

## **Championship Sports for Iranian Women: Challenges, Opportunities and Solutions**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The main purpose of this research was to study the challenges, opportunities and solutions of the championship sports for Iranian women.

**Method:** The research method was mixed, and different methods were applied to serve the purpose of this research. The research sample was selected from the main population (N=172) following Morgan's sample size determination (118). Open and closed questionnaires were used to measure the effect of each of the challenges and opportunities with a Likert's five-item scale.

**Results:** The findings showed that 9 opportunities and 19 challenges exist regarding Iranian women's championship sports.

**Conclusions:** Though investigations of women's sports in internal and external fields show progress in Iranian women's sports, they do not show any desirable growth compared to male sports, which is due to social restrictions and other factors.

**Keywords:** Championship, sport, Iranian, women, mixed method.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sports have been largely discussed as a social right of humans. The United Nations in 2003 declared sports as a social right. It stated that the opportunity to participate in sports and physical activity is a human right and governments must give everyone the opportunity to participate in sports (Mirghafoori, Sayyadi Touranlou, & Mirfakhreddini, 2009).

In Iranian and other Islamic cultures and civilizations, sport is an effective learning tool for individual and social development. It is considered an effective factor for mental and physical health. Sports provide an ideal education. Skills and values learned from sports are especially important for girls. Sports let those with fewer opportunities learn skills and values beyond those learned in their families, from social activities outside their home. Sports can be an effective means to empower girls and women who are deprived of sports-induced physical, mental, and social joys and participation due to their gender in different cultures. In an article titled 'Barriers to sports participation of women and their relation to motivation', Naderian, Zolaktaf, & Moshkelgosha (2009) showed that individual or mental problems, lack of access to facilities, lack of interest, and lack of knowledge are the major obstacles to women's participation in sports.

Sports programs can help reduce discrimination against women by busting myths about their competencies. In a study titled 'Arab-Muslim point of view on women's sports participation', AbdulRazak, Sofian, & Abd-Latif (2010) showed that women were strongly influenced by cultural processes and ethnic prejudices of parents and, therefore, did not have a positive idea about participating in sports activities.

Ensuring that girls have equal access to quality education is the basis of development because sustainable development is based on human development. Sustainable development needs governments to give more opportunities to all community members to lead a healthier, longer, and more meaningful life. Sports programs contribute to meeting the objectives of sustainable, economic, social, cultural, and environmental development. Women's sports have for long been in the form of traditional sports and local games. The Olympic Games gave women proper opportunities to engage in modern sports.

The development of international sports organizations made it necessary to create attractions and opportunities for women. The Charter

of the International Olympic Committee gives special attention to creating sports opportunities for both men and women. International federations that wish to be recognized by the International Olympic Committee are also obliged to adapt their statutes to the Olympic Charter, and observe the principle of avoiding sexual and religious discrimination to create equal opportunities for all people (Rasekh, Sajjadi, Hamidi, & Khabiri, 2015).

On the other hand, in countries where cultural traditions limit the advancement of women, women's sport becomes less important. However, we do see more women participating in sports today, whether by breaking the norms of their society or by conforming to those norms. Of course, the rate of progress of women who have taken up sports varies. But it is important to note that this progress is expanding more or less everywhere. However, many obstacles must be overcome. It is true that in the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, there was no place for women. But since 1990, women's Olympic program has been growing. Important international conferences have dealt with women's issues and their role in sports. One of these conferences was the International Conference on Women and Sport held by the Sports Council of Great Britain in Brighton (Great Britain) in 1994 with the support of the International Olympic Committee. The conference particularly dealt with issues like accelerating the change process, including a revision of the status of women's unequal participation in sports activities. In Part V (sports with higher performances), the Brighton Declaration of Principles states: "Governments and sports organizations should provide equal opportunities for women to achieve their potential in sport performances. To do this, it should be noted that all activities and programs in improving athletic performance include special needs of female athletes. Those who support elite or professional athletes should note that competition opportunities, rewards, incentives, recognition, sponsorship, promotion, and other fair and equitable sponsorship forms should be provided for both men and women" (Jackson & Palmer, 1998/2004).

International success for the athletes of a country in international competitions and the Olympics in particular reinforces the reputation and validity of that country worldwide. In addition to international success, the importance of sports for athletes is that it gives them opportunities to learn, as well as experience success, teamwork, and privileged moments.

However, apart from technical issues, women's sport has become a cultural, social, and political issue. Its growth and progress in every country represents the social, cultural, and political behavior of the whole spectrum of the society toward women's approach to sports. Today, the presence of women in sporting competitions (world and Olympic) shows that this class has been released of its burden and pressure. It has found the possibility to seriously represent the field of sports. Women's sport in Iran has undergone many changes. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the invasion of the Baathist regime in Iraq and the outbreak of war, sports took time to recover. But after a while, it was taken more seriously. A new movement began, and it has now led to a spurt in professional or semi-professional sports. However, due to social conditions, it took a long time for women's sports to have something more to say than men's sports. In particular, the need for female athletes to cover themselves has prevented them from participating in international competitions such as swimming and gymnastics. Besides, there is much opposition against the participation of Iranian women whose hijab is confirmed in certain areas by international sports federations. However, there are women who have had a successful presence in recent international competitions. Despite all the bans and restrictions, they have proved their merit.

Today, women have broken free of the traditional roles in society and demand increased social and cultural participation. However, the facilities and infrastructure needed to provide this presence has not been well provided. For example, the growing presence of women in public and professional athletic fields, on the one hand, and religious considerations, on the other, has increased the need to establish cultural, sports, and recreational centers particularly for women. It needs the attention of the authorities. In his article titled 'Cultural changes and the need to exercise among young Iranians with an emphasis on girls', Sheikhi (2003) stated that sport is a means of leisure for the youth, the population of which is constantly growing.

It is a hidden need, and it will be followed by irreversible consequences, unless it is specified as a clear and objective need. For this and the above-mentioned reasons, this study examined the challenges and opportunities Iranian women face in sports. This will ultimately help the authorities develop women's sports by providing them with executive solutions.

## **METHOD**

The research method was mixed, qualitative-quantitative in terms of strategy. Due to the exploratory nature of the research in qualitative terms, the challenges and opportunities facing the country's women's championship were identified by referring to the documents, desk studies, and using the techniques of content analysis and focus groups.

### **Participants**

The population of the study consisted of the presidents and vice-presidents of the Sports Federation Department for Women, the directors of physical education departments of the provinces, the officials of the provincial women's sports bodies, women's sports officials in the Ministry of Sport and Youth since the victory of the Islamic Revolution, and women experts in the women's sports department. The total number was 172 people. The research sample was selected from the population following Morgan's sample size determination. 130 people (with a 10 percent chance of loss), including 34 heads and 31 vice-presidents of the Sports Federation Department for Women, 23 general managers of the physical education of the provinces, 23 officials of women's sports organizations in the provinces, four officials of women's sport in physical education organizations since the Islamic Revolution, and 15 female experts in the women's sports department, were selected following quota sampling techniques. The research instruments and the related forms and questionnaires were distributed among them.

### **Research Instruments**

Based on the subject matter, the following forms and questionnaires were used to collect the required information:

- An open-ended questionnaire to identify the challenges and opportunities for women's championship sport; and,
- A closed questionnaire to measure the effect of each of the items with a five-item Likert's scale. It should be noted that after confirming the content validity among the experts using the Delphi method, its reliability was determined through Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.93$ ).

Extracted and categorized, the collected data was entered into the SPSS ver. 17 software package. The indices of frequency, percentage, graphs, and tables were used to present the descriptive information, and the Friedman ANOVA test was used to rank and determine the weight of each question in the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

The demographic characteristics of the sample showed that men accounted for 41% and women accounted for 59% of the sample. Among them, 69 subjects (59%) had a bachelor's degree, nine (13%) had a master's degree, and 49 (5.8%) had a Ph.D. Those who were educated in Physical Education accounted for 64.1%, and 35.9% of the sample held a degree in a field other than Physical Education. The result of data analysis in Tables 1 and 2 shows the opportunities and challenges facing women's championship sports.

**Table 1:** Opportunities facing women's championship sports

No.	Factors	Mean Rate
1	The increasing tendency of girls and women of the country to join championship sports activities and rising motivation to represent indoor and outdoor activities	4.53
2	A significant rise in the number of female students who take up physical education	4.32
3	Seeking self-development and the increasing motivation of female champions to gain national and international honors	4.09
4	The positive attitude of some of the top officials of the country to promote women's sport	3.85
5	The growing trend of women earning medals in Asian and international games	3.56
6	Improving the level of knowledge and human resource awareness of women's sport and the existence of educated women in sports in the country	3.24
7	The existence of a positive attitude among the Members of Parliament, especially sports fractions, about women's championship sports	3.22
8	The sponsorship of minister, deputies, and senior sports executives toward the development of women's championship sports	3.08
9	The existence of a proper prospect in Iran in 1404	2.90

**Table 2: Challenges Facing Women's Sports Championship**

No.	Factors	The Mean Rate
1	Limited allocation of funds from public sources and the existence of problems associated with marketing and financial support of the private sector in women's championship sports	18.62
2	Lack of space, facilities, and equipment for women's sport compared with what women need to take advantage of in indoor spaces	15.90
3	The uncertainty of the country's developmental cultural policies of women's championship sports	15.81
4	Limited opportunities to gain experience for managers, coaches, and athletes in national and international competitions	14.57
5	Low levels of authority, role, and the contribution of women in decision-making and strategic plans of championship sports	13.65
6	Limitation on holding international competition of women's sport in the country and the lack of national sports camps and club tournaments for women	13.50
7	Lack of a system for identifying, attracting, and nurturing sports talents in women's championship sports	13.01
8	Lack of interaction with scientific centers and the lack of a R&D system in women's championship sports	12.97
9	The existence of some cultural constraints in society for women's sports	9.97
10	Inability of the media to cover news due to existing limitations	9.92
11	Lack of attention toward the participation of the private sector and paving the way for attracting sports in financial terms	9.33
12	Low possibility of hosting women for tournaments	9.30
13	Non-implementation of the development of physical education and sports in development programs	9.06
14	The presence of inefficient and non-sport leaders at various levels of sport management	8.46
15	Unawareness of policymakers and legislators of the benefits of women's championship sports	8.24
16	Limitation of laws in some fields to compete with the Islamic veil	8.18
17	The rapid growth of women's championship sports in the region and other countries	7.71
18	Ignorance of high-ranking officials about women's championship sports	7.64
19	Limited government investment in women's championship sports	7.47

## DISCUSSION

It is obvious that women account for half of the talents of the population. However, the extent to which economic, social, cultural, and managerial conditions have laid the groundwork for nourishing these talents needs to be considered. The more the environment is paved for women's social activities, the greater will be the chance for them to prove their ability. An obvious example of this can be found in the recent success of women in the university entrance exam. In the competition between girls and boys, girls outshone boys and took a greater place in the university (Mozaffari, Elahi, Abbasi, & Ahmadpour, 2009). Physical education and sports science are not an exception to this issue. Qualitative and quantitative growth of female graduates and professionals in the field of sports science has created opportunities for various athletic organizations (federations, faculties, clubs, etc.) that can make greater contributions by taking advantage of this growth and development of sports under their administration. The presence of women, who are a major part of the society, in the field of championship sports is inevitable. The results showed that women's championship sport faces opportunities like improving the knowledge and awareness of women's sports, human resources, the existence of educated women in the field of sports, and a significant increase in the number of female students studying sports and physical education. In the descriptive results, women accounted for 69% of the sample, of which 56 (81.2%) had a bachelor's degree, nine (13%) had a master's degree, and 49 (5.8%) had a Ph.D. Of course, professionalism and knowledge orientation are considered among the assets of championship sports in every country and as one of the most important competitive advantages of championship sports in the international arena. However, many of these studies are not done purposefully, and are merely based on needs. The conduction of unnecessary studies, parallel and repetitive, is considered as the major obstacle to the effectiveness of research activities in the field of sports science (Alizadeh & Elahi, 2008).

The lack of a macro strategy to conduct such research toward solving the problems of sports, and especially championship sports, is clear (Alizadeh & Elahi, 2008). In many countries, the sports science research strategy completely follows the macro strategy of sports. New Zealand is a typical country in this regard. The macro perspective of sports in



New Zealand is determined as “the most active nation (with) persistent victories in athletic competitions, pp. 6-11”. In the strategic planning of sports in New Zealand, it has been stressed that such a perspective cannot be achieved except by relying on the knowledge and research of the researcher. The emphases on the scientific development system of sports of New Zealand include the determination of the national research priorities, support of administrative agencies to the research, vast participation and engagement of all sectors, encouragement and cooperation of all experts, and the publication and distribution of research results for the use of institutions in charge of sports (Sport and Recreation of New Zealand, 2006).

The following strategies are suggested to take advantage of these opportunities:

- Determination of the needs and priorities of education and research in women’s championship sports;
- Establishment of a scientific education system for coaches and referees of women’s sports;
- Development of basic and applied research in women’s championship sports;
- Comparative studies of the championship sport system in select countries;
- Studying the performance of other countries with an approach toward understanding the competitor in the selected sports fields;
- Developing a comprehensive plan to assess the performance of the national team of women’s sports;
- Establishing a relationship and interaction with academic and research centers of the countries’ sports sector; and,
- Creating a center for women’s sports.

On the other hand, we can say that today, an indicator of the difference between developed and underdeveloped countries in championship sport is the quality of human resources of federations, the National Olympic Committee, and the national and regional sports organizations, such as associations, sports bodies, and so on. Knowledge-centered human resource with appropriate expertise and efficiency are the most important pillars of the championship sports system. With knowledge and expertise, human resource can contribute to the development of championship sports. Educational issues, and

recruitment and training of human resources in the championship sports system are three distinct and yet interconnected categories that will be applicable in the form of a comprehensive system.

Although a study of the current situation shows a relatively high number of people with coaching qualifications in sports, their activity and professionalism have been questioned.

In other words, since federations and sports boards have held different coaching courses in the last few years, a lot of people got coaching cards by participating in these courses. But many of these people are either inactive or have poor professional quality (Mozaffari et al., 2009).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Nowadays, in many countries that have made a name in the international sports arena, certain coaching systems have been assigned to direct and organize them as a national institution. These institutions authenticate the documents of sports coaching in these countries. Considering the role of coaches in the development of championship sports in Iran, and the weaknesses in this area, it seems that sports in the country desperately need a strategic plan to education accreditation and the promotion of coaches (Mozaffari et al., 2009). Undoubtedly, the sports community and experts are experienced at various levels. To achieve optimal results, it should benefit the available managerial capacities at different levels of decision-making, planning, and management. With regard to the opportunities, such as the positive attitude of some of the top officials of the country toward the promotion of women's sport and the improvement of the knowledge and awareness of the human resources of women's sport and the existence of educated women in sports, the following tasks are offered for maximum utilization of these opportunities:

- Development of a volunteer system in women's championship sport;
- Designing and establishing the national seminar of women's sports coaches;
- Creating a system to recruit, train, and retain the human resources of women's sport;
- A comprehensive plan to support the national team athletes; and,
- A plan to support the coaches and staff of the national team.

- The successful participation of women in sports and the Olympics shows that Iranian women can work in conjunction with men to achieve success in different fields while observing the Islamic and ethical principles at the same time.

Earlier, women's international activities were limited. They got the opportunity to take part in competitions to commemorate Daheye-Fajr in which the second and third teams from neighboring countries, especially those in Central Asia, participated. They could also participate in the games for women in Islamic countries held in Tehran. But today, with the permission for the participation of Muslim women with Islamic headscarves in various competitions, it has become possible for them to encounter high-level teams. The topic of designing clothes for female athletes had long been discussed in sports circles and brought hope for female athletes to participate in cross-border competitions and win glory and honor.

These sports clothing will apparently be produced and designed following Islamic regulations for women to participate in international competitions in collaboration with the National Olympic Committee. These clothes will fully observe the Islamic cover but cause no negative impact on the performance of athletes or hinder their activities. Prior to this era, our female athletes could only participate in archery, chess, and yachting. But now, they can participate in all martial arts, including wushu, taekwondo, karate, and kung fu, group and ball games such as football, handball, futsal, volleyball, and basketball, and individual sports such as badminton, table tennis, skating, golf, track and field, horseback riding, archery, tennis, racing, cycling, and disability sports. In some of these fields, such as shooting, chess, taekwondo, track and field, and soccer, Iranian women athletes have won medals at the international level (performance report of the Information Technology section of the Department of Women's Affairs, 2010).

With growing opportunities, such as perfection-seeking and increasing incentives for champion women to get national and international honors" and "the growing trend of winning international and Asian medals by women, and reduced challenges, such as cultural constraints in women's sports, low possibility of hosting women's tournaments, limitations to competing in some fields with the Islamic

veil and the quick growth of women's championship sport in the region and other countries, the following activities are suggested:

- Increased interaction with international and continental federations to remove the problems of female athletes in participating with the hijab in international sporting events;
- Making efforts to eliminate the presence of women in stadiums of the country by observing the norms and the dignity of women;
- Feasibility and efforts to win effective international seats by women;
- Evaluating the performance of Iranian women in international sport associations; and,
- Strengthening the participation of manager women in sport federations and departments.

Almost all experts believe that Iran has suffered a lot of damage through wide governmental ownership, exclusive market structure, introspection, and lack of interaction with the outside world. The solution recommended to fix these structural flaws is the establishment of a competitive structure, extraversion, and the development of interaction with the global economy. These goals become possible by expanding the role and status of the private sector as the main element in the activity of financial firms (Kabolizadeh, 2005).

In an article titled *Privatization, Decentralization, and Devolution of the Tasks of Championship Sports to the National Olympic Committee*, Razavi (2006) stated that the country's sports training managers show the highest agreement (78.3 percent) and the executive managers show the least agreement (69.4 percent) on the devolution of these tasks. Also, to reform the structure of championship sports, a specific goal, plan, and program should be determined to implement the work, and some stages, like labor division occasions, and the dynamic relationship between sectors, competency, the funding required to implement the project, and the incentive system for employees should be considered. The option of privatizing the institutions of championship sports can be discussed and investigated from the policy-making and legislative stage to delegating and monitoring it.

Considering the opportunities, such as sponsorship of the minister, deputies and senior sport executives of women's championship sports development and reduced challenges, such as inability of the media to

cover news due to the limitations, the lack of attention to the participation of the private sector and paving the way for absorbing sports in financial terms, non-implementation of the development of physical education and sports in development programs, unawareness of policymakers and legislators of the benefits of women's championship sports, and limited government investment in women's championship sports, the following strategies are recommended:

- Identifying the main sponsors, partners, and providers of women's championship sports in the country;
- Developing the regulations for the use of logos and signs of marketing activities of women's championship sports;
- Developing bylaws, the ways and possibilities of taking advantage of women's championship sports from Article 44 of the constitution; and,
- Supporting the establishment of non-governmental organizations for the development of championship sports.

Given the opportunities, such as positive attitude of some of the top officials of the country to grow and promote women's sport and the existence of a proper perspective in Iran program in 1404, the following suggestions are made:

- Increasing the share of championship sports budget;
- Regulation and improvement of the status of women's sports in the sports system and sports federations;
- Establishing the presence of at least two women in the executive committee of the National Olympic Committee; and,
- The regulation and development of laws protecting women's championship sports in the country.

Research shows that there is no systematic talent search, and no determined institution in Iran is responsible for this important issue in sports.

The only criterion for talent search is the results of competitions and sports festivals, which are also weak due to the paucity of competitions, especially at the institution level, as well as the lack of specific criteria for the selection of experienced experts for talent search (Alijani, 2002).

Thus, to improve the current situation, the following actions are recommended:

- Supporting and improving the system of identifying and nurturing sports talents;
- Identifying the areas or women's sport hubs in the country;
- The establishment of greenhouse talent searching and nurturing centers in target provinces;
- Planning to delegate the talent research process to the Ministry of Education;
- Strengthening the structural and procedural communication between the institutions to discover and nurture talents;
- The establishment of talent search committees for women in sports federations;
- Making the talent search process scientific;
- Comparative studies on talent search in select countries; and,
- Delegating the championship competitions of children, adolescents, and youths to the Ministry of Education.

Although investigations into the growth of women's sports in indoor and outdoor activities are an evidence of progress in Iranian women's sports, they do not have desirable growth compared with male sports because of social restrictions and other factors. Thus, despite the approximate equality in the number of women and men in the current Iranian society, men exercise 8.6 times more than women do. Social factors have a significant impact on the ability of Iranian women regarding sports. According to religious commandments and moral and religious beliefs of families, girls cannot exercise after they cross childhood. Poor movement leads to a drop in their performance. Obviously, specific spaces and facilities have to be created to separate the genders in sports places.

In a study done in 1991 by the Physical Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Research, it was revealed that cardiac and respiratory readiness, which is one of the most important capabilities to maintain health, reduces with increasing age in girls (Kashef, 1991). As a result, the ability of a 17-year-old girl is less than that of a nine-year-old girl. On the other hand, this feature improves in boys with increasing age. The results showed that the growth factor has a positive effect on

the performance of boys, and their physical activity and fitness are in accordance to their cardiac and respiratory growth.

But the cardio-respiratory readiness of girls decreases when they reach puberty. Thereafter, their physical activity is not coordinated with their growth and does not improve their cardio-respiratory readiness. In terms of the level of ability, there is a significant difference among girls. The gap between girls with high ability and those with low ability is very wide. This dramatic difference shows that only a limited number of girls exercise regularly, while many of them are far from doing any physical activity. There is no doubt that competitions for women involve the participation of only a few girls. Due to existing limits, many of them are deprived of sports.

There are several reasons for this. But the special psychological and social occasions for girls in our society are among the important factors.

These findings confirm that the social situation of Iranian girls affects their ability. Girls under nine years can easily play in the streets, while mature girls cannot, and do not expect it either. Since the spaces and sports facilities for girls and women are very limited, they cannot enjoy vast participation in sport activities.

The lack of movement degrades their performance (Kashef, 1991). Thus, as it was observed in the results, the “lack of spaces, facilities, and sports equipment for women’s sports due to the high population and the necessity to take advantage of the indoor spaces” has been identified as a challenge for women’s championships of the country. On the other hand, “cultural constraints on women’s sports in the community”, “low attention of high-ranking officials to women’s championships”, as well as other issues are the challenges faced by championship sports. Therefore, to minimize the effects of the challenges, the following solutions are suggested:

- Standardization of sports equipment and facilities;
- Providing advanced training facilities at women’s championship sports centers;
- Strengthening and developing women’s sport facilities according to land-use planning and polarization of the country’s sports;
- Planning to create bases and special places for women’s championship sports and sport hubs; and,

- Establishing facilities and supporting the development of women's sports clubs by the private sector.

As seen in the list of challenges identified in this study, “the existence of various limitations to hosting international competitions” is confirmed as a threat to the championship sports system. A main reason for the lack of success in hosting international competitions is poor-quality and non-standardized sports facilities. For example, a study carried out on 17 Iranian soccer league stadiums showed that they lack the main criteria for a standard stadium, and more than 70 percent of the country's football stadiums meet only 20% of even the minimum standards (Aghazadeh, 2003).

Today, national and local governments around the world spend a lot of resources to obtain permission to host major sporting events. The claim is that hosting a sporting event is considered a good investment for the development of championship sports in the country (Angelo & Souza, 2003). According to a research by Endorf (2000), around 95% of the major events are held only in 30 advanced countries, and only 5% is held in developing countries. Thus, these countries enjoy the benefits of hosting such events.

Szymanski (2002) collected data from the top 20 economic countries of the world based on their GDP in the last 30 years. By analyzing the data, he concluded that the majority of them have hosted the World Cup or the Olympic Games at least once.

Given the importance of hosting international competitions and its role in the development of championship sports in the country, the following tasks are suggested:

- Establishing the infrastructure required to host international events; and,
- Designing and operating events and international sports competitions with other countries in the region.

To complete this research project, the following future studies are recommended:

- A study of the performance of other countries with a rival recognition approach in select sports;
- Designing and developing a comprehensive system to evaluate the performance of national teams in women's sports;



- A study of the database of the development of women's championship sports;
- Analysis of the causes of success and failure of teams and sports champions in women's championship sports; and,
- Identification of sports areas or hubs.

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