

Gender Differences in Physical Activity
Among Birzeit University First Year Students

By

Kamal B. Shamshoum

Physical Education Department

Birzeit University

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Physical Education Department

Birzeit University, Palestine

Abstract:

Physical activity is recommended for health maintenance in adults, but basic descriptive data are lacking for university students. The present study examined first year university students at Birzeit in a sample of 200 students (M=100; F=100) where physical education is a required course for first year only. The purpose of this study is to identify the attitudes of the students toward physical activity and the differences in relation to gender as an independent variable.

Kenyon's scale was used as the instrument, which consists of six dimensions (social experience, Health and fitness, pursuit of vertigo, Aesthetic experience, recreational catharsis and ascetic experience). In addition, the researcher has developed five more questions focused on the social traditions of the country.

Descriptive statistics is utilized to analyze the pertinent data (mean, standard deviation, t. test and percentiles). The results of the study showed that there were statistical differences between male and female attitudes towards the social experience and the aesthetic dimensions, where the other four dimensions showed no statistical differences. Moreover the results of the additional five questions showed differences between males and females mainly in the area of coeducational physical activities, practicing sport activities out side the university and in the presence of an audience during the physical activity sessions. In light of the study results six recommendation were suggested by the researcher.

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Introduction

According to the history of Physical Education (Hacken Smith, 1966) the early United States built on European heritage, provided limited physical education programs for men in schools, and rarely provided any education for women. Physical education for women was essentially nonexistent. Fortunately, by 1800s, schools for females were established and were providing minimal physical education programs, mainly in private institutions consisted of calisthenics, dance-like steps, and domestic duties such as gardening. In the mid 1800s, physical education for girls and young women included forms of German and Swedish-style gymnastics.

Sex role stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions concerning what is "right for men" and what is "right for women" have been perpetuated through physical activity and sport since both reflect societal and cultural norms. Most people believe that men are "supposed to be" strong, aggressive, and assertive-both physically and emotionally- and that women are "supposed to be" weak, gentle, and passive. The traits most associated with excellence in physical performance such as achievement, self-confidence, aggressiveness, leadership, strength and swiftness have received social approval for men, but often seem as being in conflict with the accepted role for women (Vincent Melograno, 1979).

Females have not been encouraged to participate in physical education activities, at least partly because of the Victorian image of women which characterizes females as being physically and psychologically weaker than their male counterparts. This traditional view is revealed when fathers say their sons, "you play like a girl". In contrast the highest compliment which may be expressed toward a female is after a comparison to a male. An expression like, "she throws like a boy" is symptomatic of this attitude, even when such a throw may be technically correct. (Association of American Colleges, 1974).

One of the most common misconception found in the exercise physiology literature suggests that the aerobic work capacity of females is only 70-75% that of the male. Harris found that females can be as efficient as males when calculating maximal oxygen uptake on lean body mass, they can maintain efficiency for many years with continued exercise and training. (Harris, 1973).

Carrol's (1993) study of the impact of religion on sport participation in the U.K. indicated that participation levels in sport for Muslim and Hindu women were inversely related to the importance attached to their religious beliefs. The more important religion was for these females, the lower their sport participation. Taylor and Toohey (1995) in their study of women, ethnicity, and sport in Australia, found that many Muslim women indicated they would like to participate in

sport but could not do so because of the limited number of existing facilities and programs that met their religious requirements.

In a study about ethnic, socioeconomic, and sex differences in physical activity among adolescents. Results show that boys reported a significantly higher frequency of participation in vigorous exercise out of school, total sport teams, physical education classes. Regarding vigorous exercises in physical education in school and out of school, boys reported a frequency that was 41% higher than that of girls. There were significant sex differences on 10 of the 22 specific activities. Girls reported significantly more minutes' participation in aerobic dance and other dance, walking, calisthenics and baseball. Boys reported more minutes of jogging yard work, bicycling, weight lifting, basketball, football, surfing and racquetball. (James F. Sallis (1996).

Pat Griffin (1984) wrote in his article "coed physical education" at its best is an opportunity for girls and boys to test the limitations sex role stereotyping imposes on sport and dance participation. Coed physical education is a chance for boys and girls to learn to enjoy sport and recreational activities together. At its worst, coed physical education is a frustrating experience for most students and a confirmation that sport is only for the most highly skilled and aggressive minority. Which direction a program takes depends on the degree of administrative support and physical education teacher commitment to making coed physical education work.

Modification of rules for some games give the opportunity for coed sport. The new coed volleyball format can enhance any physical education program by allowing both sexes to compete on equal terms. (Lois Macgregor Al scott, 1993).

Traditional rules and team structures must be carefully considered and revised when necessary to yield games that play well for everyone. The goal of such revisions is competitive equity, which does not mean that all players regardless of skill, experience, and game intelligence should be able to compete on equal footing but that average males and females can play evenly (Steven Hoppes 1987).

Sabo (1984) indicated that men may learn to work with women rather than over them or against them. Men may begin to feel less threatened by losing in front of women, less enraged or ashamed by failing. Some men may even begin to experience genuine non sexual bonding with women and form true friendship

According to Thorne (1980) gender can be conceptualized in at least three ways. First, it can be seen as personal attribute or trait which is assumed to be the result of the interaction of biology and social learning. Gender can also be conceptualized as in terms of roles. The term "sexrole" usually connotes that each gender behaves in stereotypic ways. The third way of defining gender is in terms of social relations.

To eliminate inequities based on gender differences, teachers must navigate their way through a sea of complex issues, using inclusive teaching behaviors and effective management and instructional strategies (Hutchinson G. 1995).

Gender differences as a global issue is wide in scope and is complex, because of its relationship to culture and traditions, as well as to the economy and the social aspects of a society.

In Palestine, to date, development and rights-based approaches to gender issues have not been fully integrated. In the area of education, the status of females compared to that of males exist at almost all levels of education (particularly in terms of enrolment which shows smaller gender gaps than in other sectors (Abu Nahleh L., Hammami R., Johnson P., Labadi F, Schalkwyk J. 1999).

Education may be considered the third major factor accounting for social mobility in Palestinian society. Palestinian women became a very visible component of growing student body at universities. (Taraki L. 1997).

Palestinian education in general, and science in particular, is first for males, and females come second in rank. Although excluding females officially from their right to education is not allowed, attitudes and practices of providers and implementers –school administrators, principals and teachers- as well as attitudes and practices of the family are crucial in maintaining a dichotomy between the “feminine” sphere and the “masculine” sphere. (Abu Nahleh L. 1996).

Physical activity plays an important role in the educational process for educating the individual physically, socially, mentally and emotionally. Furthermore regular physical activity is always recommended for physical fitness and health maintenance.

In spite of the importance of physical activities, we still find some students with negative attitudes towards participating in such activities. As much as positive attitudes motivate students to engage in physical activities, which contribute to their development not only physically, but emotionally, socially and mentally, negative attitudes, on the other hand, tend to hinder such development.

The purpose of this research is to study the attitudes of male and female university students towards physical activities. This study is expected to help understand better the attitudes of a new generation of incoming students and the relationship of such attitudes to the social and cultural environment in which students live. In addition, an understanding of students' attitudes will help physical education teachers in developing and using appropriate teaching methods and techniques which would lead students to appreciate physical activities and would motivate them to develop personal habits in practicing them, particularly after leaving their student life.

Methodology

Two hundred (100 Females, 100 Males) first year students at Birzeit University were surveyed using the attitude towards Physical Activity Questionnaire (ATPA) by Kenyon (1968). The ATPA contains 50 items with responses on a five point Likert scale, where high ATPA scores indicate that the subject has a positive perception towards physical activities and low ATPA scores indicate a negative perception towards physical activities.

The ATPA consists of six dimensions:

- **Social experience:** when more than one person participate together in one physical activity, it becomes a social value.
- **Health and fitness:** Physical activity is always recommended for physical fitness and health maintenance.
- **Pursuit of vertigo:** Limit exceeding experience by facing some dangerous movements, which needs full body control.
- **Aesthetic experience:** Most physical activities have attraction in its artistic movements as well as a good cause for reducing weight and forming a good body shape.
- **Recreational Catharsis:** Physical activity can be a good source for reducing tension and stress.
- **Ascetic experience:** Physical activity can lead to pursuit of excellence in sport level through ascetic type of living.

Other than the ATPA questionnaire, five questions were added which focus on social traditions and play a role in gender differences.

This study uses the gender variable as an independent with the above six dimensions as dependent variables.

Results:

The results of the study will be presented, first, with respect to the six dimensions of physical activity and second, with respect to the five questions related to social factors.

With respect to the six dimensions of physical activities, means, standard deviations, t-test and significant differences in attitudes towards physical activities are presented according to the gender variable.

Table 1

Physical activities mean differences according to sex (t-test)

Variable	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Social experience	male	96	22.3646	3.6277	2.441	.016
	female	101	20.9604	4.3884	2.453	.015
Health & fitness	male	96	26.1771	5.3430	-1.468	.144
	female	101	27.1485	3.8585	-1.457	.147
Pursuit of vertigo	male	94	23.3936	5.8955	.533	.594
	female	93	22.9677	4.9770	.534	.594
Aesthetic experience	male	94	27.6489	7.1793	-2.314	.022
	female	93	30.1935	7.8453	-2.313	.022
Recreational Catharsis	male	95	24.9158	6.0682	-.498	.619
	female	101	25.3762	6.8277	-.500	.618
Ascetic experience	male	95	21.1579	4.9579	.717	.474
	female	101	20.6238	5.4458	.719	.473

Table 1 above summarizes the results as follows:

- 1- There are statistical mean differences between male and female attitudes towards the social experience dimensions. Table 1 shows that male students have a higher mean ($\bar{x}=22.36$) than female students ($\bar{x}=20.96$).
- 2- There are statistical mean differences between male and female attitudes towards the aesthetic dimensions. Table 1 shows that female students have a higher mean ($\bar{x}30.19$) than male students ($\bar{x}=27.65$).

The rest of the dimensions, Health and fitness, pursuit of vertigo, Recreational catharsis and Ascetic experience, showed no statistical mean differences between male and female students.

According to these results, a male attitude towards social experience was more positive than that for females. At the same time, female attitude towards aesthetic experience was more positive than that for males.

Concerning the additional questions, which focused on social traditions, the following are the results as percentages.

Question 1: Do you approve of coeducation physical activities? If not why.

Table 2 presents the results to question 1.

Table 2

Student's attitudes towards coeducation in physical activities according to sex (percentages).

Sex	Approve		Disapprove	
	N	%	N	%
Male	51	51	49	49
Female	32	32	68	68

Table 2 shows that male students approve more than female students on coeducation physical activities. However, they appear to be more divided on this issue than female students. The percentage of male students who approve and disapprove are close 51% and 49% however, female students are more in agreement on this issue where two thirds of them disapprove of such an education. With respect to the reasons given for approving or disapproving coeducation, the highest percentages were given to each of embarrassment and religious factors.

Question 2: Do you prefer practicing physical activities in full sport uniform?

Table 3 presents the results of question 2.

Table 3

Student's attitudes towards sport uniform in physical activities according to sex (percentages)

Sex	I prefer		I do not prefer	
	N	%	N	%
Male	91	91	9	9
Female	98	98	2	2

Table 3 shows that male and female students were in agreement with respect to wearing sports uniform during their physical activities classes. Most male and female students (91% and 98% respectively) had positive attitude towards wearing sports uniforms during physical activity.

Question 3: Do you object to the presence of an audience during your physical activities classes?

If yes why?

Table 4 presents the results of question 3

Table 4

Student's attitudes towards the presence of an audience according to sex (percentages)

Sex	I object		I do not object	
	N	%	N	%
Male	15	15	85	85
Female	37	37	63	63

Table 4 indicates that both male and female students do not object to the presence of an audience during their physical activities classes. But female objection to the presence of an audience was stronger than for male. The main reason given by those who objected was embarrassment.

Question 4: Do you practice sport activities outside the university? If yes what kind of sport?

Table 5 presents the results of question 4.

Table 5

Student's attitudes towards practicing sport activities outside the university,

According to sex (percentages)

Sex	I practice		I do not practice	
	N	%	N	%
Male	58	58	42	42
Female	25	25	75	75

Table 5 shows that the number of male participation in sport activities was much higher than for female. Male participation concentrated mainly on football, Basketball, Volleyball, Body building, Table tennis and Jogging. Where as female participation concentrated on Volleyball, Basketball, Folklore dance and feather ball.

Question 5: Do you object a sport trainer from other sex?

If yes why?

Table 6 present the results of question 5.

Table 6

Student's attitudes towards a sport trainer from other sex, according to sex (Percentages)

Sex	I object		I do not object	
	N	%	N	%
Male	20	20	80	80
Female	25	25	75	75

Table 6 indicate that both male and female students showed low objection to having a sports trainer from another sex, those who objected to such a trainer gave social, religious and embarrassment factors as reason for their attitudes.

Discussion and conclusions:

The reasons behind the above mentioned results can be related to the traditions in the Palestinian society which provides males more than females with opportunities for participating in sports and physical activities, through which social contacts are established.

Also females are more likely to reduce their weights through physical activity in order to appear in a good shape.

Concerning the other dimensions which showed no significant mean differences between the attitudes of males and females they can be explained in terms of health benefits and fitness provided to university students who care much about them these days.

The results concerning pursuit of vertigo and recreational catharsis dimensions show that the university students sometimes perform tough and risky movements. These movements exceed their limits through sport activities, and at the same time look for recreational sport activities to relax and release the tension caused by the conditions they live due to the Israeli military occupation.

The ascetic experience dimension also shows no statistical significance, which means that females are trying to see themselves at an equal level with males towards seeking excellence in sport activities, to compensate their deprivation from equal opportunities in physical activities.

The results of the five questions that were developed by the researcher show differences between males and females mainly in coeducational physical activities classes, practicing sport activities outside the university, and in the presence of an audience during the physical activities classes.

These results can be explained that social traditions and religious factors in the Palestinian society place more restrictions on females. This has been reflected in their attitudes towards physical activities, as it was shown in the results of table 1 from the ATPA questionnaire that the Palestinian society provides more opportunities for males than females for participating in sport and physical activities. This indicates that social traditions play a big role in the attitudes of both sexes towards physical activities. These findings can be used in program planning and methods of teaching used.

Recommendations:

In light of the study results, the following recommendations are suggested:

- To tailor physical activity programmes in accordance with the results mentioned.
- To provide sufficient financial support for the sport facilities, which will help attract and encourage both sexes for participating in sports and physical activities.
- To increase female awareness of the importance of participation in sport and physical activities.
- To expand the awareness towards physical culture to the Palestinian society in order to change some misconceptions about the female sport and physical activities.
- To conduct broader studies for identifying attitudes towards physical activities in other Palestinian institutions.

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