

BARRIERS TO FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED SPORTS: AN EXAMINATION OF CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the barriers to female participation in organized sports in Calabar, Nigeria. The research was guided by three objectives and three research questions. A descriptive survey design was adopted, targeting girls and women aged 12-35 years in the state. A sample of 350 respondents was selected through multistage stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale, validated by experts and tested for reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$). Descriptive statistics- mean (M) and standard deviation (σ) were computed, with a benchmark of 2.50 used to interpret agreement. Findings revealed that cultural (M = 3.00), social (M = 3.26), and environmental (M = 3.31) factors all scored above the threshold, indicating they significantly hinder female participation in organized sports. The study concludes that these barriers collectively undermine gender equity, health, and human capital development in the region. It recommends the provision of safe, gender-friendly facilities; public sensitization to reshape harmful norms; financial support and scholarships for athletes; deployment of female coaches and role models; and strengthened collaboration among government, community, and private stakeholders to sustain interventions.

KEYWORDS: Female participation, Sports barriers, Cultural factors, Social constraints, Environmental limitations.

INTRODUCTION

Participation in organized sports is widely recognized as a catalyst for physical health, psychosocial development, and gender equality. Yet, across many regions, particularly in contexts where cultural, social, and environmental constraints are pronounced-female engagement in formal sport remains limited. This disparity according to Adetunji and Yusuf (2021) not only undermines the rights of girls and women but also deprives communities of the broader benefits of inclusive athletic programs, such as improved leadership skills, higher educational attainment, and reduced risk of violence. Sports hold a fundamental place in the development of individuals and societies, functioning as a conduit for physical health, psychological resilience, social cohesion, and economic progress. At the individual level, regular engagement in sport enhances cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, coordination, and overall stamina, while also reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Beyond the physiological benefits, participation in sport fosters mental well-being by releasing endorphins that alleviate stress, anxiety, and depression, thereby improving mood and cognitive function. The discipline required to train, adhere to rules, and strive for personal improvement cultivates qualities such as perseverance, time-management, leadership, and teamwork attributes that are transferable to academic pursuits, work environments, and civic life. Socially, sport serves as a universal language that bridges cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides. It creates a shared sense of identity and belonging, whether through cheering for a local team or representing a nation on the global stage. In communities where trust and cooperation are essential for stability, organized sporting events often act as catalysts for dialogue, reconciliation, and collective pride. Moreover, sport provides a platform for promoting gender equality, inclusion of persons with disabilities, and the empowerment of marginalized groups, thereby contributing to broader societal transformation. Economically, sport is a growing sector that generates employment, stimulates tourism, and drives infrastructure development. From grassroots programs that keep children in school to professional leagues that attract sponsorship and media revenue, the sports industry fuels ancillary businesses such as hospitality, merchandising, and health services (Gregory & Fruebi, 2024). For developing nations, investment in sport can translate into improved public health outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, and enhanced international visibility.

Organized sports refer to structured, rule-governed athletic activities that are coordinated by institutions such as schools, clubs, federations, or governmental bodies. Unlike informal play,

organized sports involve formal registration of participants, scheduled training sessions, competitions with standardized rules, and often a hierarchy of leagues or tournaments that provide pathways for progression from local to national, and even international levels. These structures ensure safety, fairness, and systematic development of talent. As Akinade and Bello (2023) rightly stated, organized sport is “a formalized system of competitive or recreational physical activities governed by explicit rules, scheduled competitions, and administered by recognized clubs, schools, or sport federations.” This definition emphasizes the presence of formal governance, scheduled events, and institutional affiliation. In a complementary view, Adetunji and Yusuf (2021) describe it as “structured athletic programs that provide systematic training, coaching, and competition opportunities for participants, often linked to developmental pathways such as talent identification and progression.” Here, the focus shifts to the developmental trajectory and the provision of qualified instruction. Organized sports provide several distinct advantages over casual play. First, they offer consistent coaching and mentorship from qualified trainers, which accelerates skill development and reduces injury risk through proper technique and conditioning. Second, they instill a sense of discipline and commitment, as athletes must adhere to training schedules, dietary guidelines, and competition calendars. Third, they create a clear progression pathway, enabling talented individuals to access scholarships, professional contracts, or even international representation, which can transform socioeconomic trajectories.

The origins of organized sport in Europe can be traced back to ancient civilizations, most notably the Olympic Games of Classical Greece (8th century BCE – 393 CE) and the gladiatorial contests of the Roman Empire. However, the modern structure of organized sport began to take shape in the 19th century, driven by industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of public education systems that introduced physical training into curricula (Gregory & Fruebi, 2024). The British Isles are widely regarded as the birthplace of codified modern sports, with the establishment of governing bodies such as The Football Association (1863) for football (soccer), the Rugby Football Union (1871), and the All England Lawn Tennis Club (1877) for tennis. These institutions created standardized rules, league systems, and competitions that spread rapidly through Europe and beyond. In France, the emergence of the Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athlétiques (USFSA) in 1887 unified several sports under a single federation, while Baron Pierre de Coubertin’s revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 re-internationalized sport and reinforced the European model of national governing bodies (Gregory & Adie, 2024). Germany’s Turner movement, founded by Friedrich Ludwig

Jahn in the early 1800s, emphasized gymnastics (Turnen) as a means of national physical and moral development, later influencing the formation of the Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB) in 1900. The Scandinavian countries Sweden (Swedish Sports Confederation, 1907) and Norway (Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports, 1900) integrated sport into state policies for health and nation-building (Ibrahim et al., 2024). By the mid-20th century, European sport had become fully professionalized, with leagues such as England's Premier League (founded 1992), Spain's La Liga (1929), and Italy's Serie A (1929) becoming global commercial entities. The European Union's post-war integration also promoted cross-border competitions (e.g., UEFA Champions League, 1955) and harmonized regulations on athlete mobility, safety, and doping control (European Commission, 2022). African engagement with organized sport began largely through colonial contact. British, French, Portuguese, and Dutch colonizers introduced their sporting codes—football, cricket, rugby, and athletics to schools, missionary institutions, and settler communities. According to Gregory and Fruebi, (2024), post-independence (1960s-1990s), newly formed nation-states embraced sport as a tool for nation-building, identity formation, and political legitimacy. The establishment of continental bodies such as the Confederation of African Football (CAF, 1957) and the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOCA, 1989) provided frameworks for international competition, most notably the Africa Cup of Nations (football, since 1957) and the All-Africa Games (since 1965). Nigeria, the most populous African nation, inherited British-style football through mission schools and colonial clubs in the 1920s (Nwankwo & Udeze, 2021). The formation of the Nigerian Football Association (NFA, 1945) and later the Nigerian Football Federation (NFF, 1990) mirrored the global trend of national federations. Nigeria's national team, the Super Eagles, achieved early success (Africa Cup of Nations 1980, 1994; Olympic gold 1996) and catalyzed the professionalization of the domestic league (Nigerian Professional Football League, NPFL, 1972).

Organized sports serve as a catalyst for holistic development across all genders. Physically, Okoko and Ahamefule (2023) maintained that participation enhances cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, motor coordination, and overall health, thereby reducing the incidence of non-communicable diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes. Psychologically, regular engagement in structured athletic activities fosters self-esteem, resilience, stress management, and improved cognitive function, which translate into better academic and work performance. Socially, organized sport provides a platform for teamwork,

leadership, fair play, and communication skills; it builds social capital by connecting individuals to supportive peer networks and mentors, which is especially vital for youth at risk of delinquency. For women and girls, inclusion in organized sports challenges gender stereotypes, promotes gender equity, and empowers participants economically through potential scholarships, professional contracts, and entrepreneurship in sport-related fields. From a societal perspective, gender-inclusive sport contributes to public health savings, enhances productivity, and strengthens community cohesion by fostering shared values of respect and collective identity (Okon & Ahamefule, 2023). Consequently, irrespective of gender, organized sport is a powerful vehicle for personal growth, health promotion, and sustainable development. However, despite global and national commitments to gender equality and the documented benefits of sport for women, female participation in organized sports in Nigeria remains far below projected targets and expectations. This gap is especially stark in Calabar, where cultural norms, socioeconomic constraints, and infrastructural deficiencies converge to suppress involvement contrary to the aspirations set by policy frameworks such as Nigeria's National Sports Development Policy (2020) and the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

Female participation in organized sports in Nigeria, especially in Calabar, is crushed by a toxic mix of cultural barriers, harsh social pressures, and a broken environment that together make it almost impossible for girls and women to lace up and run. Culturally, Nigerian communities are steeped in patriarchal notions of femininity that treat sports as a male domain. In many Igbo and Hausa households, a girl who dares to wear shorts and chase a ball is labeled “unfeminine” or “boyish,” and families fear that such a reputation will ruin marriage prospects. Okpara and Agbo (2020) reported that 78 % of women in southeastern Nigeria cited cultural expectations as the primary reason they never stepped onto a field. Early marriage and child-bearing priorities further pull girls out of sport after menarche, with Olowonirejuaro and Okunade (2019) noting over 60 % of girls in Kaduna and Kano quit sport once they reach puberty because families prioritize marriage over any “useless hobby.”

Socially, the situation is no kinder. Safety and sexual harassment loom large; girls grow up hearing “don't go out after dark” and “don't wear shorts,” and Oyetunde et al. (2018) recorded a staggering 4.1/5 mean score for fear of harassment and assault on sports grounds. Stories of coaches, officials, or teammates crossing lines circulate, turning fields into danger zones. Economic hardship compounds the problem- Nigeria's poverty rate hovers around

40 % forcing families to choose between school fees, food, or a pair of sneakers. Usendok et al. (2022) found financial constraints ranked highest (mean 4.2/5) among social barriers for girls in rural Calabar. The lack of visible female role models and peer support further deepens the crisis. Nigerian female athletes rarely get media coverage, leaving a village girl with no one to emulate except distant Super Falcons stars. The absence of role models leads to low aspiration, while peers often mock or withdraw support, asking, “Why waste time running when you could be learning a trade?” The dual burden of school, household chores, and sometimes petty trading leaves girls with no time for training; many Nigerian girls spend three or more hours daily on chores, wiping out any chance for consistent practice.

Environmentally, the infrastructure is a desert. Nigeria has roughly one field per 50,000 people in many states, and in Calabar over 60 % of schools lack a functional pitch, let alone locker rooms or sanitary facilities. Usendok et al. (2022) identified environmental constraints—fields, transport, equipment as the strongest barrier with participation. Even when a field exists, it is often littered with broken goalposts, missing nets, and deflated balls, making training embarrassing for girls. Transportation is a nightmare; many venues sit far from villages, public transport is unreliable and unsafe after dusk, and transport difficulty is also a major deterrent for girls in Calabar. Moreover, the coaching staff is overwhelmingly male, and the absence of female supervisors creates discomfort and safety concerns. The 2020 National Sports Development Policy promised female coaches and segregated facilities, yet implementation is nonexistent.

These barriers intersect brutally. A girl in Sokoto faces cultural pressure to marry early, has no money for a kit, and her village has no field. A teen in Onitsha may have a supportive family but still cannot train after school because the only field is 10 km away with no safe transport. The result is a leaky pipeline—by age 18, less than 5 % of Nigerian girls have ever participated in organized sport (Waliya & Mbey, 2024). This is not just a sports issue; it is a health crisis, an education loss, and a denial of rights. Breaking the cycle requires safe, gender-segregated facilities with lighting, toilets, and female security guards; financial incentives like scholarships, free kits, and transport stipends; community champions such as traditional rulers, religious leaders, and former male.

Female participation in organized sports in Nigeria, and especially in Calabar, runs starkly contrary to expectation. National policies such as the 2020 National Sports Development Policy and the 2019 National Gender Policy, together with international commitments like

CEDAW and the Commonwealth Sports Ministers' Declaration, project steady growth in women's involvement at all levels of sport. Yet empirical evidence reveals a dismal reality: Waliya & Mbey (2024) reports only about 12 % of registered athletes nationwide are female, and in Calabar the figure drops to roughly 7 % for secondary-school girls and under 3 % for women in community clubs. This divergence stems from a confluence of cultural, socioeconomic, safety and infrastructural barriers that override policy aspirations.

In Calabar, Nigeria, female participation in organized sports remains critically low despite national and international commitments to gender equality and the recognized benefits of sport for health, education, and empowerment. Emerging evidence suggests that cultural norms, social insecurities, and inadequate infrastructure collectively impede girls' and women's access to and retention in sports programs. However, there is a dearth of empirical data that systematically identifies and quantifies the specific cultural, social, and environmental barriers within the Calabar context, nor has there been sufficient analysis of how these barriers intersect to undermine national development goals such as human capital growth, gender equity, and sustainable health outcomes. Without a clear understanding of these challenges, policymakers, educators, and sports administrators lack the evidence needed to design targeted interventions, resulting in persistent underrepresentation of females in sports and the loss of potential socio-economic benefits for individuals, communities, and the nation at large. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining the key factors that hinder female participation in organized sports in Calabar and exploring feasible strategies to address them.

Existing initiatives, while well-intentioned, frequently suffer from fragmented implementation, under-funding, and a failure to address the interplay of cultural, social, and environmental determinants. Consequently, the gap in participation not only perpetuates gender inequality but also deprives societies of the holistic development and leadership potential that girls and women could contribute through sport. There is, therefore, an urgent need to systematically identify and understand the specific cultural, social, and environmental obstacles that impede female involvement in organized sports, and to inform evidence-based policies and interventions capable of dismantling these barriers.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What cultural factors significantly impede female participation in organized sports in Calabar?
2. How do social barriers affect girls' and women's engagement in formal sports programs in Calabar?
3. In what ways do environmental constraints limit female involvement in organized sports in Calabar?

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive survey research design was employed to identify and describe the cultural, social, and environmental barriers to female participation in organized sports in Calabar. This design captures the perceptions and experiences of respondents at a single point in time without manipulating any variables, making it suitable for an exploratory study of this nature.

Participants

The target population comprised girls and women aged 12-35 years residing in Calabar, including students, athletes, and non-athletes. A sample of 350 respondents was selected through multistage stratified random sampling. The state was divided into its three senatorial zones (Calabar North, Central, South). From each zone, two local government areas (LGAs) were chosen, yielding six LGAs. Within each LGA, two communities or schools were selected, and from each community or school, roughly 30 females were sampled to ensure representation of both rural and urban areas. Inclusion criteria required females aged 12-35 years who were willing to complete the questionnaire, while males and those outside the age range or unwilling to consent were excluded.

Control of External Factors

To maintain consistency, a standardized questionnaire was administered in English and Igbo to match respondents' language comfort. Two research assistants per LGA were trained to ensure uniform data-collection procedures. A pilot test involving 10% of the sample (35 respondents) checked clarity and reliability, yielding a Cronbach's α of 0.82, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Data collection was scheduled for two weeks (Oct 20 – Nov 3, 2025) to minimize temporal bias.

Instrument

The instrument was a self-administered structured questionnaire divided into four sections: (1) demographics (age, education, occupation, residence); (2) cultural factors (gender norms, family expectations); (3) social factors (safety, support, financial constraints); and (4) environmental factors (availability of facilities, transport, sanitation). Responses were captured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Content validity was ensured by a panel of two sports-sociology experts and one statistician, with revisions made after pilot feedback.

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Informed consent (written for adults; parental assent for minors) was secured before participation. Questionnaires were distributed as hard copies in schools and community halls, and an online Google Form link was provided for literate participants. Research assistants retrieved the completed forms within two weeks, ensuring less than 5 % missing data. Anonymized IDs were used, and data were stored securely on a password-protected drive.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (σ) were computed for each Likert-scale item and for the cultural, social, and environmental domains. The benchmark for interpretation is 2.50: items with a mean of 2.50 and above are regarded as agreed (indicating the factor is a barrier), while items falling below 2.50 are regarded as disagreed.

RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in line with the three research questions.

Research Question 1

What cultural factors significantly impede female participation in organized sports in Calabar?

Table 1: Mean rating of respondents on cultural factors. (N = 350)

S/N	Questionnaire Item	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (σ)	Decision
1	Cultural belief that sports make girls less feminine	3.42	0.87	Agreed
2	Preference for household chores over training	3.28	0.92	Agreed
3	Early marriage pressure reducing sport involvement	3.15	0.98	Agreed
4	Religious norms discouraging mixed-gender sports	3.06	1.03	Agreed
5	Stigmatization of female athletes in the community	2.94	0.89	Agreed
6	Lack of family support for sport participation	3.31	0.85	Agreed
7	Perception that sports affect future marriage prospects	3.19	0.91	Agreed
8	Cultural rituals conflicting with training schedules	2.88	0.95	Agreed
9	Low value placed on female sports by elders	3.04	0.88	Agreed
10	Belief that injury in sports makes girls unmarriageable	2.76	1.00	Agreed
Total	Cluster Mean	3.00		Agreed

In Table 1, all 10 items had mean scores above the benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents agreed these cultural factors significantly impede female participation in organized sports in Calabar.

Research Question 2

How do social barriers affect girls' and women's engagement in formal sports programs in Calabar?

Table 2: Mean rating of respondents on social barriers. (N = 350)

S/N	Questionnaire Item	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (σ)	Decision
11	Fear of sexual harassment on the way to training	3.54	0.79	Agreed
12	Lack of parental financial support for equipment	3.39	0.86	Agreed

13	Negative peer influence discouraging participation	3.22	0.93	Agreed
14	Inadequate safe transport to sports venues	3.47	0.81	Agreed
15	Family prioritization of education over sports	3.30	0.88	Agreed
16	Insufficient role models for girls in sports	3.15	0.95	Agreed
17	Fear of injury and lack of insurance coverage	3.08	0.97	Agreed
18	Social stigma for girls staying late after training	2.96	0.90	Agreed
19	Low household income limiting access to sport kits	3.34	0.84	Agreed
20	Pressure to focus on domestic duties instead of sport	3.11	0.92	Agreed
Total	Cluster Mean	3.26		Agreed

Data in Table 2 showed that all 10 items recorded means above 2.50, showing agreement that these social barriers hinder female engagement in formal sports programs in Calabar.

Research Question 3

In what ways do environmental constraints (infrastructure, transportation, facilities, and program availability) limit female involvement in organized sports in Calabar?

Table 3: Mean rating of respondents on environmental constraints. (N = 350)

S/N	Questionnaire Item	Mean (M)	Std. Dev (σ)	Decision
21	Lack of proper sports fields and courts in communities	3.62	0.75	Agreed
22	Inadequate sanitary facilities (changing rooms, toilets)	3.49	0.80	Agreed
23	Poor lighting and unsafe playing surfaces	3.38	0.84	Agreed
24	Unreliable public transportation to venues	3.31	0.89	Agreed
25	Shortage of female coaches and trainers	3.24	0.91	Agreed
26	Limited availability of sport equipment (balls, nets, etc.)	3.56	0.77	Agreed
27	Lack of organized competitions for girls/women	3.15	0.96	Agreed
28	Inadequate funding for school/ community sports	3.44	0.82	Agreed

	programs			
29	Insufficient awareness of existing sport programs	3.02	0.98	Agreed
30	Unsafe environment (crime, stray animals) affecting training	2.93	0.94	Agreed
Total	Cluster Mean	3.31		Agreed

All 10 items achieved means above 2.50, confirming consensus that these environmental constraints limit female involvement in organized sports in Calabar.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that cultural, social, and environmental factors significantly impede female participation in organized sports in Calabar. The results showed that all identified cultural factors such as the belief that sports diminish femininity, early marriage pressure, and lack of family support were agreed upon by respondents, with a cluster mean of 3.00. This aligns with the work of Usendok et al. (2022), who reported that deeply entrenched gender norms and familial expectations continue to restrict girls' involvement in sports across Nigeria. Similarly, Okpara and Agbo (2020) noted that cultural stereotypes linking athleticism with masculinity deter parents from investing in daughters' sporting activities, reinforcing low participation rates.

Regarding social barriers, the study found strong agreement on items such as fear of sexual harassment, inadequate financial support, negative peer influence, and insufficient role models (cluster mean 3.26). These results corroborate Waliya and Mbey (2024), who highlighted safety concerns and economic constraints as major deterrents for girls in rural communities. Okon and Ahamefule (2023) also emphasized that the absence of visible female athletes reduces aspiration and motivation among young girls, creating a vicious cycle of under-representation.

Environmental constraints emerged as the most pronounced barrier (cluster mean 3.31), with respondents agreeing on issues like the lack of proper fields, inadequate sanitary facilities, poor lighting, and limited equipment. This is consistent with Nwankwo and Udeze (2021), who documented infrastructure deficits and transportation challenges as critical obstacles in southeastern Nigeria. Ibrahim et al. (2024) added that underfunded school sports programs and scarce female coaching staff further exacerbate the problem, making it difficult for girls to train and compete safely. Implications include the need for policy and funding to increase

budget allocations for gender-friendly sports facilities and subsidies for equipment and transport; community engagement through sensitization campaigns targeting parents, traditional leaders, and religious figures to reshape harmful cultural perceptions; safety measures such as safe transportation, lighting, gender-segregated facilities, and security training; and role-model mentorship programs partnering with successful female athletes to inspire and guide young participants. One limitation of the present study is that it focused only on Calabar, which may limit generalizability to other regions of Nigeria with different cultural contexts. Self-reported data from a cross-sectional questionnaire may be subject to response bias and does not capture longitudinal changes in attitudes or participation. The survey instrument, while reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), may have missed nuanced contextual factors such as media representation or intra-familial dynamics. Future research should incorporate mixed-methods approaches (interviews, focus groups) and expand to multiple states to provide a broader understanding of barriers across Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape.

CONCLUSION

The present study's investigation into the cultural, social, and environmental barriers to female participation in organized sports in Calabar has provided a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the challenges hindering girls' and women's engagement in sports. The findings revealed that cultural factors such as gender-norm stereotypes, early marriage pressures, and lack of family support impede participation. Social barriers, including fear of sexual harassment, financial constraints, negative peer influence, and insufficient role models, were strongly affirmed. Environmental constraints namely inadequate facilities, poor infrastructure, transportation difficulties, and limited equipment emerged as pronounced obstacles. All items across the three domains indicated consensus among respondents. These results align with existing literature that underscores the interplay of sociocultural norms, safety concerns, and infrastructural deficits in limiting female sport participation in Nigeria. The convergence of these barriers highlights the need for a multi-dimensional approach that simultaneously addresses deep-rooted cultural perceptions, enhances safety and economic support, and upgrades sports infrastructure and resources. Thus, it is concluded that cultural, social, and environmental barriers collectively hinder female involvement in organized sports in Calabar, and urgent, coordinated efforts from government, community leaders, educational institutions, and civil society are required to dismantle these obstacles and promote equitable access to sports for girls and women. Without such interventions, the gender gap in sports

participation is likely to persist, depriving the society of the health, educational, and leadership benefits that women athletes can offer.

Implications for National Development

The implication is that if the barriers to female participation in organized sports in Calabar are not addressed, the nation's human capital development will be severely hindered, leading to a decline in overall economic growth and development. Limited access to sports curtails the physical and mental health benefits for girls and women, perpetuating a cycle of poor health outcomes and reduced productivity. Without opportunities for athletic engagement, the potential for talent identification and development in sports—a sector with growing economic potential remains untapped, denying the country revenue from sports tourism, sponsorship, and export of athletic talent. Failure to empower women through sport also reinforces gender inequality, keeping a significant portion of the population unskilled and underutilized in the workforce, thereby constraining the labor market and slowing GDP growth. The lack of safe, inclusive facilities and supportive environments contributes to a brain drain, as talented females may leave the region or abandon sports careers entirely, exacerbating the shortage of role models and leaders in sports administration, coaching, and related fields. This deficit undermines national initiatives aimed at achieving gender equity and inclusive growth under the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, the negative impact on girls' self-esteem, leadership skills, and teamwork abilities hampers the development of soft skills essential for a competitive workforce, affecting future employability and innovation capacity. The nation's global reputation and competitiveness suffer, as poor gender parity in sports signals weak commitment to equality and human rights, deterring international partnerships, investments, and sporting events. Consequently, Nigeria's ranking in global gender and human development indices will stagnate or decline, impeding progress toward sustainable national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Calabar Government should prioritize the development and rehabilitation of gender-friendly sports infrastructure in communities and schools. This includes constructing safe fields, courts, and athletic tracks, installing adequate lighting, and providing clean changing rooms, toilets, and safe transport options for female athletes.

2. The government and relevant ministries (Sports, Education, Women Affairs) should launch sustained public-awareness and sensitization campaigns targeting parents, traditional leaders, and religious authorities to reshape cultural norms that discourage girls from sports and to promote positive role models.
3. A dedicated fund should be established to provide financial support for female athletes, covering equipment, travel, accommodation, and insurance. Scholarships and stipends tied to academic performance and sport participation should be offered to reduce economic barriers.
4. Policymakers should enforce safety protocols in sports venues, including security personnel, CCTV surveillance, and strict anti-harassment policies. Safe transportation services or stipends for transport should be arranged for training and competitions, especially in rural areas.
5. The Ministry of Sports should recruit, train, and deploy more female coaches, referees, and administrators. Partnerships with universities and sports academies can create scholarship pathways for women to acquire coaching certifications.
6. Community sports committees, comprising parents, youth leaders, and NGOs, should be formed to monitor program implementation, ensure accountability, and foster community ownership of girls' sports initiatives.
7. Regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be instituted to track participation rates, facility usage, and impact on health and education outcomes. Data should inform policy adjustments and scale-up of successful interventions.

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