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Parents' Involvement in Choosing Extracurricular Sports Activities: A Gendered Perspective from Israel

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Abstract: This study explores the multifaceted motivations behind parental decisions to enroll their children in organized sports, with a focus on how these decisions intersect with gender norms and values. Through qualitative interviews with mothers and fathers in Israel, this research uncovers a complex interplay between societal expectations, personal values, and the gender identities of both parents and children. A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that despite a societal shift towards more gender-neutral perspectives, traditional gender roles persist, particularly in the attitudes of fathers towards the sports participation of their sons. This research identifies a paradox where girls are encouraged to participate in a broader range of sports, including those traditionally viewed as masculine, while boys face more restrictions, particularly against engaging in sports perceived as feminine. Mothers generally exhibit more flexibility in challenging gender norms, suggesting the potential for gradual change in future generations. This study's findings contribute to the understanding of how parental guidance shapes children's sports involvement and the perpetuation or challenging of gender norms within this context. Future research could benefit from a broader, more diverse sample and a mixed-methods approach to enhance generalizability and reduce potential biases.

Keywords: parental guidance; gender norms; sports participation; children; societal expectations



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1. Introduction

Selecting extracurricular sports for children involves a complex interplay of societal norms, cultural traditions, and gender roles, as supported by prior studies [1,2]. Gender, as a social construct, often acts as a determinant in these choices, influenced by societal and cultural narratives [3,4]. While there is abundant research on the topic, there is a noticeable gap in studies that examine this issue through both a gendered and a cultural lens. The current study aims to address this by focusing on Israel, a society characterized by a unique blend of traditional and modern elements [5,6]. To achieve this, this study poses two main questions: first, are parents willing to enroll their children in sports clubs traditionally associated with the opposite gender, and second, are there gender differences between fathers and mothers in their sports enrolment preferences? By delving into these questions, we seek not only to fill a gap in the existing literature, but also to offer practical implications for policy makers and educators interested in promoting more inclusive sports programs.

1.1. The Developmental Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Children

Childhood and adolescence are pivotal developmental stages characterized by profound changes both physically and mentally. Extracurricular activities, particularly sports, are instrumental in shaping children's characters, instilling values, and promoting physical well-being [7]. These activities cultivate essential life skills such as teamwork, resilience, and

the pursuit of excellence [8]. Empirical evidence supports that active engagement in sports activities not only improves cognitive functions, but also enhances academic achievements, emotional stability, and overall physical health [9]. Moreover, involvement in athletics is linked to positive peer relationships and heightened self-esteem, which, in turn, lead to improved academic performance and a more enriching school experience [10–12].

Parents serve as critical agents in their children's initiation into sports [13]. Their role extends beyond mere facilitators; they are influencers and primary decision-makers [14,15]. Choosing a sport that aligns with a child's interests, physical capabilities, future opportunities, and temperament is a complex task that often falls on the parents. This complexity arises from the need to balance societal expectations, cultural norms, and their own aspirations [16,17]. Gender norms, deeply ingrained in cultural narratives, considerably influence these parental decisions. As a result, parents frequently find themselves navigating traditional gender roles and societal views on what are deemed appropriate sports for boys versus girls, adding layers of complexity to an already intricate decision-making process [18].

1.2. The Gendered Lens of Sports Selection—Tradition vs. Modernism: A Cultural Perspective

The way society labels sports as either 'masculine' or 'feminine' has a profound influence on children's athletic choices and their psychological well-being [3,4]. Such gender categorizations do not just act as labels; they also guide parents in selecting what they consider to be 'gender-appropriate' sports for their children [19]. As we understand the limitations set by these gender-based categories, it is crucial to delve into another significant influencer: the role of parents in these selections. Parents frequently nudge their children towards sports that conform to societal gender roles. This trend is not confined to family decisions alone; it is further perpetuated by educational institutions and community centers, which often present a more limited set of options to girls compared to boys [19]. These choices are not made in isolation; they are heavily influenced by the cultural settings in which they occur, especially when the focus shifts to the limited sports options for girls.

In countries with traditional value systems like India, prevailing cultural narratives often act as deterrents to girls' active participation in sports. However, some parents buck this trend, encouraging their daughters to take part in sports and thereby helping them break free from these societal limitations [20]. It is worth noting that even in societies known for their progressive stances, similar gender-based disparities in sports selection exist. In seemingly progressive Western societies, such as Scandinavia, parents' attitudes continue to sustain gender-based disparities in sports activities [21]. Particularly conservative parents may even discourage their daughters from participating in sports considered 'masculine', raising concerns about how such participation could affect their femininity and physical appearance [22].

1.3. Parental Gender Differences in Sports Preferences

Parental attitudes towards children's participation in sports are notably influenced by gendered perceptions, often aligning with traditional roles [23]. Fathers are frequently oriented towards the competitive aspects, viewing sports as a medium for teaching discipline and life skills [24]. Mothers, conversely, prioritize the health and emotional well-being of their children, focusing on sports as a platform for physical fitness and social development [25]. These generalized roles, however, are not universally applicable and can be influenced by various factors, including culture, socio-economic status, and individual beliefs [26]. Recent societal shifts towards more egalitarian gender roles have also been found to result in more balanced parental approaches to children's sports involvement [27].

1.4. The Israeli Tapestry: Navigating Multifaceted Influences in Sports Selection

Israel presents a dynamic sociocultural tapestry that deeply influences the process of sports selection [28,29]. For instance, while soccer enjoys widespread popularity across various Israeli demographics, the choice to enroll a child in Krav Maga—a martial art of

Israeli origin—might stem from a blend of national pride, a sense of self-defense, and community encouragement [30]. Parental choices are shaped not only by religious directives, but also by community norms and the influx of contemporary global perspectives. Different regions within Israel, characterized by their unique cultural nuances, further diversify the spectrum of sports preferences. Consequently, Israeli parents grapple with the intricate task of harmonizing tradition with modernity and aligning community norms with individual desires. This study delves into this intricate context, offering insights into the multifarious factors Israeli parents consider when selecting extracurricular sports for their children. Israel was chosen as a case study as it is a microcosm that juxtaposes tradition and modernization, offering a unique vantage point for understanding how these complex cultural dynamics influence parents' decisions in selecting extracurricular sports activities for their children [31].

1.5. Study Objectives and Research Questions

To gain an in-depth understanding of the complex factors influencing parental choices in the selection of extracurricular sports activities for children in Israel—a culture that blends both traditional and modern influences—this study adopted a qualitative research methodology. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, facilitating the capture of comprehensive perspectives and experiential narratives from Israeli parents. These interviews aimed to elucidate not only the explicit rationales underpinning such decisions, but also the subtle societal and psychological factors that might not be immediately apparent.

The acquired qualitative data were subsequently subjected to thematic analysis to discern patterns and latent motivations. The objective was to construct an exhaustive understanding of the multifaceted societal, cultural, and psychological elements that factor into parents' decision-making processes. The current study has two main goals: firstly, to examine gender perceptions regarding children's enrolment in sports clubs, specifically, the parents' willingness to encourage or allow children to participate in activities associated with the opposite gender; and secondly, to explore the differences in gender perceptions between mothers and fathers regarding preferences for enrolment and participation in organized sports activities.

2. Methods

This research was conducted within a qualitative philosophical paradigm, focusing on the nuanced social and cultural determinants shaping parental gender perceptions toward their children's participation in after-school sports clubs. The study's objectives were to delve into the motivations behind parents' decisions to enroll their children in these activities, assess the impact of gender perceptions on such choices, and discern any potential differences between mothers' and fathers' viewpoints.

Research Participants and Procedure

This study engaged a purposive sample of 30 parents, comprising an equal distribution of 15 mothers and 15 fathers, whose ages ranged from 27 to 45 years. Table 1 provides a list of study participants, along with the mean age and gender of their children and their sports involvement. Initial recruitment capitalized on the research team's networks, with subsequent participants identified through snowball sampling. Ethical approval was secured from the institutional review board, and participant consent was obtained and documented, aligning with the ethical principles delineated by the American Psychological Association [32].

Table 1. Demographic data of participants.

Mothers	Fathers
Sally—mother of 2 daughters aged 10 (floor gymnastics and hip-hop) and 6 (floor gymnastics and classical ballet).	William—father to a 16-year-old daughter—combat training instructor; a 13-year-old son—robotics; and a 10-year-old daughter—dance.
Aily—mother of 4 sons aged 15, 12, 10, and 8 (all in basketball) and 2 daughters aged 13 (adventure climbing) and 5 (not participating in a club).	Mike—father to an 18-year-old son (football) and a 16.5-year-old daughter (swimming).
Tammi—mother to a 6-year-old son (football).	Greg—father to daughters aged 8, 6, and 4 (all in horseback riding clubs).
Linn—mother to a 6-year-old son (swimming and capoeira).	Gil—father to a 19-year-old son, 16-year-old daughter, and 13-year-old daughter (all in tennis clubs).
Emily—mother of 3 (a 21-year-old daughter—sports instructor; a 20-year-old son—soldier; a 10-year-old daughter—dance club).	Sam—father of 2 daughters aged 10 and 6 (floor gymnastics and dance).
Lucy—mother of a 13-year-old son, 11-year-old daughter, and 6-year-old son (all in basketball club).	Eric—father to a 15-year-old daughter (gymnastics and fitness club); an 11-year-old daughter (dance); and a 7-year-old daughter (non-sport club).
Grace—mother of a 12-year-old daughter (basketball), 10-year-old son (football), and an 8-year-old daughter (dance).	Michael—father to sons aged 16 and 12 (football).
Alex—mother to a 15-year-old son and a 12-year-old son (basketball and boxing); a 7-year-old son (boxing); and a 6-year-old daughter (dance).	Guy—father to an 18-year-old son (basketball) and a 15-year-old daughter (dance).
Sophia—mother to a 15-year-old daughter (basketball); a 13-year-old daughter (floor gymnastics); a 9-year-old son (football); and an 8-year-old son (football and ballroom dancing).	Phil—father to a 16-year-old daughter, a 13-year-old son (football), and a 6-year-old daughter (dance).
Emma—mother of 2 daughters aged 16 and 14 (both in dance).	Joe—father of 3 daughters aged 6 years (acrobatics and hip-hop), 2.5 years, and a 1 month.
Milly—mother of 3: a 16-year-old daughter (volleyball); a 14-year-old daughter (swimming and surfing); and an 11-year-old son (karate).	Micha—father to a 10-year-old son (karate).
Gail—mother to 2 daughters aged 12 and 10 (both in floor gymnastics and apparatus).	Rick—father to a 17-year-old daughter (self-defense).
Betty—mother to 2 daughters aged 17 and 16 (dance and horseback riding).	Ben—father to an 8-year-old son and a 10-year-old daughter (both in ballet clubs).
Anna—mother of 3: a 15-year-old son (swimming) and two daughters: 12-year-old (floor gymnastics) and 10-year-old (capoeira).	Bob—father to a 6-year-old daughter (dance).
Jessy—mother to an 11-year-old son (Jiu-Jitsu) and a 9-year-old son (football).	John—father to an 18-year-old son (basketball) and daughters aged 10 and 14 who do not participate in clubs.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, aligned with theoretical underpinnings of gender perception and socialization [33–35]. Interviews were orchestrated by experienced social science researchers at convenient times during the children’s sports

club activities, lasting between 30 and 45 min each. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

The collected data were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis, adhering to the guidelines set forth by [36]. The first stage involved an independent reading of the interview transcriptions by two researchers, both well-versed in the theoretical frameworks pertinent to our study. This was followed by the identification of sub-themes, including 'gender rigidity', 'motives for activity', and 'gender differences'. These sub-themes were reflective of the intricate narratives related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, alongside psychological flexibility and value-based action, which were core to our interpretative analysis within the constructionist paradigm [36,37]. These sub-themes were then grouped into three main themes: perceptions concerning the motives and objectives behind the activities, limitations imposed by gender perceptions on the choices available for boys and girls, and differing perspectives between mothers and fathers. A comparative review of the identified themes by the two initial researchers, who followed inter-coder reliability guidelines [38], showed no significant disagreements. To further validate these findings, a third researcher conducted an independent analysis, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.74, indicating a reasonably good level of agreement [39].

In pursuit of methodological rigor, this study employed a multifaceted approach to validation that adhered to established academic standards, incorporating a relativist orientation and a reflective practice to ensure credibility [40,41]. Notably, member reflections, rather than member checking, served as a cornerstone strategy, wherein participants were invited to engage in discussions about the research findings, enhancing mutual understanding and fostering dialogue [42]. Complementing this, iterative questioning was pivotal during the interview process, allowing the researchers to refine and deepen lines of inquiry in response to participant feedback, thereby capturing a richer understanding of the subject matter [43]. This dynamic and responsive approach to data collection underscored the study's adaptability and thoroughness, ensuring the alignment of our research with the intricate dynamics between participants and researchers [40].

3. Findings

The current research identifies three distinct themes that collectively paint a comprehensive picture of gender perceptions in non-formal sports activities among children and adolescents. The first theme, motivation and activity goals, highlights a discrepancy between parents' attitudes towards the gender-specific nature of these activities and the individual goals they aspire for their children to achieve. Interestingly, these goals—whether related to personal development, skill acquisition, or social benefits—are not influenced by gender distinctions, nor do they have an impact on existing gender perceptions. This nuance is further elaborated upon in both the varying attitudes among parents, as discussed in the second theme, Limitation of Choice and Gender Perceptions. Finally, how these attitudes correlate with their children's experiences is the focus of the third theme, Parental Guidance and Gender Norms.

3.1. Motivation and Activity Goals

From the interviews, parents identify a broad spectrum of motivations for their children's engagement in physical activities within the framework of non-formal education settings. These motivations fall under three primary categories: physical benefits, social benefits, and personal benefits. Some of these goals not only relate to the children, but also echo the personal aspirations of the parents. These were, however, framed as objectives set for their children and are discussed in that context.

The most frequently cited goal by parents, both mothers and fathers alike, pertains to the potential benefits of the activity for their children's health and physical well-being. This includes aspects like body strengthening, weight management, discouraging a sedentary lifestyle, and fostering a habit of regular, effective physical activity. While most interviewees mentioned these aspects, some mothers specifically emphasized that they want their

daughters to maintain a healthy weight, contrasting it with their own experiences. For instance, Sally states “I want to prevent my daughter from gaining excessive weight. I don’t want her to undergo the challenges I faced at her age and continue to face”.

Another common motivator revolves around enhancing the children’s personal image and boosting their self-confidence. Parents focused on two dimensions: The first relates to improvements in physical appearance or shifts in body perception due to enhanced physical capabilities. The second aspect is oriented towards social and self-perception. For instance, Gil remarks “To instill in them a sense of capability, to provide an environment for growth, and to enable them to confront and overcome challenges. Success in these areas is fundamentally contingent on sound judgment and effective management”. It is important to note that sports, especially competitive ones, also present the risk of failure and consequent damage to self-esteem. However, this concern was notably absent in the participants’ responses, suggesting either a lack of awareness or a strong belief in their child’s potential and the supportive role of the sporting environment.

Another motivation cited by parents is the social enrichment derived from participating in these activities. Notably, even if the child is involved in individual sports such as athletics or climbing, these often occur in a group setting. While the research did not delve into the dynamics of internal competition within sports teams, this topic was also notably absent from the responses of the interviewees. Across the board, parents highlighted the valuable social interactions that occur in these settings. In this regard, there was no discernible difference in attitudes between parents of sons and daughters, or between mothers and fathers. It appears that all parents generally appreciate the genuine social encounters facilitated by these sports clubs.

The motives parents articulated also extended to the promotion of achievement as a vehicle for empowerment and personal development. For example, Micha says “My son has grown immensely in the club. His self-esteem has risen, and he experiences a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. I see the sport as a stepping stone for future successes. Even when failure occurs, it becomes an opportunity for further growth”. Anna focuses on personal development, stating “It’s more than just an activity; it’s a lifestyle, a heightened awareness, and a nurturing environment. All these factors give the child the security to take on subsequent challenges. There is a continuous developmental journey that meets specific needs at every stage”. Parents seem to view the improvement in social and psychological aspects as a foundational step for realizing their children’s potential.

The final significant motive that emerged centers on the alignment of the selected activity with the parents’ own values and personal experiences in sports. For instance, Aily outlines three key values that her family’s involvement in a basketball club fulfills. First, due to their traditional lifestyle which precludes Saturday activities, basketball becomes a more viable long-term option than soccer. Second, she values physical fitness and skill development, which align directly with participation in sports. Third, she appreciates that the sport exposes her son to diverse social groups and languages in Israel, particularly since the activities are organized by a regional council with a varied population.

It is worth noting that various values, such as discipline, independence, and group belonging, were cited by parents, adding another layer to their motivations. Some parents even saw their children’s activities as a continuation of their own athletic history or as an opportunity for their children to succeed where they could not. Interestingly, some responses implied that these might be the aspirations of other parents, rather than their own, an observation that could have implications for the perpetuation of gender-specific perceptions of certain sports.

Contrary to what one might expect, parents did not report significant gender differences in their motives for enrolling their sons or daughters in these activities. There was no specific focus on encouraging traits considered masculine in sons, such as competitiveness, or traits considered feminine in daughters, such as grace or aesthetics. Even in the social context, despite the perception of sports as a traditionally masculine domain, there were no significant differences in views about the social benefits of sports clubs.

3.2. Limitation of Choice and Gender Perceptions

The interviews revealed that children's choices for extracurricular activities generally stem from five main sources. First, some children develop a preference for specific activities through early exposure via television or personal experiences in early childhood settings. This influence does not necessarily display distinct gender preferences but can create initial leanings towards certain activities. Second, peer groups often exert social pressures, which may sometimes reinforce traditional gender roles in sports selection, though this varies from case to case. Third, choices can be made after engaging in trial sessions across various sports, offering a more experimental approach to selection. Fourth, geographical considerations, especially for those living in more peripheral areas, can limit the range of available options. It remains an open question whether such limitations tend to reinforce traditional gender roles due to a lack of diverse choices.

Lastly, parental guidance frequently emerges as the most influential factor, particularly as most children start sports activities between the ages of 5 and 8, a period when external influences are relatively minor compared to parental guidance. While parents' influence is strong, it is not yet clear how this correlates with traditional gender perceptions. Do parents guide children towards activities that align with traditional gender roles, or are choices becoming increasingly neutral? The importance of each factor varies by individual circumstance, but parental guidance seems to hold the most sway, potentially setting the stage for reinforcing or challenging traditional gender perceptions in sports.

These research findings illuminate the nuanced ways parental guidance shapes children's involvement in sports, often reinforcing traditional gender norms. Several key sub-themes emerge within this context. Firstly, collective registration plays a pivotal role in shaping these early choices. As John, a father of two boys and a girl, succinctly puts it, "For me, I didn't think about it; all the boys registered for soccer at the community center, and I also registered my son". Emily, a mother, echoes this sentiment: "My daughter is in a ballet class. In my opinion, it was early, but all the girls in her kindergarten registered. Why wouldn't I register her as well?".

These comments reveal that the initial selection of an activity often aligns with a broader social consensus rather than individual preference. For young children, peer influence becomes a significant factor; they are likely to follow their classmates, reinforcing gender-specific trends. Secondly, parents often tailor activities to align with their own perceptions of gender-appropriate sports. In this vein, Michael observes: "There are male sports and there are female sports. Physical contact might be the distinguishing factor. Soccer and basketball, for example, are masculine because they involve confrontations. Volleyball may attract more females because it is less confrontational, while swimming seems gender-neutral".

3.3. Parental Guidance and Gender Norms

By underscoring the weight of parental guidance and the significance of collective decision-making, these findings provide a lens through which we can scrutinize the perpetuation of gender norms in youth sports. While the prevailing approach among parents suggests a preference for gender-conforming sports, a nuanced divergence is observed in attitudes toward sons and daughters. The data indicate that girls are more likely to venture outside traditional gender norms by engaging in sports often categorized as masculine, such as soccer, basketball, or judo. Conversely, boys seem less inclined to participate in activities commonly perceived as feminine, such as gymnastics, volleyball, or dance forms like ballet, jazz, or modern dance.

William, a father of both boys and girls, shared his perspective: "If my son wanted to enroll in a dance class, that's fine by me. But the idea never originated from him, nor did I propose it". He added "Soccer has always been his passion, making it the obvious choice for everyone".

Sophia chimed in: “We have an open-minded approach. My daughter Emily expressed interest in joining a soccer class at the community center, and she has been attending for six months now, thoroughly enjoying herself”.

Emma, a mother of two daughters and a son, echoed these sentiments: “I hold no gender-specific reservations when it comes to my children’s involvement in sports. My daughters participate in triathlons, which some might label as a male-dominated sport. They excel in cycling, swimming, and running, and compete nationwide throughout the year. We couldn’t be more supportive”.

Parents maintain accepted social perceptions in which men are subject to more criticism than women for adopting the behavior and appearance of the opposite gender. One of the interviewees even explicitly stated this in relation to clothing, saying that there is no clothing that is exclusively masculine. In other words, there is nothing a woman could wear that would be considered a significant breach of accepted perceptions. On the other hand, clothing such as dresses, skirts, or even bodysuits are considered feminine and therefore not acceptable for men.

Societal norms shape parental attitudes in gender-specific ways, with men often facing harsher scrutiny than women for breaking gender norms, particularly in attire. As one respondent explicitly stated, “There’s no such thing as ‘men-only’ clothing, meaning a woman wouldn’t be considered to be breaking any norms based on her clothing choices. In contrast, dresses and skirts are labelled as ‘feminine’, making them socially unacceptable for men”.

Given these norms, it appears that parents may be more willing to let their daughters explore outside traditional gender roles than their sons. As far as athletic pursuits are concerned, the intent to uphold these norms exists despite the universal motivations for sports participation, which do not inherently differ by gender. In essence, daughters are subtly encouraged to believe they can pursue the same activities as sons, but the reverse is rarely promoted.

This inclination to challenge or uphold gender norms also seems influenced by the parents’ own gender identity. According to the findings, fathers displayed greater cognitive rigidity than mothers when it came to selecting sports for their children. Mike, a father to children of both genders, said “As far as I’m concerned, the choices are pretty clear-cut in terms of gender. If one of my sons wanted to take ballet, I’d be like, ‘What? That’s unimaginable; my sons are men!’”.

Likewise, Alex reinforced traditional gender roles, stating “My sons made their own choices, but those choices also happen to be what I’d consider natural”.

In contrast, Lucy responded to her husband’s rigid stance by saying “My husband would never approve of our son taking a jazz dance class. He just couldn’t accept it”.

Mothers, however, seemed to take a more flexible approach. Sarah, a mother of two daughters, said “Gender doesn’t factor into our decisions regarding sports selection. What really matters is what my daughter wants to do”. She added “It’s time to break free from these pointless stereotypes. Who says soccer is just for boys? Look around; there are all-girl teams everywhere”.

Similarly, Emily emphasized the irrelevance of societal norms, stating “Sports are for everyone, regardless of gender”.

The second theme posits that societal constraints on breaking gender boundaries may disproportionately affect men. This not only shapes how fathers guide their children, but also reflects their own adherence to social norms. Fathers, perhaps more sensitive to social repercussions, tend to be more conservative in their views—not only toward their sons, but also their daughters. Conversely, mothers often enjoy a degree of latitude when it comes to gender norms, a freedom they are more willing to extend to their children. While they may be generally more open than fathers in this regard, it is noteworthy that they, too, tend to lean more toward flexibility for their daughters than for their sons.

4. Discussion

Sports and physical activities have long been acknowledged for their comprehensive contributions to emotional well-being, physical health, and the cultivation of social skills among youth. This recognition has led a substantial number of parents to pursue organized sports programs for their children outside the educational provisions of schools. Echoing and extending previous research [7,8] this study has illuminated a spectrum of parental motivations for involving their children in organized sports and the multifaceted benefits they perceive as a result. The intricate and personal narratives of the participants of this study have enriched our understanding of these motivations.

The scholarly literature offers details of the contrast in how fathers and mothers perceive their children's participation in sports, revealing distinct differences in the anticipated benefits of such activities. Fathers tend to regard sports as a means to cultivate competitiveness and discipline in their children [24], whereas mothers are more likely to highlight the roles of sports in promoting physical health and social skills [25]. Our research adds complexity to this dichotomy by identifying a shift towards more unified parental perspectives, implying a movement toward the intersection of traditional gender-specific motivations. Recent investigations into parental motives for enrolling their children in sports underscore the relevance of a constellation of factors—socioeconomic conditions, personal belief systems, and cultural nuances [26]. Additionally, the fluidity of gender roles within contemporary family structures is increasingly influential in how children's sports participation is shaped [44]. Understanding these evolving parental impulses is imperative, as they can profoundly impact child development and the dynamics within families.

When we situate our study within the broader spectrum of research, the evolving landscape of gender norms in both society and family units becomes prominent. Coakley [45] suggests that large-scale societal transformations are often reflected in the microcosm of the family. Yet our research uncovers a more intricate dynamic: although societal shifts influence family practices, a perceptible adherence to traditional gender roles persists, particularly among fathers. This complexity prompts an examination of the degree to which family units mirror or resist societal movements toward the liberalization of gender norms.

Comparative studies across cultures further elucidate that while some parental motives and perceptions regarding their children's participation in sports are widespread, they are also shaped by unique cultural and socioeconomic factors. Investigations from regions like Australia and Portugal [46,47] demonstrate how parental views are sculpted by these influences, underscoring the imperative of cultural awareness in addressing the manifestations of gender norms within the arena of sports. Our investigation delves into the persistent gender-based views shaping parental decisions in enrolling their children in sports clubs. Despite acknowledging the universally beneficial aspects of sports participation, societal conventions continue to assign particular sports to specific genders. Parents, therefore, are tasked with promoting their children's engagement in sports for its inherent advantages while also maneuvering through the maze of societal expectations and their children's personal preferences. This situation demands a critical approach to challenging and dismantling the deep-seated gender stereotypes entrenched in our culture [18].

Our study also presents a salient paradox: societal gender perceptions appear to guide the selection of sports, yet a contrary trend emerges when it comes to participation restrictions. Girls, historically limited to a narrow range of "appropriate" sports, are surprisingly afforded fewer parental constraints on their sporting endeavors [19]. In settings where sports are typically gender-segregated, such as in Israel, parents display a readiness to sign up their daughters for a wide variety of sports, including co-ed and contact sports like soccer or rugby. Boys, in contrast, may face discouragement from participating in sports that are deemed culturally feminine. This contrast raises two points for consideration. Firstly, the historical underrepresentation of girls in sports might prompt parents to support any athletic pursuit their daughters show interest in, potentially bypassing any traditional limitations. Secondly, the social permissiveness regarding girls crossing traditional gender boundaries in sports does not seem to extend to boys, suggesting an imbalance in societal

tolerance that could mitigate the challenges boys confront when they step outside these traditional roles.

It is feasible to deduce two reasons from this contradiction. Firstly, considering the traditionally lower rates of sports engagement among girls, parents might be inclined to support any athletic interest their daughters demonstrate, intentionally laying aside any preconceived constraints. On the flip side, boys, who are generally more inclined towards sports provide parents with the opportunity to channel their participation towards sports that align with traditional masculine norms [18]. Secondly, society tends to be more permissive of girls transgressing traditional gender boundaries in sports than it is of boys, suggesting a societal tolerance imbalance that might act to offset the repercussions boys face for defying these norms.

To conclude, our research highlights a gradual societal shift towards relaxing traditional gender norms in the realm of sports. However, it also demonstrates how parents—fathers in particular—frequently uphold conventional gender expectations, especially with regard to their sons, which is a reflection of their own views on gender roles. Traditionally, fathers have taken a more conservative approach than mothers, more stringently reinforcing established gender distinctions. Mothers, on the other hand, are typically viewed as being more liberal. As mothers become more influential in decisions about sports participation and as women's autonomy continues to rise, there is a greater possibility for the ongoing attenuation of gender-specific roles for future generations.

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study, while methodologically thorough, is not without its limitations. The choice of purposive and snowball sampling, although common in qualitative research, is susceptible to selection bias. To address this, future research might consider using a more diverse range of sampling techniques, such as stratified sampling, to ensure a broader representation of parental perspectives. This non-random sampling method constrains the external validity of the results, as the sample might not encapsulate the diversity of the entire parent demographic. Expanding the recruitment to a wider demographic through various channels could mitigate this limitation.

The initial recruitment through the researchers' networks might amplify this effect, favoring a more homogenized sample reflective of the researchers' immediate social milieu. The semi-structured interviews, while beneficial for deriving deep insights, are vulnerable to interviewer influence, potentially skewing responses towards social desirability. In future studies, implementing structured interviews or anonymous surveys could help in reducing this potential bias. Furthermore, the application of reflexive thematic analysis, despite stringent inter-coder reliability checks, cannot completely neutralize the subjectivity that accompanies qualitative analysis. Incorporating quantitative measures alongside qualitative analysis could provide a more balanced view and help validate the findings.

For future inquiries, a mixed-methods approach or a quantitative study on a broader scale could offer enhanced generalizability. Incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, possibly through national surveys or longitudinal studies, would provide a deeper understanding of the trends and patterns in parental attitudes towards children's sports participation. Employing a randomized sampling strategy would mitigate selection biases and afford a more representative snapshot of parental attitudes. A more inclusive participant demographic could provide a richer tapestry of perspectives. Utilizing different recruitment channels, such as schools, sports clubs, and online parenting forums, could also contribute to this diversity. Additionally, implementing varied recruitment techniques to reach beyond the researchers' networks could bring forth a more diverse array of insights. Further methodological enhancements, like using multiple data sources and triangulating findings with existing literature, would add robustness to the research. Introducing further methodological safeguards, such as data triangulation and employing multiple interviewers for cross-comparison, could reduce potential biases in data collection and analysis.

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