

**RESEARCH PAPER****Lived Experiences of Shame: An Exploratory Study of Women in Sports****¹ Misbah Parveen, ²Sadia Sultan and ³Asma Yunus***

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***Corresponding Author:** asmayounus@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This article is intended to explore the potential impact of shame on sportswomen and how the experience of shame reduces their performance and participation. Shame is a complex emotion generated from multiple aspects, i.e., embarrassment, being negatively evaluated by others, and blaming. The experience of shame in sports needs severe consideration and demands immediate solutions. Despite the incredible achievements of women in sports, they still face challenges like stereotypical attitudes, societal expectations, pressure, and gender-based discrimination. The study is based on Phenomenological research design. Shame leads to feelings of failure and ultimately leads sportswomen to give up, along with physical and psychological ill.. The data from in-depth interviews reveals shame and its different types and suggests interventions to cope with it. This article aims to raise considerations and awareness among the sports community to create an empowered and inclusive environment for everyone.

KEYWORDS Gender Discrimination, Inclusive Environment, Shame, Stereotypical Attitudes**Introduction**

Over the past few decades, the involvement of women in sports and physical activities has significantly increased (Cooky et al., 2015). Women had put much effort into achieving parity in sports, from being forbidden to participate to breaking world records (Hargreaves, 2002). They are still working hard to have an equal footing in the sports world. Despite their hard work, they still experience multiple challenges, including the feeling of embarrassment and experience of shame. These feelings result from several factors, such as cultural expectations, stereotypical attitudes, and perceptions about women, social norms, and psychological and social pressure to act according to prescribed gender roles (Haydu, 2019).

Despite the fantastic achievements of sportswomen, they are often judged on behalf of their looks and physical appearances rather than their talents and abilities the sportswomen who did not conform to the set beauty standards faced criticism and prejudice (Pfister, 2010). Sportswomen often feel social pressure to behave perfectly considering the set forth standards (Fink, 2015). They are compelled to perform as capable as their male counterparts. The involvement of shame in sports requires serious consideration and careful thought. By clearly understanding the importance of shame experienced by sportswomen, an inclusive environment and supportive sports culture can be created that will be equal for all.

The experience of shame or embarrassment might significantly impact women's participation in sports and physical activities (Sabiston et al., 2019). These feelings of shame and embarrassment create a hostile, discouraging environment for women. Through the experience of shame, women lose their determination, motivation, confidence, and even

performance. The feelings generated by shame and embarrassment can have long-term effects on the wellbeing and happiness of women. Women stop participating in such activities and may miss out on their physical, emotional, and social grooming (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Furthermore, shame can cause physical as well as mental ills, i.e., anxiety, depression, and loss of self-esteem (Saukko, 2008).

The involvement of shame associated with sports is not new to hear. The roots of embarrassment and shame can be traced back to the historical marginalization of women in sports and physical activities. Men's sports were always given more attention, appreciation, recognition, and funding than women's (Cooky & Messner, 2015). Women were highly discouraged from participating in sports. Even if a few women participated in sports, they were ridiculed and humiliated. That history of discouragement and discrimination paved the way for the development of a culture that still considers female athletes inferior to male ones (Messner, 2002). Women are still treated harshly and subjected to criticism. Even today, sportswomen are excluded and judged on their physical appearances, such as weight, height, and color (Harrison & Secarea, 2010). These discriminatory behaviors compel sportswomen to go through strict diets, use drugs to enhance their performance, and other psychological traumas. All of these forbade a sportswoman to enjoy their sports.

Literature Review

Women's participation in sports has been a topic of attention, research, and discussion for many decades. Although women's participation in sports has made significant progress over the years, there still exist notable disparities in opportunities, resources, and recognition for female athletes. It is evident in research that the participation of females in sports has multiple physical, social, and psychological benefits. These activities' benefits include improved physical health, increased self-esteem, and enhanced social connections (Babakus & Yavas, 2010; Eime et al., 2013; Strong et al., 2005). However, despite such multiple benefits, females continue to face challenges to participate in sports, including cultural stereotypes, lack of opportunities and funding, social pressure, and discrimination. (Anderson & Dixon, 2010; McKay et al., 2014; Messner & Sabo, 2014).

Research has also highlighted that gender stereotypes and cultural norms continue to shape the participation of women in sports and other physical activities. Women are frequently discouraged from participating in sports and forced to participate in less physically demanding sports, if any (Anderson & Dixon, 2010; McKay et al., 2014). Moreover, sportswomen are harshly judged on their physical appearance and behavior than their male counterparts (Messner & Sabo, 2014). This intense focus on physical appearance has the potential to create a hostile environment that makes it difficult for women to embrace and enjoy sports fully.

Additionally, research has illustrated that women's participation in sports is highly influenced by societal pressure and gender role expectations. Females who prioritize their sports over their traditional gender roles experience a strong feeling of shame and guilt for not conforming to social expectations (Krane et al., 2015). These expectations can also affect female athletes' performance (Stangor et al., 2002).

The participation of women in sports in Pakistan has been an area of interest for research and discussion in recent years. Even though Pakistan has a rich history of sports, women's participation in sports still faces significant challenges in terms of access to opportunities and resources, funding, and recognition, along with social, cultural, and religious barriers. Researches clearly show that cultural norms and gender stereotypes highly impact the participation of women in sports in Pakistan. Women are continuously discouraged from participating in sports. They can only participate in a few socially acceptable sports (Shah, 2018). Furthermore, female athletes often face discrimination and harassment in the form of verbal abuse and physical violence (Ali, 2019).

Despite these barriers, there has been some significant development in recent years. In 2019, Pakistan's women's cricket team won a gold medal at the South Asian Games, marking a significant achievement for women's sports (Naveed, 2019). However, more efforts need to be made to address the challenges faced by women in sports in Pakistan and encourage them to participate in sports to their fullest potential.

The literature demonstrates that the influence of shame experienced by women in sports highly impacts their participation and performance. One of the very common types of shame experienced by women is body shame, which refers to feelings of embarrassment or self-consciousness about one's physical appearance or body proportions (Sabiston et al., 2019).

Women who go through body shame are less likely to participate in sports and other physical activities. They are more prone to negative attitudes towards their bodies (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2013). In addition to body shame, sportswomen also experience shame related to their skills and abilities, as well as their gender identity. It can be insulted or disrespected by coaches, teammates, or spectators (Krane et al., 2004).

Moreover, women who are successful in sports may be viewed as going against traditional gender norms, which can lead to feelings of guilt or shame (Breslin et al., 2017). On the whole, the experience of shame in women's sports can have significant negative impacts on women's participation in sports and physical activity. Moreover, successful women in sports may be viewed as going against traditional gender norms, which can lead to feelings of guilt or shame (Breslin et al., 2017).

Sportswomen who experience body shame feel pressure to conform to societal expectations about body shape and size. It can lead them to perceive negative attitudes toward their bodies and a decreased desire to participate in sports and physical activity (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2013). Gender identity may also become a source of shame for sportswomen, especially if they do not conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. Sportswomen who are successful and dominating may be accused of violating traditional gender norms, which can lead to feelings of guilt or shame (Breslin et al., 2017). Additionally, women athletes who are members of marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ athletes, may experience shame related to their identity, which can negatively impact their participation in sports (Velez & Saavedra, 2020).

The role of social media in shaping women's experiences of shame in sports is also significant. The pressure to present a perfect image on social media also leads to increased body shame and self-consciousness. Women athletes feel pressure to conform to beauty standards and portray themselves in a certain way (Rodebaugh & Kiger, 2021).

Coping strategies should be introduced and implemented to enhance the participation of women in sports. These strategies must specifically address the types of shame experienced by women athletes. Body positivity and self-compassion interventions must be made. Such interventions help women athletes to develop a more positive body image. It may involve encouraging athletes to focus on what their bodies can do instead of how they look. Self-compassion interventions may help sportswomen to develop a more accepting and kind attitude towards themselves (Sabiston et al., 2019).

Interventions that focus on skill-building and confidence-boosting must be implemented to address shame related to skills and abilities. These interventions help female athletes develop a healthy mindset that emphasizes the significance of effort and persistence rather than innate talent (Hogue et al., 2020). To deal with the shame related to gender identity and other such factors, it is crucial to create supportive and inclusive environments. This can ensure that women athletes have access to the same resources and

opportunities as their male counterparts and create a culture of inclusivity and respect (Sabiston et al., 2019).

In conclusion, a multifaceted approach is needed to address the different types of shame experienced by sportswomen. Coping strategies such as body positivity, skill-building, supportive and inclusive environments, mental health support, and combating discrimination and racism can enhance women's participation in sports.

Material and Methods

The study is qualitative since it studies the subjective experience of shaming and how it intensely impacts women participating in sports and physical activities. Phenomenological research methodology is applied as it specifically aims to describe and interpret the subjective lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenological research design is particularly suited for investigating the lived experiences of sportswomen who have experienced shame. The target population includes all the sportswomen who have experienced shame (any type of shame) in sports. A sample of eleven participants was recruited through a purposive sampling technique.

In qualitative research, a variety of data collection methods (interviews, focus groups, and observation) are used. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data on the experiences of shame. The interviews were conducted in different sections and comfortable settings according to the participants' comfort.

Results and Discussion

The data collected was analyzed using thematic data analysis. The themes were extracted that emerged from the data. These themes were used to construct a description of the subjective experiences of shame by sportswomen. These themes included the infliction of shame, causes of shame, the impact of shame on the participants, and the coping mechanisms used by the participants.

Table 1
Showing the demographic profile of participants

Participant	Age	Marital Status	No. of Years in Sports	Area of Residence
P1	26	Single	5	Urban
P2	24	Single	3	Urban
P3	26	Single	4	Urban
P4	21	Single	5	Urban
P5	28	Single	6	Rural
P6	20	Single	6	Urban
P7	24	Single	5	Urban
P8	24	Single	7	Rural
P9	27	Single	9	Rural
P10	23	Single	5	Rural
P11	26	Single	4	Urban

Thematic Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews were analyzed by using thematic data analysis. The data collected through the interview guide was analyzed using thematic analysis. It comprised in-depth interviews of the participants who experienced shame (in any of its types). The qualitative information was analyzed by establishing themes and sub-themes to systematically gain knowledge and empathy about all the participants.

All the major themes that were extracted were further divided into sub-themes. The analysis of each theme in terms of its sub-themes is stated below:

Infliction of Shame from Social Network

The women participating in sports often fell victim to shame and embarrassment. The sportswomen were ashamed differently by their teammates, coaches, and trainers. The experience of shame was not new to them, and they still had to go through it because of several physiological and other traits. Regarding this, one of the sportswomen said:

"Yes, there was a time when I missed an important goal during a soccer game, and I felt a sharp gaze from my coach like I had let my teammates down. I felt ashamed and embarrassed, like I was not good enough." (Participant 01)

Another participant stated:

I was practicing basketball, and I accidentally missed a crucial throw, and I immediately heard an abusive word from my coach that was hurting and humiliating" (Participant 03)

Regarding the same, another participant shared her experience:

"While performing, I suddenly tripped over due to physical balance. I was publicly humiliated by my team members as I was obese. They called me "fatty" and laughed so hard that the people passing by laughed," That could have won the game for my team." (Participant 04)

Family members and relatives are always of paramount importance in one's life. Any acceptations or rejections from them matter a lot. A participant recorded:

"I remember that in my initial days of participating in cricket, I was heavily ashamed of my own family members and relatives. I was highly criticized as I was an offender because I was wearing my cricket uniform. That was the most hurtful to bear in my life. I still remember their frowns and vulgarity." (Participant 11)

One of the participants said:

"I was often criticized by my family members, especially my elder brother. They were not allowing me to pursue my goal. I remember that my brother used to humiliate me in front of other relatives and it was painful to bear. But now he supports me" (Participant 05)

A sportswoman smiled and said:

"I remember my mother's words when she said 'Good girls don't go to sports. Only whore girls go to sports. And if you will you'd become one of them. Sports are not for women like you.' But she accepted not immediately, but gradually." (Participant 08)

While talking about relatives, a participant said:

"It hurts the most when the people close to your heart, hurt you. I can't forget their reactions and the dirty language they used to use about me. All of them treated me as a criminal and used to call me a whore. They were ashamed to call me" (Participant 07)

Different Types of Shame

Sportswomen have felt different types of shame based on various traits. They fall victim to shame and embarrassment based on their physical appearance, gender stereotypes, performance shame, personal shame, ethnicity, and age. A participant shared her experience as:

"There is a lot of pressure on women athletes to be perfect and to live up to certain expectations. We are led to feelings of shame if we fall short of such expectations. I have experienced this personally, especially when I struggled to keep up with my male counterparts." (Participant 10)

Another sportswoman stated:

"Women athletes also go through tough experience of shame due to societal expectations about gender roles and typical behavioral attitudes. I have felt shame when I have been told I am not too aggressive to be an athlete. They call me feminine and suggest me to go home." (Participant 02)

Regarding the experience of body shaming, a participant said:

"Women in sports definitely feel pressure to maintain a certain weight, size, or body shape to be competitive or accepted. If one does lack any of them, she is ashamed to the extent that she has to go on extreme diets and starve herself." (Participant 04)

Sportswomen have to go through a lot, and maintaining a standardized figure is also one of them. A participant said:

"I remember that I had an hourglass figure and was overweight. My body became a topic of discussion among my teammates and trainers. They used to laugh at me and often do "tsk." I have to go through a lot to conform to those standards. I was continuously body shamed" (Participant 05)

A participant shared her experience of personal shame as:

"I have experienced personal shame multiple times. I felt like let myself down as well as the whole team down. I also felt shame in front of my teammates, and lost the courage to make any eye contact." (Participant 11)

Shame can be felt on the grounds of someone's age or ethnicity. People often become ashamed if they belong to a specific ethnic group. People are humiliated and judged on behalf of ascribed statuses as well. One of the participants shared her experience of shame in the following words:

"I often get targeted to awful comments by my fellows just because I belong to a minority. I do not belong to their ethnicity, and they treat me like I am not included. One mistake, and there they go. They don't know, but deep down, it hurts me. But I pretend I do not" (Participant 07)

One of the participants stated:

"I am the eldest member in my team. All the other girls are younger than I am and they humiliate me just because of my age. It's not that big deal but to them it is. They call me 'old lady, oldie, rotten, rusty, etc'. and surprisingly, my coach also treat me like others." (Participant 09)

She also stated that:

"I have witnessed that it is necessary for girls to be pretty and maintain a specific physical figure. You become a topic of gossip if you don't" (Participant 09)

Negative Impacts

Shame is a very powerful emotion that can negatively impact individuals in different ways. Sportswomen go through the experience of shame and experience its multiple negative consequences that ultimately affect their physiological and psychological wellbeing. One of the sportswomen said regarding the adverse effects of shame:

"At the time, it made me want to give up soccer altogether. I felt like I was not good enough and that I would never be able to play at the level I wanted to." (Participant 01)

Another participant stated:

"These feelings of shame made me doubt my abilities and my confidence was shaken. I didn't want to play basketball for a while because I was afraid of making mistakes and disappointing my team again." (Participant 10)

The experience of shame leads the individual to lose motivation. A sportswoman stated:

"It can be difficult to keep pushing forward when you feel like you're not meeting expectations." (Participant 04)

Another participant recorded:

"These feelings of shame made me question my abilities as a player and I started to doubt myself." (Participant 05)

Shame and embarrassment lead the individual to engage in several activities, including substance abuse, addiction, harmful behavior, and self-harm. While addressing this, a participant said:

"Going through shame, I was lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness. These made me suffocated enough, and I started smoking." (Participant 11)

Shame also makes individuals feel unworthy, inadequate, and inferior, leading to low self-esteem. It ultimately leads to withdrawal and isolation from others. A sportswoman said:

"The experience of shame vanished all my confidence and made me introverted. I often isolated myself from others and locked myself in my room. I lost my self-esteem and enthusiasm to proceed. I was traumatized, and it made me suffer even more" (Participant 07)

A sportswoman said:

It was so painful. I isolated myself and wanted to quit sports. I was feeling worthless and ashamed of myself for being me. It made me feel different as I am not acceptable and unwelcomed" (Participant 08)

Coping Mechanism

Shame is an intense emotion and feeling that can have severe consequences, including physiological and psychological. It leads to anxiety and depression as well. There should be specific measures or coping strategies to deal with the feeling of shame and

embarrassment to reduce its negative consequences that can lead a human to even self-destructive behaviors and substance abuse. While talking about coping mechanisms adopted by the sportswomen, a participant said:

"I consider that the coaches and teammates are most important and helpful in coping with shame. They do create a supportive and inclusive environment. They should make athletes feel comfortable sharing their struggles and failures." (Participant 05)

She also stated that:

It is also very important to recognize and appreciate the struggle of players. The team should celebrate every progress and achievement, rather than just focusing on mistakes." (Participant 05)

While addressing the coping mechanism adopted, a participant said:

"I talked to my coach and teammates about how I was feeling. They were all very supportive and understanding. They helped me a lot by reminded me that everyone makes mistakes and its part of the learning process." (Participant 07)

A participant shared her coping strategy and said:

"I think there is a need of a lot of work to be done in terms of gender equality in sports. Creating cultural norms that values and supports women athletes is a big part of that. This includes things like equal treatment, equal opportunities, and equal recognition, etc." (Participant 01)

Self-compassion and self-confidence are prime coping elements for tackling intense emotions, i.e., shame. A participant said:

"Ultimately, I came to learn that it is important to be true to myself and rely on my own strengths, rather than trying to conform to expectations set by someone else." (Participant 11)

Another participant said:

"I try to focus on the things I have done well instead of just focusing on my mistakes and negativity. I regularly remind myself that it's normal if I make mistakes, everyone makes mistakes. It's completely fine to not be perfect all the time." (Participant 02)

Positive feedback from fellow sportswomen and trainers does help a lot in coping with shame. A sportswoman said:

"Encouragement and positive feedback can help athletes to generate confidence and reduce shame. It's also important to cherish and celebrate small victories and improvements." (Participant 08)

While addressing the same, a participant said:

"Even a single word or a gesture of encouragement matters a lot. A single one can drop your confidence and gives you enough energy to compete. But on the other hand, a single disappointed one can reduce your energy to zero. Just some encouraging words are all we need to keep it up" (Participant 05)

A participant stated:

“Creating a supportive and inclusive environment is the main key. It's also necessary to create a space where athletes feel comfortable sharing their struggles and failures without fear of judgment.” (Participant 09)

Major Findings

Women's participation in sports has made significant progress over the years. However, there are still multiple barriers that hinder their full participation. One of the most frequent challenges that affects the participation of women in sports is the experience of shame that they have to go through. Cultural stereotypes, societal expectations, body image issues, and gender discrimination can trigger it. Shame has a profound impact on women's physical and psychological abilities in sports. By addressing and reducing the experiences of shame, the participation of women in sports can be encouraged and enhanced.

Women's experience of shame and its impact on their participation and performance in sports is a complex and multifaceted issue. It takes birth from numerous societal, cultural, and personal factors contributing to feelings of inadequacy, self-consciousness, and fear of judgment. Identifying sources of shame and its different types can shed light on the barriers women face in sports and ultimately help develop strategies to address and reduce its impact.

Body shame is one of the most significant aspects of the female sports experience. Women are continuously compelled towards the images of the "ideal" athletic body. That ideal body is often portrayed as lean, toned, and muscular. This bombardment can lead to body dissatisfaction and become a source of shame for women who do not fit this mold.

Women participating in sports frequently face objectification and sexualization as well. This objectification and sexualization can be a source of shame. Their achievements are often undermined by an intense focus on their physical appearance and attractiveness. This overshadows their accomplishments and confirms the notion that women's value lies in their appearance rather than their abilities. It creates a sense of shame as they may feel like objects.

Sportswomen may also experience shame because of failure or underperformance in sports. The fear of not meeting expectations or being judged continuously as incapable or weak can create significant psychological pressure, which can also discourage women from participating in sports.

Discussions

Despite the fact that the participation of women in sports has made progress over the decades, notable disparities still proceed for sportswomen. The research also highlights that the participation of women in sports is embedded with physical, social, and psychological benefits. Sports benefit includes significant physical health, increased self-esteem, and enhanced social connections (Babakus & Yavas, 2010; Eime et al., 2013; Strong et al., 2005). But sportswomen still go through challenges to participate in sports, including cultural stereotypes, lack of opportunities and funding, social pressure, and discrimination. (Anderson & Dixon, 2010; McKay et al., 2014; Messner & Sabo, 2014).

Research shows that women are often discouraged from participating in sports and are forced to participate in physically less demanding sports (Anderson & Dixon, 2010; McKay et al., 2014). Sportswomen are harshly judged on their physical appearance and behavior than the sportsmen (Messner & Sabo, 2014). Women can only participate in a few sports that are accepted in society (Shah, 2018). Research indicates that sportswomen often face discrimination and harassment in the form of verbal abuse and physical violence (Ali, 2019). Furthermore, the females who are successful in sports are treated as going against

traditional gender norms, which can lead to feelings of guilt or shame (Breslin et al., 2017). Despite such challenges, there has been some significant development in recent years.

Conclusion

The study concludes that addressing the experiences of shame in women's sports is essential for cultivating an inclusive and supportive environment that enhances both participation and performance. By identifying and mitigating the sources of shame, such as cultural norms, societal expectations, and gender stereotypes, we can reduce the physical and psychological burdens that these experiences impose on female athletes. Promoting body positivity, providing equal opportunities, and fostering environments that celebrate women's achievements in sports are crucial steps toward empowering women to reach their full potential. By reshaping societal perceptions and creating a culture that values and supports female participation in sports, we can inspire future generations of women to engage confidently in athletic pursuits, ultimately leading to a more equitable and vibrant sports culture.

Recommendations

Addressing the experiences of shame in women's sports is paramount for fostering inclusivity and enhancing participation and performance. The sources of shame (in all of its types) must be identified and appropriately monitored as they further generate multiple physical and psychological fatigues. Such adverse experiences of shame must be addressed to ensure a healthy sports environment equal for both males and females. Gender stereotypes must be eradicated, and by promoting body positivity, providing equal opportunities, and creating supportive environments, sportswomen can be empowered enough to combat shame and participate in sports with their full potential. Fostering a culture that appreciates women's participation in sports and celebrates their achievements must be developed. It can inspire future generations and reshape societal perceptions of women in sports.

Shame often arises from cultural norms and societal expectations. These particularly forbade women to take part in sports. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations of femininity also discourages females from participating in sports. It is a common perception that sports are primarily male-dominated. It further exacerbates feelings of shame, making women feel like they are transgressing societal norms by participating in sports.

Minimizing the experiences of shame to the lowest possible level is crucial for increasing women's participation in sports. We can do this by creating inclusive and supportive environments, challenging cultural stereotypes, promoting body positivity, and fostering a culture that celebrates female athletes. We can help women overcome the barriers of shame and encourage their active involvement in sports. Prioritizing participation over performance, providing mentorship and role models, and offering equal opportunities can also reduce shame and create a more inclusive sports culture for women.

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