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Gender Equity in Community Physical Activity: Challenges, Barriers and Strategies for Inclusion

Equidad de Género en la Actividad Física Comunitaria: Desafíos, Barreras y Estrategias para la Inclusión

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Abstract

Gender equity is a fundamental principle for social justice, which seeks to ensure equal access to resources and opportunities, recognizing and addressing the historical and structural inequalities faced by women and other marginalized groups. In the field of physical activity (PA), gender plays a determining role, since social expectations and roles influence the participation and appreciation of these practices. Despite recent advances, barriers that limit female participation persist, such as gender stereotypes, the burden of domestic responsibilities, and socioeconomic inequalities. Community physical activity (CPA) has been proposed as a means to promote health and well-being, as well as strengthen social capital. However, women face various limitations in accessing PA programs, especially those in low-resource contexts or with family responsibilities. Non-binary people also face exclusion in binary sporting spaces, reinforcing the need to transform sporting structures and create inclusive and accessible environments for all. This article examines the barriers and inequalities that affect participation in PA from a gender perspective, and proposes strategies to promote inclusion and equity. Through public policies, specific programs and the active participation of women and non-binary people in the design of activities, we seek to move towards a fairer and more inclusive sports model, which considers the needs and capabilities of all groups, without distinction of gender.

Code words: Gender equity, Community physical activity.

Resumen



La equidad de género es un principio fundamental para la justicia social, que busca garantizar igualdad de acceso a recursos y oportunidades, reconociendo y abordando las desigualdades históricas y estructurales que enfrentan las mujeres y otros grupos marginados. En el ámbito de la actividad física (AF), el género juega un papel determinante, ya que las expectativas y roles sociales influyen en la participación y valoración de estas prácticas. A pesar de los avances recientes, persisten barreras que limitan la participación femenina, como los estereotipos de género, la carga de responsabilidades domésticas y las desigualdades socioeconómicas. La actividad física comunitaria (AFC) se ha propuesto como un medio para promover la salud y el bienestar, así como fortalecer el capital social. Sin embargo, las mujeres enfrentan diversas limitaciones para acceder a programas de AF, especialmente aquellas en contextos de bajos recursos o con responsabilidades familiares. Las personas no binarias también enfrentan exclusión en espacios deportivos binarios, lo que refuerza la necesidad de transformar las estructuras deportivas y crear entornos inclusivos y accesibles para todos. Este artículo examina las barreras y desigualdades que afectan la participación en la AF desde un enfoque de género, y propone estrategias para promover la inclusión y la equidad. A través de políticas públicas, programas específicos y la participación activa de mujeres y personas no binarias en el diseño de actividades, se busca avanzar hacia un modelo deportivo más justo e inclusivo, que considere las necesidades y capacidades de todos los grupos, sin distinción de género.

Palabras clave: Equidad de género, Actividad física comunitaria,

Introduction

Gender equity, understood as the defense of equality in access, control and use of goods and services, is a fundamental pillar for justice and social cohesion. This equity goes beyond formal equality, seeking to compensate for the historical and structural disadvantages faced by women and other marginalized groups.

Physical activity (PA) is essential for physical and mental well-being, contributing to a healthy and balanced life. However, its practice does not occur in a vacuum; It is intrinsically linked to social constructions, where gender emerges as a determining factor. Gender expectations and roles, rooted in the collective imagination, influence not only participation in physical activities, but also how these practices are perceived and valued in various cultural contexts. Understanding this interdependence then alerts us that the relationship between PA and gender is a dynamic and complex field of study, where characteristics and biological differences interact with sociocultural factors and condition schemes, patterns, motivation, participation and performance.



In the last decade, several factors have gradually modified stereotypes and practices that were anchored in patriarchal sediments and that reinforced the confinement of women and girls only to certain specific activities and roles. Among these factors, it is necessary to mention the advances in the research field on gender relations and physical activity from which evidence has been obtained that today supports the growing need to make gender inequalities visible in the field of physical activity and sports practice; Education and the influence of the media have also reinforced the positive representation of people accessing opportunities or alternatives to satisfy their needs and motivations in this field, an issue that has been challenging social perceptions and expectations. Greater access to resources and changes in sports policies and programs have also been decisive in reducing objective and subjective barriers, creating more inclusive environments.

However, it is important to recognize that gender disparities persist that are expressed in the internalization of limiting gender roles, the persistence of microaggressions in the sporting environment, the persistence of differentiated social expectations, the unequal distribution/allocation of domestic and care responsibilities, which directly impact the time and energy available for physical activity. Many studies even confirm that, on average, men participate in higher levels of vigorous PA in organized sports activities, while women tend to be less active, especially during adolescence, young adulthood, and old age.

The commodification of the female body, reinforced by social networks and market canons, is an additional challenge, by superimposing beauty ideals and stereotypes (determined from the great emitters of the ideal image to be achieved), on the intrinsic motivation for health and well-being. This pressure, assumed uncritically, can lead to internalizing unattainable standards, sometimes harmful to health, which on many occasions lead to frustration and distancing from PA (Balboa, 2021). Consequently, true equity requires constant, critical analysis of the underlying structures and processes that perpetuate inequality. Therefore, it is not enough to promote participation; it is necessary to transform sports cultures and environments so that they are truly inclusive, respectful, and safe for anyone, regardless of their gender identity or expression, race, age, physical or social condition, etc.

Precisely the gender approach goes beyond simple formal equality, considering the differences and inequalities that individuals currently experience in multiple areas, which not only include PA and sports, but also health and education. This approach seeks to challenge and dismantle traditional gender norms and roles that limit opportunities for people, especially women and other marginalized groups, promoting more equal and fair participation in physical activity and sport.



The central objective of this article is to examine the gender approach in community physical activity, emphasizing the need to promote gender equity and analyzing the specific barriers faced by women, men, and non-binary people. Through a rigorous analysis, strategies and recommendations will be proposed to promote inclusion and equality in the field of community physical activity, seeking a social transformation that benefits everyone.

Development

Gender equity, understood as a fundamental principle of social justice, seeks not only to guarantee equal rights, but also to recognize and address specific differences and disadvantages to achieve real equality in results. This approach is aligned with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, promoting the participation of all people as agents of change and contributing to the construction of more just and inclusive societies. Derived from the Latin term *aequitas*, equity implies a fair distribution of resources and opportunities that allows women, men, and non-binary people to participate equally in all areas of life. This approach transcends the uniformity promoted by equality, highlighting the importance of providing the necessary support to overcome structural and cultural barriers (Jarrín, 2024).

Gender, as a social and cultural construction, plays a determining role in the formation of roles, expectations and behaviors from an early age. Gender-responsive education has the potential to mitigate these roles and expectations by challenging entrenched stereotypes, promoting a more equitable and flexible understanding of the capabilities and opportunities of all people. This educational approach promotes equal conditions from early stages and contributes to breaking down structural barriers that limit the full development of individuals of any gender (Lleixà & Soler, 2020).

Gender roles are deeply embedded and shape people's opportunities and experiences, including in the realm of physical activity. For example, gender stereotypes have relegated women to sports considered "feminine," underestimating their athletic potential, while men face pressure to participate in disciplines that reinforce an image of hegemonic masculinity. These limitations also affect non-binary people, who frequently face exclusions in sports spaces designed under a binary structure (Alemany & Aguilar, 2019).

Community physical activity (CPA) - understood as a set of programs and initiatives designed to promote the regular practice of physical activity in a community context with the purpose of promoting the well-being, health and quality of life of the people who access them - seeks to strengthen not only health on an individual scale, but also strengthen social capital, creating supportive social environments that promote



connection, participation and equity in health, so that communities are healthier and more sustainable (Reyes & Moya, 2022). From this position, several studies have focused on analyzing the relationship between AFC and gender equality, finding persistent gaps in terms of the lower participation of women compared to men, fundamentally in groups such as: adult women, low-income women, with some type of disability, heading single-parent households, caregivers and also some members of ethnic minorities.

In general, women tend to encounter various barriers that make their participation difficult. Among them, the deep-rooted social and cultural stereotypes stand out that perpetuate the idea that family care and domestic work is the responsibility of women, while they face a lack of social and family support, as well as work overload, fears of censorship, harassment, injuries, and lack of information about the benefits of physical activity on health in general.

Other factors such as the lack of financial solvency to cover the expenses that arise from joining collective spaces (fees, transportation, appropriate clothing), the absence of childcare options, geographical location and inconvenience in the schedules of activities, also play a crucial role in limiting their participation. Likewise, non-binary people face significant challenges such as lack of recognition and exclusion from spaces designed under strictly binary norms. Discrimination and harassment are also common problems that generate insecurity and discouragement (Rodríguez & Sabando, 2022).

In the last decade, the relationship between community physical activity and gender in Cuba has also been the subject of growing attention that has led to several research studies, which have found both significant advances and persistent challenges in the search for equitable and beneficial participation for all people (Izquierdo, 2019). Although the Cuban Constitution enshrines gender equality and for more than sixty years public policies that promote female participation in various areas have been designed, implemented and updated, community physical activity does not escape the influences of traditional gender roles, stereotypes and socioeconomic limitations that differentially impact men and women.

One of the most notable trends observed in Cuban research is the persistent gender gap in participation. Inclusive programs, strategies, projects and activities have been promoted by the National Institute of Sports, Physical Education and Recreation (INDER) and its territorial directorates. However, especially in certain sports and activities considered traditionally "masculine", the presence of women and girls continues to be lower than that of men. This is attributed, in part, to cultural stereotypes that associate strength and competitiveness with masculinity, and delicacy and aesthetics with femininity, influencing physical activity preferences and choices from childhood. Less physically demanding activities or activities



that are considered "feminine", such as ballet or rhythmic gymnastics, are those visualized for girls and young people, while boys are encouraged towards sports such as baseball or boxing (Bestard, 2021).

Several results of qualitative studies in the Cuban context coincide with international trends regarding the overload of roles, especially those that assume extensive family responsibilities, which consider participation in physical activities as a luxury or a secondary priority, in the face of barriers such as fatigue, lack of time and the impossibility of combining schedules to practice physical activity with domestic responsibilities, especially when accessible and affordable child care services are scarce in community settings, which makes it difficult for single mothers or women to participate. with young children (Ochoa & Rodríguez, 2018).

In contrast to this reality, men tend to have greater availability of free time and fewer social restrictions to participate in community physical activities. Many studies confirm that men often perceive physical activity as a way to maintain their health and virility, while women often resort to this option as an alternative to achieve physical appearances consistent with aesthetic stereotypes.

Another important finding is the impact of the socioeconomic element on the relationship between community physical activity and gender. Women who reside in urban areas have greater opportunities to access sports facilities and benefit from physical activity programs, therefore, they tend to have higher participation rates than women in rural or difficult-to-access areas (Izquierdo, 2019). Likewise, women with higher levels of education and higher incomes are more likely to participate in community physical activities, since they have more resources and opportunities available. This highlights the need to address socioeconomic inequalities as a determining factor in promoting equitable physical activity for all women.

Several international authors and researchers from the Cuban context have oriented their research towards the identification and visualization of the barriers that make it difficult to promote gender equity in community physical activity, reaching the conclusion that comprehensive and inclusive strategies are required that, above all, can dismantle gender stereotypes through awareness campaigns that promote true access to all people in any type of physical activity, regardless of their gender. They also warn of the urgency of creating safe and inclusive sports spaces, with flexible schedules, accessible childcare, a variety of activities and adequate alternative facilities or spaces, where conditions are available for women with disabilities, as well as changing rooms and bathrooms accessible to all genders. The representation of women in governing bodies, in decision-making processes in sports organizations and leading planning and



implementation processes of programs that respond to the needs and preferences of different groups is also essential to guarantee an equitable approach (Palacio & O'Reilly, 2023).

These programs should include recreational, sports and wellness activities that consider the diversity of interests and abilities. Additionally, promoting visible female role models, such as athletes, coaches and leaders, can inspire more women to get involved in sport. Likewise, the training of coaches, sports instructors or AFC managers with a gender perspective ensures an inclusive and respectful practice (González & Rivas, 2018).

Both public policies and social support also play a crucial role. The first to support financing programs aimed at women, offers of subsidies and programs sensitive to female needs. Social support aimed at creating support networks and community alliances is vital to facilitate the active participation of women and non-binary people in physical activity.

Several reports issued by international organizations highlight the importance of promoting gender equality in sport and how the creation of inclusive spaces can positively influence female participation, such as the one issued by the International Olympic Committee in 2021, which presents studies that indicate how the creation of inclusive environments reduces the cultural, social and economic barriers that traditionally limit the participation of women and girls in sport. These spaces are recognized for their contribution to the empowerment of women, improvement of self-esteem and development of social and physical skills (Nsekera, 2021).

Studies carried out between 2019 and 2023 have shown that inclusive initiatives in sport not only increase female participation, but also contribute to improving the physical and mental well-being of communities (Lindstrom & Rosvall, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to continue researching and developing policies and programs that promote truly equitable and inclusive physical activity for all people.

Regarding proposals for managing inequalities in this area, Cuban research has proposed various strategies that range from public policies to community interventions. First, the need to develop gender-sensitive community physical activity programs is emphasized, considering the specific needs and interests of women at different stages of life. This involves offering a variety of activities that are accessible, affordable and culturally appropriate, and that adapt to women's time and resource constraints. It is also suggested to involve women in the design and implementation of these programs, to ensure that they are relevant and effective.



Some positive changes and emerging trends show that there is an increase in female participation in physical activities that promote health, body expression and well-being, such as yoga, Pilates and dance. Some community initiatives are also being developed that seek to promote female participation through specific programs aimed at women, with convenient times and locations, and that offer activities adapted to their needs and interests, although they are still insufficient. These initiatives, spaces or programs often incorporate elements of health education, emotional support and social networking, which contribute to improving the self-esteem, confidence and general well-being of the participants.

Despite the accumulated knowledge and its theoretical incorporation in Cuban public policies, the gap between formulation and effective implementation persists; The real results are still significantly far from the desired objectives, due to the combination of a series of systemic factors among which we could mention the economic limitations that make it difficult to allocate sufficient resources to community programs, the deficiencies in sports and recreational infrastructure, which limit the options available to women, the prevalence of a top-down culture that permeates the scheme programs, both in their design and in their execution and, therefore, they fail to capture the real needs and priorities of women in the different communities, which decreases their effectiveness. The lack of reliable data, disaggregated by gender, and the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms also make it difficult to identify progress and challenges in promoting female physical activity.

It is up to science, institutions and change managers to adopt a proactive and action-oriented vision. An increasingly objective visibility and understanding of the relationship between gender and community physical activity is required to overcome the barriers that still maintain equity gaps. This includes reallocating resources more efficiently, improving sports and recreational infrastructure, and promoting a participatory culture in which women are key actors in decision-making. Likewise, it is essential to develop robust data collection systems and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that allow continuous monitoring of progress and challenges. Only through the effective implementation and constant monitoring of these strategies will it be possible to close the gap between policy formulation and its real impact, thus moving towards greater equity and well-being for women in the field of physical activity in Cuba.

Conclusions

Gender equity in community physical activity is essential to ensure that all people, regardless of gender, have access to opportunities that support their well-being and development. Despite advances in public policies that promote female participation and equal rights, gender gaps remain evident due to social,



cultural and economic barriers. Entrenched gender stereotypes, family role overload, and lack of resources limit the participation of women and non-binary people in physical activities, especially those associated with hegemonic masculinity. To promote true equity, a comprehensive approach is necessary that challenges these structural and cultural barriers, ensuring inclusive and accessible spaces for all people.

In the Cuban context, although gender equality is enshrined in the Constitution and there are policies that support female participation, gaps persist in community physical activity. Factors such as cultural stereotypes, the burden of domestic responsibilities, the lack of adequate sports infrastructure and the shortage of childcare services continue to limit women's participation, especially in rural or hard-to-reach areas. Creating gender-sensitive programs, improving infrastructure, making women leaders in sport visible, and establishing monitoring and evaluation systems are critical to closing these gaps. A comprehensive approach that considers the specific needs of women and non-binary people, along with a commitment to inclusion and accessibility, is key to moving towards real equity in community physical activity in Cuba.

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