



She Believed She Could and So She Did

Gender, Sports and Psychology

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Abstract

Women in general have been underrepresented in the fields of sports, even in this day and age. Women athletes have to face various challenges while trying to be a professional athlete and be successful in her field. These challenges include finding the perfect coach who is not abusive, facing the gender discrimination from both the society and the sports authorities. In terms of data collection, the secondary data collection technique has been utilised. In terms of the case study, four women athlete's journeys have been discussed regarding gender inequality and discrimination.

Introduction

Gender dynamics play a vital role in the field of sports being shaped as it is currently. Women face unique challenges while participating in various sports and achieving success.

Women, in general, have been underrepresented in various fields, sports in particular. Women are faced with societal as well as institutional biases, when participating in sports (Pape, 2020). Despite these challenges, women have started to participate more in sports in recent times. 45% more women participate in the Olympics compared to the 1950s (Cavadias, 2023). Various studies have been conducted regarding the requirement of mental resilience, equal opportunity and motivation to achieve success in sports. However, how these factors affect participation and success in sports fields from a gender point of view has been missing (Jeanes *et al.* 2021).

The issue regarding this research topic is that women have been severely *underrepresented while participating in sports*. According to a report published by BBC, more than 42% men have participated in sports at least once in their lives (Singh, 2023). However, only 29% of participation is witnessed in sports among women (Singh,

2023). This **underrepresentation** impacts the potential for young girls to participate in sports as well as promotes **stereotypes** which are harmful (Staurowsky *et al.* 2020). Moreover, these stereotypes impact the **psychological construct** of these young girls and prevent them from participating in sports.

This could be witnessed in a PwC report, where there were no women athletes in the first summer Olympics, whereas the Tokyo Olympics of 2020 witnessed 50% of the overall athletes being women (PwC, 2024).

As a result, in order to identify these challenges regarding the participation of women in sports and the psychological aspect associated with it. This paper aims to identify the psychological mechanisms which drive women to participate in sports and succeed in it.

The main aim of this paper is to identify the psychological mechanisms which drive women's self-belief, resilience, and performance while overcoming gender-related challenges in sports. I will focus on looking at the research question of 'What psychological factors influence the women athlete's self-belief and motivation?'

Research Objectives

1. To identify the psychological factors that impact self-belief and motivation among women athletes.
2. To identify the impact of societal and institutional biases, which women athletes have to overcome.
3. To explore the role of mental resilience in overcoming gender-related challenges among women athletes.

Literature Review

According to Vysochina and Vorobiova (2023), psychological factors significantly impact the motivation and the self-belief of women athletes, especially in competitive sports. Women athletes with elevated levels of self-motivation possess the skills of high self-efficacy and clear goal setting. However, stress and overtraining often result in the athlete getting burned out. Various factors, such as high motivation among women athletes and better performance, are elevated as a result of autonomy and self-determination (Vysochina and Vorobiova, 2023). It could also be witnessed that the most amount of anxiety and lack of motivation is felt by women athletes during the pre-competition stages.

Similarly, O'Brien *et al.* (2021), in their research, stated that showing psychological resilience often results in women athletes gaining valuable life lessons from the same. The athletes are also helped to grow personally as a result of their sporting life. The main reason which is responsible for this includes their high motivation levels and self-belief. It is even more important for young women athletes, as they are faced with various issues, such as body image issues and sports inequality (O'Brien *et al.* 2021). In order to overcome these challenges, these women athletes are required to showcase a lot of mental strength and resilience.

Weight *et al.* (2020), also stated in their research that having transformative coaches also results in the women athlete's motivation and psychological factors. These coaches treat these young women athletes as their own children and take care of them. They are also responsible for strengthening the mentality of these athletes. However, only two-thirds of the established women athletes state that they have been groomed under transformational coaches. The rest one-third state that their coaches were destructive and abusive when the athletes did not achieve success (Weight *et al.* 2020). Both of these spectrums of coaches played a big part in the women athletes' self-belief and motivation being high or not.

Pape (2020), stated in his research that societal as well as institutional biases play a big role in women athletes not being able to achieve success in their careers. The women athletes that do succeed in their field have to overcome these challenges at some point in their lives. Society as well as sports organizations, have a binary logic in terms of sports. They always seem to back the sports personalities based on gender, and give the logic of chances of success (Pape, 2020). The reasoning behind these includes that these institutions these days also have male dominated leadership structures.

Similarly, Hancock (2023) stated in their research that bias within societies also negatively impacts women athletes' participation in various sports. These biases include that women are not as physically able as the males are. Moreover, the notion that the women game would not get as many views as the men's game also plays a part in young girls being discouraged from participating in sports. They are also faced with discrimination by the sports institutions, which results in women athletes being discouraged (Hancock, 2023). Harassment cases against women athletes are also filed, which often leads to them not participating in sports activities.

The mental resilience of women athletes also plays a significant role in them being able to overcome the challenges associated with gender discrimination. According to Guo & Chang (2024), women athletes tend to have higher levels of dedication and self-belief because of the challenges they constantly face and have to overcome. This mental resilience among women athletes also helps them fight societal challenges such as being discriminated on the basis of gender (Guo & Chang 2024). The study also stated that the awareness levels of women athletes and their ability to control emotions also play a vital part in them being able to overcome societal challenges. According to Strycharczyk *et al.* (2020), the mental toughness that is achieved by women athletes becomes persistent and mentally tough because of the struggles they have to overcome. Moreover, it was difficult for women athletes to break into the male-dominated sports structure, which also makes them mentally resilient.

2.3 Literature Gap

While conducting this study, the main gap in the literature which was identified, is the impact of societal and institutional discrimination on women's sports. The previous studies mainly focused on the impact of these aspects on the overall impact of sports personalities. Moreover, previous studies also mainly focused on the mental health aspect of women athletes. Research relevant to the topic of mental and psychological resilience and how it impacted women athletes is scarce.

It could be stated from the above literature review that the mental toughness aspect of women athletes is strong because of various reasons. This includes them having to face discrimination from a young age. This made their mental resilience much stronger and also enabled them to bounce back from setbacks. Moreover, the coaches of these women athletes also play a major role in them being able to achieve success or not. Almost two-thirds of the women athletes stated that they had been groomed under coaches who were supportive and helped them to overcome the challenges they faced. However, the gap in the literature does not have enough studies present that strictly deal with women athletes and not athletes in general.

Discussion

This section deals with the real life case studies of women athletes who have faced gender discrimination and inequity in their lifetime. Four athletes are discussed, and based on that data, an analysis is also conducted.

Simone Biles is an African-American gymnast who was born on the 14th of March 1997. During the Tokyo Olympics of 2020, she faced various instances of racial and gender discrimination, which ultimately led to withdrawing from various events (Germain, 2023).

Serena Williams is an American born tennis player and is also widely regarded as one of the greatest women tennis players in the world. However, she also faced gender discrimination from her childhood. While, she was trained and coached by her father, they were not permitted to enter tennis arenas because of their skin color (Davis, 2022). Moreover, tennis fans also trolled her, referencing her muscles and 'man-like' physique (Davis, 2022). The tennis associations also discriminated against her by sending drug testers randomly to get her dope tested.

Kathrine Switzer is an American marathon runner. She also faced gender discrimination in her lifetime as a women marathon runner. The most notable among them includes entering the Boston Marathon. Up until 1967, women were not allowed to enter the Boston Marathon as it was a male-only event (Kotecha, 2021). However, Kathrine Switzer entered the 1967 version of the Boston Marathon by changing her name to K.V. Switzer. After she completed two miles of the marathon, the officials of the Boston Marathon also tried to forcefully eject her

from the event (Kotecha, 2021). However, she remained resilient and finished the race, becoming the first ever woman to complete the Boston Marathon.

Analysis

The literature review on gender, sports and psychology suggested that in competitive sports, psychological factors such as mental stress can severely impact one's motivation. For women athletes, this is especially true because mental stressors such as overtraining can lead to burnout (Vysochina and Vorobiova, 2023). This is perfectly showcased in the case of African-American gymnast Simona Biles, who had to opt out of the Olympics due to racial and gender discrimination. These kinds of acts can cause psychological stress for any person, which becomes even more prominent when it comes to famous women athletes. Moreover, she was also attacked on social media by being called weak, which further lowered her motivation to compete (Germain, 2023).

The literature review also found that psychological resilience can lead to the personal growth of women athletes through valuable life lessons. Due to high motivation and self-belief, they grow not only in their career but also in their personal life. It is more important for young women athletes to develop psychological resilience because they are constantly subjected to body shaming and sports inequality (O'Brien *et al.* 2021). This can be seen in the case of tennis player Serena Williams, who faced gender and racial discrimination from childhood. However, due to her psychological resilience, she was able to overcome these challenges and become the most successful tennis player in the world (Davis, 2022).

Having a transformative coach can also lead to the professional and personal development of women athletes. However, it was found that most of the women athletes under such a coach were groomed by them or had to endure their abuse and destructive tantrums (Weight *et al.* 2020). Although this is true, findings have suggested that Serena Williams's father was her trainer and coach who supported her even when she was not allowed to enter the fields due to her skin colour (Davis, 2022).

Conclusion

Women athletes have faced various hardships on their way to becoming a successful sportspersons. From being discriminated against for gender or being called a man, their psychological resilience and mental toughness has paved their way to becoming the most successful personas in their fields. In order to promote participation in various sporting activities, governments across the world should implement a quota system. This would enable women athletes to take part in sporting events and not feel left out. Moreover, societies should also be educated regarding gender equality and treating everyone fairly (Staurowsky *et al.* 2020). This would also enable the women athletes to be able to participate in these events without any inhibitions. Equal pay for both male and women athletes should also be implemented by the sports authorities (Carrick *et al.* 2021). These would help to

solve two problems, One of them being encouraging women athletes to participate in sporting events and also to prevent discrimination happening on the basis of gender.

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