



Exploring the Identity Representation and Empowerment of Pakistani Women Athletes: An Ethnographic Study of Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), Islamabad

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the identity representation and empowerment of Pakistani women athletes through an ethnographic inquiry at the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), Islamabad. Employing Postcolonial Feminism, particularly Lila Abu-Lughod's critique of Western-centric narratives of empowerment, the research examines how sociocultural norms, religious expectations, political structures, and economic constraints shape female athletes' everyday experiences. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, the study highlights how women navigate intersecting barriers such as restricted access to facilities, familial pressures, harassment, and structural inequalities in policy implementation. The findings reveal that while institutional neglect and gendered hierarchies persist, female athletes demonstrate resilience by negotiating agency within cultural frameworks, redefining empowerment through subtle forms of resistance, identity negotiation, and embodied performance. The paper contributes to anthropological scholarship by situating Pakistani women athletes in global feminist debates while offering policy recommendations that advocate for inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and women-led leadership in sports institutions.

Introduction

The anthropology of sports and gender has increasingly emphasized the ways in which cultural values, institutional arrangements, and political economies shape women's participation in

athletics. Globally, sports have historically been viewed as male-dominated spaces, with women's participation often framed as transgressive to normative gender roles (Messner, 2002; Giulianotti, 2005). Within South Asia, and particularly Pakistan, women athletes confront multiple structural and cultural constraints that go beyond physical access to sports facilities. These include deeply embedded patriarchal expectations, religious interpretations, economic limitations, and institutional neglect. Against this backdrop, the presence of women athletes represents both a symbolic challenge to hegemonic masculinity and a lived negotiation of agency in restrictive contexts.

This study investigates these dynamics through an ethnographic exploration of the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), Islamabad, which functions as a central governing body for sports in the country. The PSB, while tasked with promoting inclusivity, has often been critiqued for tokenistic policies, insufficient budget allocation for women's sports, and male-dominated leadership structures (Pakistan Sports Board, 2022). As such, it provides a critical institutional setting for analyzing how Pakistani women athletes represent their identities, negotiate their agency, and confront systemic inequalities.

Theoretically, this research draws on Postcolonial Feminism, particularly the insights of Lila Abu-Lughod (1990), who cautions against universalizing Western notions of women empowerment. Instead, she highlights the significance of everyday forms of resistance such as modesty, silence, or compliance as tactics through which women navigate patriarchal structures without necessarily engaging in overt defiance. This framework is particularly relevant for Pakistani female athletes who often resist exclusion by adopting culturally accepted strategies: conforming to dress codes, balancing athletic careers with family expectations, or selectively engaging with media visibility.

At the same time, the study incorporates complementary theoretical insights. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic violence explains how institutional neglect and resource disparities reinforce women's marginalization in sports. Fraser's (1997) framework of redistribution and recognition provides a lens to understand how material inequities (e.g., funding, coaching) intersect with cultural misrecognition (e.g., stereotyping of women athletes) to produce structural exclusion. Together, these perspectives situate Pakistani women athletes' struggles within broader debates about power, identity, and social justice.

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Pakistani women athletes negotiate their identities within the institutional setting of the PSB?
2. In what ways do cultural and familial expectations intersect with athletes' pursuit of empowerment?
3. How are policies regarding women in sports understood, implemented, and experienced by athletes?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to both feminist anthropology and sports studies. It documents how empowerment is not only a matter of policy or visibility but also a deeply situated process of negotiation within cultural, institutional, and postcolonial contexts.

Literature Review

The intersection of gender, identity, and sports has been widely examined in anthropology and feminist scholarship, highlighting the ways in which cultural values and institutional structures shape women's participation in physical activities. In Western contexts, scholars such as Messner

(2002) and Theberge (2000) demonstrate how sports have historically reinforced gender binaries, situating athleticism within a framework of hegemonic masculinity. Female athletes, even when successful, are often evaluated through stereotypes that emphasize femininity or sexualization rather than performance. These dynamics reflect what Bourdieu (1984) terms symbolic violence the normalization of inequalities through everyday practices and institutional neglect.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives

Postcolonial feminism provides a critical lens for understanding the specific challenges of women athletes in non-Western contexts. Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) seminal work *The Romance of Resistance* critiques universalist notions of empowerment and calls for attention to context-specific negotiations of agency. Her framework emphasizes that women may resist structural constraints not only through open rebellion but also through subtle, everyday practices such as modesty, silence, or strategic compliance. For Pakistani women athletes, this insight is crucial: empowerment is not necessarily about rejecting cultural values but about navigating within them to carve out spaces for participation.

Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) critiques the homogenization of "Third World women" in Western feminist discourse, underscoring the need to situate Pakistani women athletes within their cultural, political, and institutional realities. In this regard, athletes' negotiation of *izzat* (honor), *haya* (modesty), and family responsibilities can be seen as tactics of survival and self-definition rather than markers of oppression.

Identity, Agency, and Embodiment

Sherry Ortner (1974) argued that women's social positioning is symbolically associated with nature, while men are aligned with culture, which historically placed women in subordinate positions. However, in sports, women often challenge this dichotomy by embodying traits like discipline, strength, and competitiveness that are culturally coded as masculine. Saba Mahmood (2005) furthers this debate by urging scholars to see agency not only as resistance but also as the capacity to inhabit norms. This is reflected in the way Pakistani women athletes accept dress codes or familial restrictions yet still use their bodies as sites of empowerment and representation.

Embodiment also emerges as a significant theme in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1984), which refers to the ingrained dispositions shaped by social structures. For women athletes at the PSB, embodied practices of training, competing, and performing in public spaces constitute negotiations of identity within a male-dominated sporting culture. Their physical presence on the field challenges patriarchal norms that associate athleticism with masculinity, creating new possibilities for self-representation.

Sports Policies and Structural Constraints

Sports institutions often reflect broader patterns of gender inequality. Nancy Fraser (1997) argues that justice requires both redistribution (material resources) and recognition (cultural respect). In Pakistan, women athletes face challenges on both fronts. Budgetary allocations for female sports rarely exceed 10% of total funding (PSB, 2022), and representation in decision-making bodies remains minimal. Policy documents often highlight gender inclusivity, yet implementation is weak and tokenistic (Asad & Noreen, 2023). This creates a disconnect between policy intent and lived experiences, reinforcing athletes' marginalization.

Comparative studies in South Asia reveal similar patterns. Majumdar and Mehta (2009) document how nationalism and patriarchy combine to restrict women's access to sports in India, while

Shaikh (2017) highlights the cultural regulation of women athletes in Pakistan through concepts of honor and modesty. Conversely, contexts such as Iran demonstrate that religious frameworks need not always be restrictive; women athletes have successfully participated in sports while adhering to Islamic dress codes (Tehran Times, 2023). These examples indicate that cultural values can be reinterpreted in ways that enable rather than exclude women.

Media and Representation

Media coverage significantly shapes how women athletes are perceived. Fink (2015) notes that global sports media often trivializes women athletes, reinforcing stereotypes. In Pakistan, women athletes are rarely covered, and when they are, the focus often shifts to their appearance rather than achievements (Lenskyj, 2013). This reflects Spivak's (1999) question of whether the subaltern can speak women athletes' voices that are frequently muted within dominant narratives. However, new digital platforms provide opportunities for mediated empowerment (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). For instance, Pakistani footballer Hajra Khan has used social media to promote visibility and advocates for gender equality, after facing institutional neglect.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the identity representation and empowerment of Pakistani women athletes within the institutional context of the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), Islamabad. Ethnography was selected as it allows for an in-depth understanding of lived experiences, cultural negotiations, and institutional practices, which cannot be captured through quantitative surveys alone (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Field Site: Pakistan Sports Board (PSB)

PSB (Pakistan Sports Board) is the central governing institution for sports in Pakistan, responsible for policy development, infrastructure, and athlete training. Its headquarters in Islamabad provide facilities such as training grounds, hostels, and administrative offices. While the PSB claims inclusivity in its mandate, it has been criticized for inadequate investment in women's sports, gender-insensitive policies, and male-dominated leadership structures (PSB, 2022). This institutional setting makes it an appropriate site to investigate the everyday struggles and negotiations of women athletes.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations, allowing for a multi-layered understanding of athletes' experiences.

- **Participant Observation:** Conducted across training sessions, competitions, and informal gatherings, enabling observation of gendered interactions, access to resources, and the daily routines of female athletes.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female athletes, coaches, and PSB officials. Questions focused on access to facilities, policy awareness, experiences of discrimination, identity negotiation, and aspirations.
- **Informal Conversations:** Casual interactions helped capture nuanced perspectives, particularly where sensitive issues such as harassment and favoritism were concerned.

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit participants who were directly involved in national-level sports activities. The sample included 12 female athletes across different sports (athletics, hockey, football, martial arts), alongside 3 coaches and 2 administrative officials. Participants were selected based on their active engagement with PSB programs and their willingness to share experiences.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed, and thematically analyzed. Themes were identified around access to opportunities, cultural/familial expectations, identity negotiation, policy awareness, and empowerment. Data was coded manually, ensuring that participant voices remained central to the interpretation. Abu-Lughod's (1990) postcolonial feminist framework was used to interpret subtle forms of resistance, while Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and symbolic violence informed the analysis of institutional practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms. Given the sensitivity of topics such as harassment, participants were allowed to skip questions or withdraw at any stage. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research, acknowledging the positionality of the researcher as a young woman conducting fieldwork in a gendered institutional space.

Discussion and Analysis

Access to Resources and Opportunities

Their right to access to the resources, training, and institutional support are the essential determinants of the empowerment of women athletes and their representation at the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB). This access indicates the wider patterns in societal views of women in sport and exposes the deep-rooted gender equality of domination in sports institutions. The participation of women is still disproportional, discriminatory and contingent in spite of their formal inclusion.

In Pakistan, women are still confined by their patriarchal norms, conservative gender roles, and restrictive religious interpretations to ensure their mobility and engagement in sports (Khan et al., 2020). Women athletes are often viewed as uncouth or unchaste, and especially in rural areas where family respect and gender alignment are prioritized (Ahmad and Qureshi, 2021; Ali and Rizvi, 2019). Cultural restrictions are compounded by the harassment and the institutional silence because when a male coach or a player is accused of harassment, little to nothing is usually done, and the lack of gender-specific accountability practices (Mustafa & Anwar, 2022).

Comparative views indicate that although patriarchal barriers prevail in the world, there are institutional responses, which are different. The state-driven programs to promote women involvement have been launched in India and Saudi Arabia, though they are limited by cultural aspects (Kaur and Garg, 2020; Al-Hazzaa, 2021). Conversely, gender equality was institutionalized in some countries such as the United States, where Title IX was enforced by law, but there are still inequalities (Messner, 2002). Pakistan, nevertheless, is still characterized by both cultural conservativeness and lack of commitment to the state and thus the low state provision of long-term support systems to women athletes.

These dynamics can be explained with the help of theoretical insights. The symbolic framework offered by Ortner places women in a peripheral status in institutions which have traditionally been male coded (Ortner, 2006). The idea of embodied structural violence provided by Scheper-Hughes explains how the lack of proper preparation, medical care, and facilities literally physically deficits the performance of women in sports (Hughes, 1991). Besnier (2012) goes on to say that globalization promotes visibility without much change to the local patriarchal structures.

Both agency and marginalization are manifested in interview narratives. Kiran (27) has defined localized institutional support:

“We receive good coaching and facilities, and now we are also gaining benefits similar to boys.”

The experience she had is what Abu-Lughod imagines as agency at the level of power systems and not the outright resistance. In contrast, selective recognition was stressed by Hina (23):

“We are not remembered except when National games are announced.”

The story of Hina demonstrates the use of tokenistic inclusion, where women are appreciated as useful resources as opposed to being nurtured as permanent players. Based on the notion of habitus, this conditional empowerment solidifies internalized gender positions, rendering the access to opportunity as unbalanced and unstable (Bourdieu, 1984).

On the whole, the problem of women access to sports in Pakistan is not only a logistical issue but one that is of a very political and cultural nature. Sustainable empowerment is not only about better facilities, but also institutional transformation of practices and belief systems that define who is deemed fit to be provided with continuous support and relevance (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Cultural Expectations and Family Influence

The concept of family comes out as a place of support and pressure in the lives of Pakistani female athletes. The cultural traditions, honor, decency and gender acceptable conducts significantly define women, their dreams, and sports preferences. Instead of serving as a support system, families tend to recreate gender regimes via daily anticipations, therefore, controlling the movement of women, their discipline, and publicity (Yanagisako, 1979). These processes indicate that the sporting involvement of women is underlain by emotional negotiations of love, obligation, fear and guilt.

The anthropological views criticize the idea that women behaviors in the traditional societies are confronting liberal meaning. Women athletes, on the contrary, exhibit situated agency and act within the cultural and emotional contexts instead of directly challenging them (Mehmood, 2005). Their existence is marked by an ongoing juggling of desire and conformity where one needs to survive under the conditions of having to walk the line of family demands without talking openly of having broken them. Ong (1990) also holds that the agency of women is usually in the form of strategic accommodation in systems of power as opposed to leaving.

This bargaining can be observed in the case of Iqra (32), a tennis player on a national level and residing in a joint family:

“My family supports me, but they expect that the family’s honor is never compromised.”

Her story depicts partial assistance, whereby there is encouragement and limitations of time, movement, and control. This kind of experience suggests an argument by Ortner (2006) that women are engaged within a framed scope of action and negotiate spaces of action in confined limits even as they are bound to gender expectations.

The same tension is evident in Amna (25), whose parents allow her to play football and present sport as a one-way affair:

“They say a woman’s real role is to run a household, so they want me to get married soon.”

The account given by Amna shows how sport is being viewed as an exception and not a viable long term identity amongst women. Based on the idea of Bourdieu’s habitus, these internal expectations do not only make the way of acting but also define the boundaries of imagination and desire (Bourdieu, 1984). Women do not necessarily fight back in a dramatic manner, they make changes quietly, reconfiguring the dreams into a reasonable framework.

Comprehensively, these stories confirm that the Pakistani female athletes do not experience empowerment manifested in their open rebellion but in terms of their emotional resilience, bargaining, and perseverance. In a similar manner as Abu-Lughod (1990) proposes, it can be in the capacity to lead a meaningful life amid constraint. The issue of these women bearing the price of cultural preservation and seeking personal ambition is that the empowerment in these situations is delicate, conditional and highly relational as opposed to the Western context.

Social Barriers and Stigma

In Pakistan, there are very strong cultural standards and gender roles which define the ways in which women have to behave and support sports as male territories. Hegemonic gender roles equate women with submissiveness and domesticity and modesty, whereas sport is physically expressive, competitive, and public, which have the cultural coding of masculinity. This paradox leaves a big social burden on the female athletes who have to juggle the household requirements, social criticism, and the lack of facility to do sports in a women-friendly manner (Chaudhry, 2004). The fear of *log kya kehenge* (what people will say) often makes it difficult to get families to permit girls to stay in sports and especially with the fear of marriage opportunities and family honor.

The presence of women in sports is also stigmatized by referring to women as unfeminine, rebellious or immodest particularly when the sports uniforms interfere with the cultural dressing codes (Walseth & Fasting, 2003). The latter is heightened in rural and conservative settings where segregation of gender is stricter and minimal exposure to female athletic role models is concerned. This stigmatization does not only impede the physical movement of women but also the ability of women to envision extended athletic destinations, highlighting the necessity of cultural change in combination with reforming of the policy (Pfister, 2010).

Aimen (22), contributed greatly to the dynamics of this kind of everyday moral policing, which is connected to the appearance and the marriageability:

“If you are a girl, how can you live like a boy... you have to get married, so how can you live like this?”

The description given by Aimen resembles the conceptualization of stigma presented by Goffman (1963) as a discrediting attribute used to label people as socially deviant. With reference to the concept of gender performativity by Butler (1990), her experience illustrates how failure to conform to the ideal feminine will result in social sanctions to reinstate the gender order.

Facilitating but limited views also come out via institutional actors. An example of the contradiction between sports empowerment and social disapproval is noted by Rashid (45), a male sport teacher:

“When girls participate in sports, they face rejection from society, yet sports greatly increase their confidence.”

His story shows how sports women are empowered and are at the same time subjected to increased scrutiny. Anthropologically, these are very subtle mentorship and advocacy modes that are translated, according to Abu-Lughod (1990), as transformative action within constraint instead of resistance.

In theory, the belief that women are linked to nature and men to culture as postulated by Ortner (1974) is what makes the society uncomfortable with the appearance of women in sporting arenas. The notion of hegemonic masculinity by Connell also explains the reason why sport is perceived as a place of masculine domination thus making a female's involvement disrupting. Therefore, women athletes can overcome stigma, surveillance, and exclusion and reinvent femininity through embodied practice.

By and large, these accounts indicate that Pakistani female athletes bargain with being very socialized. They are not rebellious but insist, and negotiate conformity, which is why their participation is subversive of dominant gender scripts. The process of being empowered, in this sense, is intermittent but significant, it gets held together by the day-to-day survival of highly gendered social regimes.

Identity Formation and Negotiation

The Pakistani female athletes show that identity is not predetermined and assigned but rather negotiated at social, religious, and national levels. Actions that appear submissive to women like consulting with parents before making decisions or wearing modest dress code designs are more appropriately viewed as tactical interactions with power that bring women to enlarge their space in moral regulated territories. Instead of indicating compliance, the practices indicate calculated negotiations that allow participation in sport to be continued.

Through the prism of selective adaptation, female athletes reconcile the desires of society with femininity that is approved by the culture, and they receive their legitimacy without having to challenge the ideals of the community (Fernandes, 2013). These identities are not formed by the denial of norms, but rather through the slow process of change and introduction of new meanings of athleticism into the existing cultural structures. This is a spatial and bodily negotiation since the presence of women in stadiums and in institutional corridors disturbs the masculine geographies that are occupied by men (Okely, 1996). This upheaval is achieved by constant visibility and daily engagement.

The construction of identity co-construction could be seen in the example of Shanza (22), who has explained that the identity is more strengthened through public recognition:

“When the audience cheers, it boosts my confidence so much that I feel I can do it.”

The view of identity, which Goffman (1959) describes as audiences creating identity, can be traced in her experience. Social validation is offered by applause and recognition, which upsets norms and therefore marginalizes the participation of women in athletics. This concept of performativity by Butler (1990) adds a further explanation of how the repetitive performances of running, competing, and winning cause the presence of women in masculine spaces to become normal and their identities to become visible and legitimate.

In the same manner, Sania (22) defined sport as a space of self-identification and not opposition:

"I am not just a girl; I am an athlete. I have an identity."

Her quote is in line with Abu-Lughod's concept of contextual agency in which women are also acting within the boundaries of their culture instead of outside of it. It is through sport that women are able to find physical, psychological and social empowerment and redefine femininity without necessarily dismissing tradition.

In general, these stories demonstrate that Pakistani women athletes are not just fighting against patriarchy but are creating the new identities in embodied practice and daily negotiation. The empowerment in this case is culturally situated as it results out of the ability to occupy several roles at the same time like woman, daughter, athlete, as well as and not losing cultural belongings. Power and femininity are, however, not antagonistic, rather they are re-articulated in relation to each other in sport.

Policy Awareness, Impact, and Gaps

The idea of empowerment as put forward by Kabeer (1999) does not occur by having access to policies or programs but by the ability to comprehend, demand and mobilize resources. To apply at the example of Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), the majority of female athletes are not only deprived of resources but also the necessary awareness of policies and can not insist on equal opportunities. Policies targeting gender are mostly formal without any outreach because their ownership does not result to empowerment unless the athletes are capable of exercising their rights.

Based on the works of Fernandes (2013), state institutions in South Asia tend to place the role of a woman as a passive recipient instead of an active agent. PBS policies are generally composed in technical, legalistic language which is not comprehensible to working, rural, and minority women, which strengthens intersectional exclusions by gender, region, and social class. This has caused elite athletes, especially the national or international competition athletes to be the focus of policy awareness. Such preferential treatment is indicative of the intersectionality framework by Collins (1990) that female athletes in marginalized areas (Balochistan or Gilgit) are quite marginalized even though they are still covered by the same national policy framework.

Such difference between symbolic inclusion and substantive support is visible in the account of Sadia (26):

"The government helps to some extent... but not much, often it feels like it is only for publicity."

Her story shows that although there is assistance in the short-term (in form of kits, travel and events) there is no investment in long-term training, coaching and development pathways. This kind of partial support is an act of accommodation and not empowerment and it forces women to depend on a personal network and private sponsorships, leading to inequality (Mahmood, 2005; Appadurai, 2004).

Ethnographic observations also indicated that the awareness of female athletes to the policies is mostly reactive as the awareness arises only at the time of denial or crisis. According to Hamna (24):

"There is no specific website or portal. We do not know what facilities are being provided."

This dependence on informal networks is indicative of what Das (2007) terms everyday coping in situations of institutional neglect and results in resilience and not structural change. As much as women are seeking information, lack of participatory and transparent policy dissemination denies

them the ability to plan athletic careers in the long term which is a form of capability deprivation (Sen, 1999).

In general, the PSB case shows that empowerment cannot be narrowed down to policy presence, or restricted access. Inclusive, visible, and language-sensitive policy communication is always missing; without all three, women athletes will always be politically shunned. As a result, empowerment is not something that is institutionally designed but the result of the daily journey of women that manages to traverse a system of fragments with peaked emphasis on the disjuncture between policy intent and lived reality.

Empowerment and Subtle Resistance

Defining empowerment as put forward by Kabeer (1999), goes a step beyond access to policies and programs to capacity to comprehend, claim and mobilize resources. Within the given case of the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB), majority of female athletes do not even have access to material support, not to mention the lack of policy awareness to enforce their right to be given equal opportunities. This means that gender sensitive sport policies are mostly formality since formal inclusion is not the same as empowerment without the right to exercise their rights.

The South Asian institutions of state tend to portray women as passive consumers instead of agents (Fernandes, 2013). PSB policies are composed technically and in legalistic language that is largely inaccessible to the working-class, rural and minority women, which further upholds intersectional exclusions on the basis of gender, class and region. This means that policy awareness has been confined to elite athletes with those in peripheral areas like Balochistan and Gilgit being marginalized despite the fact that they are formally under national arrangements (Collins, 1990).

This ordeal between figurative inclusion and effective support can be traced in the experience of Sadia (26):

“The government helps to some extent but not much. Often it feels like the support is mainly for publicity.”

Although temporary measures like kits or travelling support can be offered, long-term investment in training, coaching and development channels is minimal. This accommodation instead of empowerment leads to such partial involvement where women athletes have to be dependent on their own networks and personal resources which replicate inequality (Mahmood, 2005; Appadurai, 2004).

Ethnographic observations also suggest that knowledge of policy by female athletes is mostly reactive and must occur when they feel denied or excluded. Lack of centralized and available information systems compels the athletes to rely on informal networks in order to provide guidance, as Hamna (24) puts it in her statement:

“There is no specific website or portal and we do not know what facilities are being provided.”

It is this dependency on informal means that is indicative of daily coping methods within the circumstances of institutional neglect (Das, 2007) which further serves to build resilience but fails to bring about structural change. Lack of clear and participatory communication of policies denies these women athletes the ability to complete long term athletic careers and this depicts the continued disparity between policy purpose and reality (Sen, 1999).

Comparative Insights

When compared globally, Pakistani women athletes face challenges similar to those in other postcolonial contexts. In India, women athletes like Mary Kom have redefined gender norms but still struggle with systemic discrimination (Majumdar, 2012). In Iran, women have achieved international recognition while adhering to religious dress codes (Tehran Times, 2023), suggesting that cultural frameworks can be reinterpreted. Saudi Arabia's recent reforms demonstrate that policy shifts can significantly improve women's participation in sports (Ministry of Sport, 2024). These examples highlight possibilities for Pakistan, where structural change remains slow but not impossible.

Conclusion and Implications

This ethnographic study of women athletes at the Pakistan Sports Board (PSB) has demonstrated that sports participation for women in Pakistan remains fraught with structural inequalities, cultural constraints, and institutional neglect. Yet, within these constraints, athletes continually negotiate agency and construct identities that challenge patriarchal boundaries in subtle but meaningful ways.

By applying Lila Abu-Lughod's (1990) postcolonial feminist framework, the study reveals that empowerment is not a universal process. Rather, it emerges through athletes' everyday persistence in training, their negotiation of family expectations, and their ability to embody discipline and evolving within the culturally acceptable boundaries. This reframing highlights empowerment as a situated, negotiated, and context-specific process, deeply rooted in local values of modesty, honor, and family.

Institutionally, the findings expose significant policy gaps. While the PSB claims inclusivity, women athletes experience tokenistic policies, inadequate resource allocation, favoritism, and weak harassment protections. These shortcomings illustrate Nancy Fraser's (1997) argument that justice requires both redistribution of resources and recognition of cultural values. Without addressing both dimensions, sports institutions risk perpetuating symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984) hence reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Despite these challenges, women athletes continue to redefine gendered spaces in Pakistan. Their presence in stadiums, training grounds, and national teams represents not only personal achievements but also a collective reshaping of women's place in public life. These athletes act as role models, inspiring younger generations to envision alternative futures.

Policy and Practical Implications

The study offers several recommendations for policymakers and sports institutions:

1. **Increase Funding:** Allocate equitable budgets to women's sports, ensuring parity in facilities, equipment, and coaching.
2. **Women-Led Governance:** Appoint female officials and coaches at decision-making levels to enhance inclusivity and reduce vulnerability to harassment.
3. **Harassment Protections:** Enforce strict anti-harassment policies and establish confidential reporting mechanisms.
4. **Awareness Campaigns:** Promote women athletes through media and community initiatives to challenge stereotypes and normalize women's participation.

5. Grassroots Development: Invest in school and community-level programs that encourage young girls to participate in sports from an early age.

This research contributes to feminist anthropology by situating Pakistani women athletes within global debates on gender, agency, and post colonialism. It underscores that empowerment is neither imposed from above nor simply resisted from below but negotiated through everyday practices. By amplifying the voices of women athletes, this study not only documents their struggles but also affirms their role as agents of transformation within Pakistan's sports and cultural landscape.

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