



SPORTS PARTICIPATION AMONG FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Sports involves physical exertion and skills and has diverse beneficial effects on many aspects including health. Female participation in sports has increased over the period and the trends are evolving much faster. This was a descriptive study carried out to identify the attitudes, patterns and influences of female sports participation in Eastern University, Sri Lanka. A total of 304 females were included in the study. Majority of the students wanted to play sports and the commonest reason for it was 'to be fit'. Previous sports performances were found in many and there was no statistically significant association found between previous and current sports participation. Participation of the students in at least one sport was found to be 81% and badminton, table tennis and kabaddi were the commonest sports played. Sports which were not available in EUSL and lack of facilities concerned were significant issues. Female participation was considered important in majority of the students. Almost all had awareness regarding available sports. Bias in selection was noted and seniority was the commonest influencing factor. Academic activities and time restraints negatively influenced the participation. Further studies are required to assess the association between the influences in female participation.

Keywords: *Sports Participation, Female, University Students.*

Introduction

Sport is generally termed as an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment. For the purpose of the study, sports are defined as, individual and team sports played by females at the school, university and professional level, nationally and internationally. Sports play a large role in many aspects, reaching beyond lines of class, ethnicity, religion and even gender, and the roles that sports play in people's lives vary individually. There is an international consensus that participation in sports can offer a great deal to individuals, communities and nations. For adults, regular participation in sports and physical activity has a variety of beneficial effects – physical, social, cultural and psychological [1]. Despite numerous benefits associated with sports participation, rates and patterns of participation fluctuate throughout the life course. Women's sports have existed throughout the world over centuries in all varieties of sports. Participation of females in sports activities has considerably increased and the pattern has evolved significantly over the last few decades. A range of physical activities, including sports and active recreation were assessed and found low female participation was a consistent trend, evidenced in Europe [2]. An evidence-based understanding of the female sports participation is needed to bring up strategies to increase population participation.

University sports are one of the main providers for sports in Sri Lanka. Sporting success of universities themselves is of major importance to Sri Lankan State Universities with universities offering professional coaching, training equipment, stadium, etc. Attitude of females toward services provided by the university helps to identify the areas to be improved for a higher future participation. There are several factors influencing the participation of females in sports such as, biological, psychological, social, and environmental.



Even though there are new sports being introduced to the world of sports every year, the recognition and participation of those are comparatively lesser in Sri Lanka especially among females. This indicates the need to investigate the female participation in sports, hence the focus of the study.

Objectives

- To describe the attitude regarding sports participation among female students in Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL)
- To describe the pattern of sports participation among female students in EUSL
- To determine the influences regarding sports participation among female students in EUSL

Literature review

Regarding the sports experience at school, the study conducted by Curtis et al. [3] in Canada revealed the relevance between intensive sports experience at high school and high level of sports participation in later life and further it showed that the strongest of sports involvement for female adults was school sports background.

Nxumalo et al. [4] conducted the study, sports participation of female university students, among 1004 students in University of Zululand in South Africa to investigate the factors that promote and prevent sports participation among the female students in the university. They have identified that the main reason given for no or low participation in sport by female students was that they had no time and the main motive for engaging in physical activity or sport indicated by most students was to be fit. This is consistent with the findings of Lovell et al. [5] and Nthangeni et al. [6] which was, 'to be fit' ranked the highest as a motivator for participation of sport.

They also found that majority of the participants and non-participants in sports declared that they felt unsafe pursuing sport at the university and majority of the sports participants preferred time to participate in sport at the university in 1700h-1900h. It also revealed that majority of the students indicated that staying in university residencies gives more opportunity to participate in sports. It is clearly evident from the study that safety is major component affecting females' engagement in sports activities and they prefer university accommodation as a better option in case of participating in sports. When considering the pattern of participation, the above study revealed that aerobics, soccer, cricket, netball, athletics, and tennis were the top six activities at the university. This is complimentary to the results of a study conducted by Anne et al which showed, girls, to a greater extend participated in feminine sports feminine sports such as dance, gymnastics, horse riding, figure skating and aerobics. Most participants intimated that the sporting activities on offer are inadequate in contrast to the non-participants, in which most of them think that they are adequate. Regarding the awareness, majority of the subjects considered that there is no awareness of the different sorting activities offered at the university. Since the study was carried in a university the results can be attributed to our setting as well and large sample size provides more reliability and validity to the results but the difference in study setting should be taken into consideration as the study was done in South Africa which is quite different from Sri Lanka.

Eccles & Harold [7] reviewed data from two studies and used Eccles et al model to understand the gender differences in the participation of sports. The girls rate sports as less important than the boys and in addition to this, girls see themselves as less able in sport than other domains and have a more negative assessment of their general ability. These patterns of self-perceptions and task values should be the critical mediators of the gender differences that are observed in the sports participation. This analysis



supported that the sports participation is related to individuals' perceptions of their sports ability and to the value that they attach being good at sport.

A large-scale postal survey was done in Netherlands by Kamphuis et al. [8] to examine the contribution of neighbourhood, household, and individual factors to socioeconomic inequalities in sports participation in a multilevel design. They found out that unfavourable perceived neighbourhood factors, household factors, and individual physical activity cognitions were significantly associated with doing no sports and were reported more frequently among lower socioeconomic groups. These results are consistent with the study of Breuer et al. [9], which indicated that demographic-economic model, consisting of variables such as age, gender, nationality, income, and time, is appropriate in predicting sport participation in different sports.

From the research conducted by Downward et al. [10], access to financial and resources as well as commitment of time were found to be critical factors in the decision-making process and to determine the decision for or against sports participation, it analysed various internal and external determinants, including motivation, the availability of sports facilities, as well as socio-demographic and socio-economic factors.

Contrary to commonplace assumptions regarding 'determinants' of sports participation, Birchwood et al. found strong evidence that family cultures were the chief factor underpinning individuals' propensities to play sport [11]. Wheeler went on to study further on the topic to investigate family sporting cultures in more detail [12]. It was clear that the parents held specific goals in relation to their children's sports participation and employed a set of strategies and practices in order to achieve such goals. Furthermore, these goals, strategies and practices were shaped by the parents' developmental histories as well as their current relations with other parents.

In terms of the motivational factors for sports participation, some research showed the factors that enhance and decrease the motivation. For example, the study conducted among 1692 middle school students by Sirard et al. found out that gender specific motivational factors exist for participation in sports where females are motivated by social opportunities such as skill benefits, competition, and fitness [13]. For both genders, lack of interest, coaching problems, and time barriers were identified as attrition factors. Also, Kondri et al. investigated the above factors and concluded on the following findings: latent structure of the types of sports students' motives consisted of six factors namely, sport action with friend, popularity, fitness & health, social status, sports events, relaxation through sports [14]. In addition, it proved that there were no relevant age-based differences among students.

Study methodology

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among female undergraduates of EUSL between the period of March 2020 and December 2020. Simple random sampling was introduced to generate sample. Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire consisting of close ended questions designed to achieve the objectives of the research in three main categories: Part A: Socio-demographic factors, Part B: Attitude and pattern regarding sports participation and Part C: Influences on sports participation to test factors that could positively, negatively or does not influence sports participation at the university. It was distributed among students along with information sheet and consent form and collected on the same day. To ensure privacy no identifiable data were collected, and all the information was restricted to the principal investigators only. Data were entered in SPSS, version



20.0 and descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from ethics review committee of EUSL/E/PF/AS/08.

Results

The study included a total of 304 female students. The demographic information the students is given in Table 1.

Out of the 304 students, 90.8% (n=276) wanted to play sports and the majority (67.8%) of them stated the reason to be to stay healthy followed by advantages in job market (25.4%) and to fight boredom (6.8%).

Two hundred forty students (91.9%) participated in sports activities during in school. The highest level of participation was roughly equally divided between all levels with the most being divisional level. Sixteen percentage of the students (n=39) have participated in national level and none of the students have gone to international level during schooling. There was no statistically significant association between the previous participation and the current participation (p>0.05).

Table 1 – Demographic details of the students

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	22-23	45	14.8
	24-25	176	57.9
	26-27	81	26.6
	28-29	2	0.7
Ethnicity	Tamil	133	43.8
	Sinhalese	148	48.7
	Muslim	18	5.9
	Others	5	1.6
Year of study	First	19	6.3
	Second	139	45.7
	Third	111	36.5
	Fourth	35	11.5
Accommodation	Home	73	24.0
	University hostel	208	68.4
	Boarding	23	7.6
Family monthly income	<LKR 20,000	101	33.2
	LKR 20,001-50,000	72	23.7
	LKR 50,001-1,00,000	52	17.1
	>LKR 1,00,000	79	26.0

The majority of students (n=245, 81%) participate in at least one sport in university. The commonest sports played by the students were badminton (26.3%) and table tennis (24.3%). None of the female students were engaged in swimming. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the participation in each sport. Out of the fourteen sports, seven (50%) were found to be played by more than 10% of the students. Among the participants, 161 students (65.7%) played more than one sport and nearly half of the participants (49.8%) played two sports. The maximum number of sports played by a single student was four. A significant proportion of students (n=97, 31.9%) wanted to play or played the sports which were not available in EUSL but included in Sri Lanka University Games.



Table 2 – Sports participation of students

Sport	Participants		Non-participants	
	n	%	n	%
Badminton	80	26.3	224	73.7
Basketball	13	4.3	291	95.7
Carrom	11	3.6	293	96.4
Chess	24	7.9	280	92.1
Elle	36	11.8	268	88.2
Hockey	14	4.6	290	95.4
Kabadi	49	16.1	255	83.9
Karate	24	7.9	280	92.1
Netball	47	15.5	257	84.5
Swimming	0	0	304	100.0
Table tennis	74	24.3	230	75.7
Tennis	3	1.0	301	99.0
Track and field	46	15.1	258	84.9
Volleyball	39	12.8	265	87.2

Two hundred students out of 245, those who were engaged in university sports (81.6%) used university equipment and only 45 students (18.4%) practiced with their own equipment. Evening time was preferred for practice sessions by 169 students (69%) and the remaining (n=76) stated it to be morning. Regular practice sessions were attended by 53.9% (n=132) and nearly half (46.1%) of the participants did not attend regularly.

Pattern of influence of the different factors on sports participation of females is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 – Factors influencing sports participation

Factor	Positive influence				Negative influence		No influence	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Family culture	229	75.3	36	11.8	39	12.8		
Religion	145	47.7	31	10.2	128	42.1		
Ethnicity	163	53.6	23	7.6	118	38.8		
Economy	86	28.3	48	15.8	170	55.9		
Society or neighbourhood	188	61.8	49	16.1	67	22.0		
Safety concern	205	67.4	46	15.1	53	17.4		
Peers or friends	228	75.0	38	12.5	38	12.5		
Transport or distance	163	53.6	95	31.3	46	15.1		
Accommodation	159	52.3	75	24.7	70	23.0		
Academic and other extracurricular activities	41	13.5	224	73.7	39	12.8		
Time management	86	28.3	180	59.2	38	12.5		
Dress code for sports	218	71.7	22	7.2	64	21.1		



Physical fitness	207	68.1	45	14.8	52	17.1
Self esteem	278	91.4	12	3.9	14	4.6
Coaching	259	85.2	15	4.9	30	9.9

Female participation in sports was stated to be important by 278 students (91.4%). Most females (n=260, 85.8%) stated that the encouragement given in university was adequate. However, the opinion regarding the available facilities to carry out sports activities was roughly equally divided between those who considered them to be adequate by 167 students (54.9%) and inadequate by 137 students (45.1%). The majority (n=276, 90.8%) of the students considered that gender equality was maintained in sports activities. Almost all (99.0%) except 3 students mentioned that they were aware of the annual selections to recruit new players. Seventy-four percentage of the subjects (n=225) mentioned there was no bias in the selections of the students to the university teams. Among the remaining students (n=79) who had felt there was bias, 49 females (62.0%) stated seniority to be the most influencing factor followed by politics (n=14, 17.7%), ethnicity (n=10, 12.7%) and religion (n=6, 7.6%). The performance of Physical Education Unit of EUSL was satisfactory for 85.2% of the female undergraduates (n=259).

Discussion

Previous studies have clearly indicated the beneficial impact of sports on physical and mental health [1]. In the present study, the main reason stated by those who wanted to play sports was 'to be fit'. This is consistent with the previous literature as several studies in other countries have yielded the results [4,5,6]. Appreciation of the importance of healthy lifestyle among adults could be an explanation for this finding. This is further supported by the fact that majority of the students have indicated physical fitness to be a positive influential factor towards sports participation.

Previous sports experience in school was high among the students however there was no statistically significant relationship established between the previous experience and current participation. This contradicts the previous studies as they have proved the strongest factor for adult female sports involvement to be intense sports activities in high school [3].

Lack of facilities is a major concern among the students given a majority of the students who participated in sports use university equipment for their practices. However, coaching has been positively influencing students to participate in sports. So, the adequate provision of equipment along with other facilities should be taken into consideration as it may considerably increase sports participation.

Academic and extracurricular activities, and time management were described to have negative influence in a large number of students and most players preferred evening time for practice sessions. This could be the underlying reason for the poor regular attendance to practice sessions among the players. Evidence from previous literature suggest 'no time' to be the main reason for the poor participation which can be correlated to our findings [4,9,13]. Unless the institution addresses the conflicts in this issue, the participation and performance will always be at suboptimal level.

Safety among students was not a major determinant of participation among females in our setting in contrast to other studies which showed safety to be a major concern affecting students'. Majority of the students considered safety to be one of the positive influences to participate in sports even though many preferred evenings to practice. It may be due to the largest proportion of students residing in hostels



which are situated inside the university premises hence adequate security is offered. However, a previous study done among female university students showed that safety was a great concern regarding sports participation [4].

There is poor participation of females in swimming even though the sport is offered at university. More attention should be paid in awareness, coaching and facilities to promote participation in swimming. The likely reason could be many schools in Sri Lanka especially those in Eastern Province still don't have swimming in their activities thereby contributing to poor exposure of swimming ability.

A significant proportion of the students wanted to play or played sports which were not offered at the university but were included in the Sri Lankan University Games. This effectively reduces both the female participation and the performance of university in national tournaments and rankings. Interventions should be carried out to investigate this further in detail and to include those into the university sports. Some of the games which were showed to have highest participation among females in other countries, are not included in university sports such as aerobics and the pattern of the sports is also quite different compared to the other studies in foreign settings [4]. The reason for this difference is not identified and should be investigated.

A majority of the students considered their family culture, neighbourhood and peers to be supportive to their participation. Surprisingly, only a small number of subjects considered economy to be a negative influential factor and around half stated it to have no influence on their decision. This contradicts the findings of the previous studies which found financial status to be major aspect in decision making process [8,9,10]

Most students intimated that their self-esteem has positively influenced them to play sports. Awareness about the available sports in university, opinion on importance of female participation and gender equality in sports are high and does not correlate with those of previous research which consistently showed widely varying results in these topics [4,7,8,13]. This could be attributed to the different settings and the evolving healthy practices and culture among Universities over time.

Although nearly all agreed about the annual selection of students for university teams, a considerable number of students felt that the elections are selections are biased and they stated the commonest influence for bias to be seniority. However, majority of the students were satisfied with the performance of Physical Education Unit, EUSL.

Conclusions

A majority wanted to play sports and 'to be fit' was the commonest reason for it. Many of the students had previous experience in sports. The largest proportion of the students participated in sports and badminton was found to be the most frequently played sports. Most of the students were aware about the sports activities available and lack of facilities was a major concern among many students. Gender equality was experienced by most of the students. Seniority was the commonest factor resulted in bias during the selection for university teams. Academic and other extracurricular activities, and time management were the two factors negatively influenced most of the students regarding participation on sports. This study indicated the need for larger scale studies to evaluate the pattern and influences in female participation of sports for the betterment of sports culture.



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