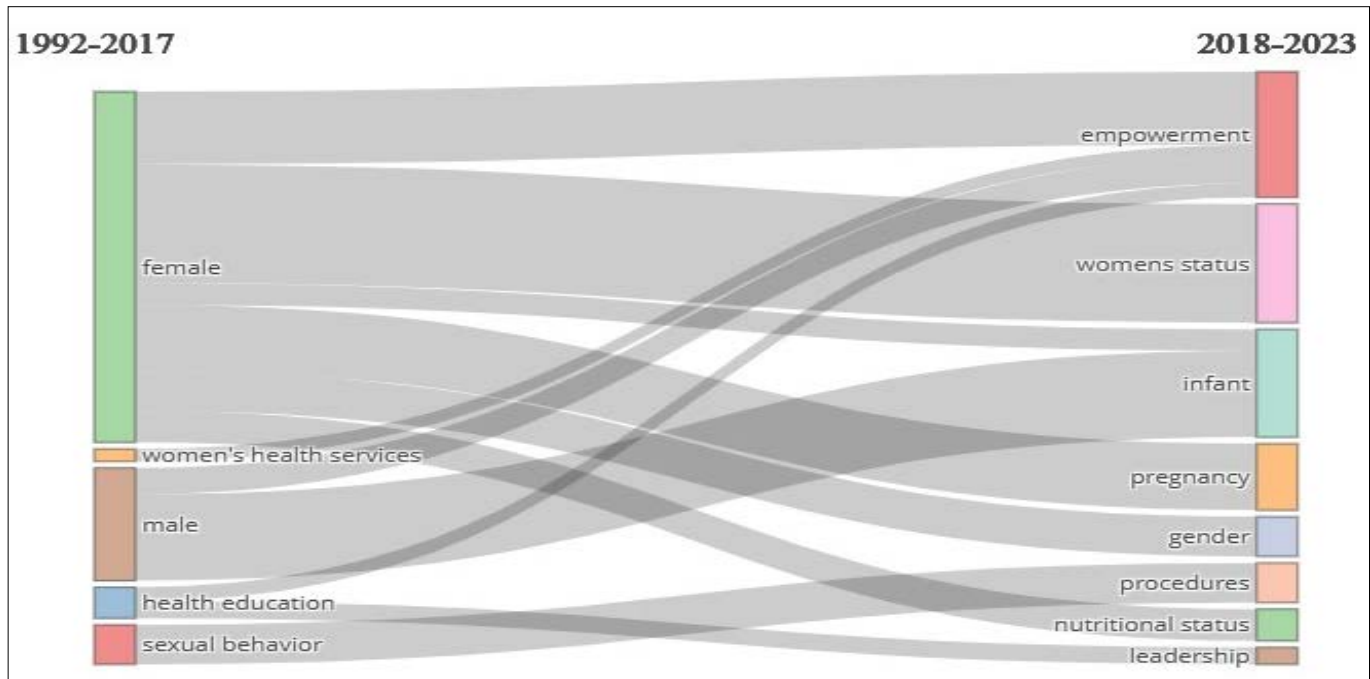


Fig 6: Theme Evolution

5. Future Research Agenda

A significant research gap within bibliometric studies lies in the analysis of the most frequent words. While these analyses typically highlight crucial themes like health, leadership, autonomy, decision making, pregnancy, and child health in the context of women's empowerment, they tend to overlook certain words that bring additional perspectives and dimensions to the discourse. This oversight is particularly evident in the words with few repetition or no repetition at all such as conservation, management, consumer participation, digitalization, and agriculture. Addressing this research gap is essential to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of women's empowerment by incorporating these often-neglected dimensions into the discussions.

The exploration of research trends linking women's empowerment with various health behaviors has yielded a significant research gap centered around physical activity participation and its impact on health. Our analysis has spotlighted health as a foundational theme within the context of empowerment, with particular emphasis on reproductive health, child health, nutrition, pregnancy, family planning services, fertility, mental health, sexual health, cancer and more. However, it is crucial to recognize that this emphasis has largely been confined to the sphere of well-being, reproductive and sexual health (Basu & Koolwal 2005), leaving broader aspects of women's health relatively unexplored.

One compelling yet unexplored avenue is the influence of physical activity participation on women's health. Physical activity stands out as a paramount and cost-effective means to address a spectrum of health concerns, including non-communicable diseases like breast cancer, mental health, and reproductive health (Brehm and Iannotta (1998) ^[5]; Ahmed, Blaha, Nasir, Rivera, and Blumenthal (2012) ^[2]; Belza & Warms, (2004) ^[4]; Diaz and Shimbo (2013) ^[10]; Dinas, Koutedakis, and Flouris (2011) ^[11]; McTiernan (2008) ^[26]). The impact is reflected in heightened stamina, enhanced energy levels, and improved overall health outcomes that help them in balancing of professional

responsibilities and familial duties, an important area, given its recurrent mention in above discussion and research (Allendorf, 2012; Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015) ^[3, 7]. The above discussion highlights again the importance of economic empowerment and financial freedom as robust predictors of women's empowerment (Taylor, & Pereznieta, 2014) ^[35]. These factors facilitate their engagement in family and household decision-making, impacting child health and social status (Allendorf, 2012) ^[3]. Despite acknowledging the adverse effects of diseases and healthcare costs on women's empowerment (Mabsout, 2011) ^[25], a significant gap exists in considering a least expensive and potent health predictor – physical activity participation.

This gap is also surprising given that physical activity is recognized as a strong indicator of overall health. Notably, the discourse has only one mention of physical activity participation as a variable in the intersection of self-defense and empowerment. Rouse & Slutsky (2014) ^[32] assessed the effects of self-defense training programs in England and the US and concluded that women experienced a renewed sense of empowerment as a result of their engagement in physical training, particularly in activities such as boxing, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu. Yet physical activity participation has not been included in prominent dimension of women empowerment.

The involvement of women in physical activity participation also serves as a means to address the pervasive gender inequality prevalent worldwide, particularly in developing nations such as India and Bangladesh. Globally, women's physical activity levels have been consistently lower than those of men, showing nearly an 8% disparity (Guthold, Stevens, Riley, & Bull 2016) ^[19]. Addressing this gender gap (The Lancet Public Health 2019) ^[36] is crucial to enhancing women's physical activity participation, emphasizing the necessity of adopting a gender-sensitive approach to address this disparity. Amartya Sen's conception of women's empowerment, which champions gender equality across all spheres, encompasses the importance of physical activity participation as well. Notably, this aspect is included within the definition of women's empowerment as it resonates with the notion that women often encounter

constraints of social and family support in freely participating in activities considered traditionally male-dominated (Brown, Brown, Miller, & Hansen, (2001) [6]; Spanier & Allison, 2001) [34]. The limitation on decision-making and participation in physical activity contradicts the essence of empowerment.

Incorporating physical activity into the discourse surrounding women's empowerment can enrich understanding and formulate strategies to foster empowerment. This inclusion aligns with the goal of addressing the multi-dimensional aspects of women's well-being, personal and societal agency.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion of this review paper underscores several pivotal themes that have emerged from the analyzed bibliometric indicators. The discourse on women's empowerment has placed significant emphasis on a range of critical dimensions. These dimensions encompass health, reproductive rights, decision-making, male engagement, autonomy, malnutrition, gender identity, household dynamics, family planning, women's status, marriage, health promotion, education, socioeconomics, child health, family characteristics, family size, economic considerations, and empowerment itself. These thematic threads collectively weave a comprehensive tapestry that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment.

The analysis of co-occurrence networks, theme evolution, and trend topics all three aligns with the health dimension of women's empowerment. The analysis reveals key diverse aspects of women's health, are nutritional status, access to health services, reproductive and sexual health, exert a profound influence on women's lives, rights, and are both predictor and consequences of women empowerment. The paramount conclusion drawn from this review paper pertains to the future research trajectory, focusing on women's physical activity participation - an aspect absent within the realm of women's health dimensions. There are few review studies focusing on women's empowerment and health, but they predominantly center on topics such as fertility (Upadhyay *et al.*, 2014) [33], maternal health, child health, and healthcare access (Abreha & Zereyesus, 2021; Pratley, 2016) [1, 30]. Even empirical studies are absent in addressing of the issue. Participation in self-defense training involving physical activity has positively impacted women's empowerment (Rouse & Slutsky, 2014) [32]. The physical activity participation could emerge as the most intriguing dimension of women empowerment.

The evolution of themes has illuminated a growing research trend in developing nations, including Africa, India, and South Asia, specifically in context of reproductive health and nutritional status. This highlights the imperative of prioritizing women's health concerns, in these countries. Given India's unique demographic position, which sets it apart from other nations, the spotlight on enhancing women's empowerment through addressing health issues, health education and promotion within the country holds significant resonance. The concentrated efforts directed towards advancing women's empowerment in India not only hold potential for catalyzing local change but also bear relevance for the broader global women's empowerment agenda.

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