

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Reimagining College Physical Education in the Philippines: Advancing Gender Equity in Higher Education

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Abstract

University Physical Education (PE) shapes students' embodied experiences, leadership opportunities, and lifelong relationships with physical activity. Despite national gender-equality mandates, Philippine higher-education PE programs can reproduce gendered norms that marginalise women-identifying students and constrain inclusive participation. A qualitative multiple-case study was conducted across three universities in Central Luzon (two public and one private). Data comprised 24 semi-structured interviews (18 female-identifying undergraduate students, 6 PE faculty; interviews lasted 20–40 minutes, averaging ~28 minutes), 12 classroom observations, and 9 curriculum documents. Reflexive thematic analysis guided coding and theme development. Four interrelated themes were generated: (a) gendered curriculum tracking; (b) embodied discomfort and surveillance; (c) leadership exclusion; and (d) innovative practices and pockets of equity. The study presents an illustrative Gender-Just PE Framework encompassing inclusive curriculum, faculty development, institutional policy, and student agency. Findings highlight both persistent inequities and actionable pathways for reform in higher-education PE.

Keywords:

gender equity, inclusive education, quality physical education, feminist pedagogy

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Introduction

Physical Education (PE) at the university level is more than a set of motor skills or fitness objectives: it is a pedagogical site where norms about bodies, capability, leadership, and gender are taught, contested, and reproduced (Andersson et al., 2018). In many contexts, including the Philippines, PE curricula and practice continue to reflect and reinforce binary and gendered expectations channelling women toward activities coded as “feminine” (e.g., dance, aerobics) and men toward competitive, high-intensity sports (Stride et al., 2022; McRoy, 2022). These patterns have implications for who feels comfortable participating, who occupies leadership roles in campus sport and PE, and who is supported to maintain lifelong physical activity.

The Philippines has formal commitments to gender equality in education, most notably Republic Act No. 9710 (2009 Magna Carta of Women; Francisco, 2022) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) gender mainstreaming policies (CHED, 2015; Gil, 2021). Nevertheless, institutional implementation across specific disciplines, such as PE, is inconsistent. Studies in other national settings similarly document that without explicit attention to pedagogy, assessment, and institutional policy, well-intentioned equality commitments may not translate into equitable practice (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2023; Meier et al., 2022).

Comparative research across Asia underscores that this challenge is not

unique to the Philippines. In South Korea, research on curricula and institutional expectations has documented how performance pressure and cultural norms shape gendered participation in sport and PE (Kim & Hodge, 2021). In Japan, studies highlight the historical gendering of activities and persistent stereotyping even amid national health promotion efforts (Eweje et al., 2025). Within ASEAN contexts, recent work has identified variability in policy implementation and resource constraints as central barriers to gender-responsive PE (Bag & Barman, 2022).

For women in particular, university PE can be an alienating experience. They often encounter barriers ranging from subtle discouragement in leadership roles to overt forms of body surveillance and discrimination based on physical appearance (Wastell, 2024; Littlefair, 2021). Research in other national contexts confirms that PE is among the least inclusive areas of the educational system with respect to gender (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2023; Meier et al., 2022), and the Philippine experience echoes this pattern.

This study addresses three critical gaps in the literature. First, while gender equity in PE has been widely examined in basic education, there remains limited research focusing on higher education contexts in the Philippines, where institutional structures and student autonomy create distinct dynamics. Second, existing studies often lack a critical and intersectional perspective, overlooking how institutional culture, policy environments, and resource disparities may shape gendered experiences in PE. Third, there is a need for applied research that not only critiques inequities but also proposes actionable frameworks for institutional transformation.

While this study focuses primarily on women-identifying students, it acknowledges that exclusionary practices in PE may be further intensified for individuals who do not conform to dominant gender norms, including queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming students. These broader

dynamics are considered in context to better understand how gender operates within university PE environments.

Guided by feminist pedagogy and gender performativity theory, this study examines how university PE in the Philippines reproduces or challenges gendered inequities. Specifically, it aims to analyse student and faculty experiences, identify structural and pedagogical barriers, and propose a context-responsive framework to advance gender equity in higher education PE.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to examine gendered dynamics in university PE. Case study methodology is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena in real-life contexts, enabling in-depth, context-rich analysis across institutional settings (Bracco et al., 2019). Across multiple institutional contexts, the study examined how gender inequalities manifest and are contested. The study included lived experiences, such as student narratives and classroom dynamics, as well as formal structures, including policies and courses.

Based on a constructivist paradigm, the study was conducted under the belief that reality is socially constructed and shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts. This viewpoint is appropriate for research on gender because of the fluid, socially mediated nature of gender identities, performances, and norms in PE (William, 2024).

Site Selection and Participants

Three universities in Central Luzon were purposively selected to ensure diversity in institutional type and to capture varied approaches to inclusive education. The selected institutions, two public universities and one private university, all offered undergraduate PE programs and had established mechanisms for promoting gender equity and inclusion, either through

formal gender offices or active student organisations.

- University A (Public, mid-sized): Established a gender office and periodic gender-sensitivity training for staff. The PE program emphasises traditional team sports.
- University B (Public, regional): Recent student-led inclusion initiatives; PE curriculum includes elective dance and fitness modules.
- University C (Private, smaller): Active student clubs around wellness and inclusion; pilot policy on flexible PE uniforms.

Together, these institutions offered a cross-sectional view of how inclusive education

is interpreted and enacted across different institutional contexts in the region.

Participants were 18 undergraduate students (ages 18–22) who self-identified as female and had completed at least 2 semesters of PE, and 6 PE faculty (3 male, 3 female) with responsibility for curriculum delivery or planning. Total $n = 24$. Participants were recruited through department contacts and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling helped identify students and faculty engaged in or knowledgeable about inclusion initiatives. However, it may have biased selection toward participants with more critical or equity-oriented perspectives (see Limitations). Table 1 shows the participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant Demographics (n = 24)

	Category	Sub-category	n	%
Students (n = 18)	Age group	18-19 years old	7	39%
		20-21 years old	8	44%
		22-above	3	17%
	University type	Public A	8	44%
		Public B	4	22%
		Private C	6	33%
	Gender identity	Female	18	100%
		1st year	4	22%
	Course year	2nd year	5	28%
		3rd year	5	28%
4th year		4	22%	
Teachers (n = 6)		Age group	25-34 years old	4
	35-44 years old		2	33%
	45-above		0	0%
Gender	Male	3	50%	
	Female	3	50%	
Teaching experience	1-5 years	1	17%	
	6-10 years	4	66%	
	11+ years	1	17%	

Note. All student participants self-identified as female. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected over six months and comprised the following:

Semi-structured interviews (n = 24): Interviews lasted 20–40 minutes (average ~28 minutes), were audio-recorded with permission, and conducted in person or via secure online platforms when required. Interview topics included experiences of inclusion/exclusion in PE, perceptions of curriculum and assessment, leadership opportunities, and suggestions for reform. A full interview protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Classroom observations (n = 12): We used a structured checklist (Appendix B) focusing on activity selection, teacher prompts, gendered role assignment, spatial use, and assessment practices. Field notes captured critical incidents and illustrative interactions.

Document analysis (n = 9): Course syllabi, PE department guidelines, and excerpts from institutional policies were analysed for language, assessment structures, uniform policies, and references to inclusion or gender sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and observation notes were uploaded to NVivo 12 for management. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Repeated reading of transcripts, field notes, and documents generated initial analytic memos capturing early impressions. Line-by-line coding in NVivo 12 was data-driven but theoretically informed by gender performativity and feminist pedagogy, producing an initial code set that was subsequently grouped into candidate themes mapped visually to examine relationships. Themes were then tested against the full dataset; discrepant and contradic-

tory data were actively interrogated rather than set aside, and subthemes were refined accordingly. Final themes were defined and named based on their prevalence, internal coherence, and analytic significance, then woven into an interpretive narrative linked to literature and practice implications.

Credibility measures included peer review of coding (two independent peers reviewed 20% of transcripts and NVivo nodes), reflexive journaling to record analytic decisions and researcher influence, and member checking with a subset of participants (n = 6) who confirmed that the interpretations resonated with their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to standard ethical practices, including voluntary informed consent, protection of participant anonymity, and secure data handling. The study involved adult participants and was designed to minimise potential risk. Prior to data collection, the research protocol was reviewed and endorsed at the departmental level within the participating institutions. It should be noted that this review constituted departmental endorsement rather than an independent institutional ethics board (IRB) or research ethics committee (REC) approval, which was not obtained.

Results

Four major themes were generated from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and curriculum documents. These findings highlight persistent gendered patterns in higher education PE while also revealing emerging inclusive practices across institutions. Table 2 summarises the themes, key features, and representative evidence supporting the analysis.

Table 2. Themes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Key Features	Representative Quotes
Gendered curriculum tracking	Activity allocation, binary coding of activities	“We don’t ask girls to do martial arts unless they ask for it.” - Faculty 4 (male)
Embodied discomfort & surveillance	Uniform policies, public testing, evaluative comments	“The shorts were too tight... it made me want to skip class.” - Student 9
Leadership exclusion	Male-dominated leadership roles, norms discouraging female assertiveness	“Even when girls are more competent, boys tend to dominate.” - Faculty 1 (female)
Innovative practices and pockets of equity	Student-led electives, gender-sensitive rubrics	“I felt more confident when I led our dance-for-change project.” - Student 12

Gendered Curriculum Tracking and Stereotyping

Examining all three institutions revealed systematic gendered tracking in activity distribution and curriculum design. Female students were routinely directed toward courses such as yoga, aerobics, and rhythmic activities, which were culturally identified as feminine and less physically demanding. Men, on the other hand, mostly registered for high-intensity training, team-based games, and combative sports.

Faculty interviews verified that teaching assignments and instructional strategies were affected by gender stereotypes. *“We don’t ask girls to do martial arts unless they ask for it,”* one male faculty member said. *“Usually, we offer them dancing”*. Such remarks point to internalised prejudices and unawareness of how institutional policies affect female experience. This is consistent with Goffman's (1977) analysis of how institutions sort individuals according to culturally constructed notions of 'appropriate' physicality based on sex.

Classroom observations also revealed that whereas female-coded activities were seen as less important or optional, male-coded sports received more class time,

structured feedback, and more rigorous assessment. Kettley-Linsell (2022) recorded that these trends marginalise not only female but also male students interested in non-normative physical practices, thus reinforcing binary gender expectations.

Embodied Discomfort and Surveillance

Students expressed strong dissatisfaction with public assessments and PE uniforms. Female students, in particular, expressed concern about being judged based on their athletic ability, body shape, or fitness level. Attire norms were frequently noted as a source of contention. One student described the impact of uniform policies: *“We were required to wear these shorts and shirts that were too tight . . . It made me want to skip class.”*

This pattern is consistent with Foucault's (1977) concept of the "panopticon". It supports Scraton's (2018) findings, which investigated how PE can become a site of bodily punishment, particularly for female students. There were instances in which teachers unknowingly encouraged body monitoring by commenting on their students' appearance or fitness. This contributed to the perpetuation of an envi-

ronment in which the female body is a target of inspection.

Leadership Exclusion and Gendered Participation Norms

In PE programs, male students held leadership positions most of the time. They either took on leadership positions in group projects or team sports, or they allocated leadership roles to themselves. When female students attempted to take the initiative, they were sometimes labelled "bossy" or "too assertive," discouraging further participation. According to Collinson et al. (2023), this phenomenon reflects broader societal tendencies in which masculinity is culturally associated with leadership. A female faculty member stated: *"Even when girls are more competent, boys tend to dominate the group, and we [faculty] sometimes overlook it."* Disclosures of this nature bring to light the systemic invisibility of gendered leadership dynamics. Additionally, student organisations associated with sports and fitness exhibited gender disparities in leadership roles. The lack of representation of women and girls in the institutional sports scene further limits their sense of influence and belonging.

Innovative Practices and Pockets of Equity

Students exposed to inclusive and flexible PE practices reported increased confidence, engagement, and a sense of belonging. For instance, one student participant shared, "I felt more confident when I led our dance-for-change project" (Student 12). Such accounts highlight how inclusive pedagogies and student-centred approaches can foster empowerment and participation. These findings suggest that meaningful transformation in PE is possible through intentional restructuring of curriculum, policy, and teaching practices.

Discussion

This study investigates how university PE in three Central Luzon institutions both reproduces gendered norms and contains

nascent practices for transformation. The four themes align with broader literature showing that PE is frequently a site of gendered sorting and bodily regulation (Scruton, 2018; Stride et al., 2022) while also confirming that intentional pedagogical and policy interventions can foster more inclusive participation (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2023).

Linking findings to theory and comparative literature

The findings reflect the concept of gender performativity, in which repeated institutional practices normalise gendered expectations for the body and participation (Butler, 1988). Within PE, routines such as activity allocation, uniform policies, and leadership roles reinforce these performances, making gender appear natural rather than socially constructed. Foucault's (1977) work on surveillance provides a lens for embodied discomfort in public assessment and uniform enforcement. Comparative work from Southeast Asia and beyond suggests similar patterns wherein formal gender policy coexists with everyday practices that reproduce inequality, underscoring the need for contextualised institutional strategies (Meier et al., 2022; Cruz et al., 2021).

Intersectionality

While gender was central to this inquiry, a full intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) would require disaggregated data on class, ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. Participants came from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, but the current dataset did not systematically capture these axes. We therefore interpret the findings as gender-centred, recognising that intersecting marginalities likely amplify exclusion for some students; future research should be explicitly designed to capture intersectional experiences. Variations across institutional contexts further underscore this complexity: differences between public and private universities—including resource availability, institutional priorities, and religious

affiliation—appear to influence how inclusive practices are implemented. For instance, the private Catholic-affiliated institution demonstrated more flexibility in uniform policies, while public institutions showed stronger engagement through gender offices and student-led initiatives. These variations indicate that gendered experiences in PE are shaped not only

by identity but also by institutional culture and structural conditions.

Toward a Proposed Gender-Just PE Conceptual Framework

Building on the findings, a Gender-Just PE Conceptual Framework is proposed to advance gender equity in PE within the Philippine higher education context (See Figure 1).

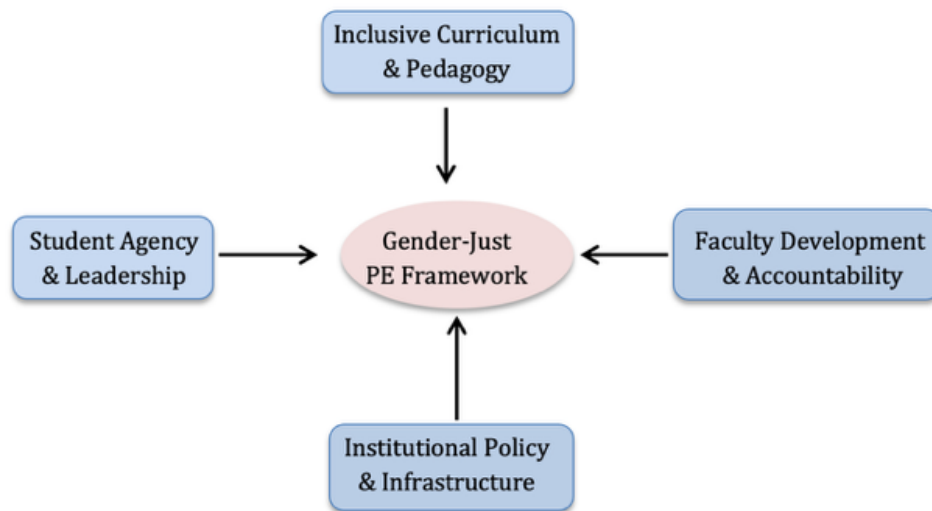


Figure 1. Gender-Just PE Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates four pillars that support the reimagining of university-level PE toward greater gender equity in the Philippine higher education context. At the centre is the Gender-Just PE Framework, which serves as the guiding principle for inclusive and equitable practice. Surrounding this core are four pillars: (1) Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy, which emphasises dismantling gendered assumptions in activity design and adopting universal learning design; (2) Faculty Development and Accountability, which focuses on capacity-building through training, mentorship, and inclusive evaluation mechanisms; (3) Institutional Policy and Infrastructure, which ensures recognition of gender-diverse identities in uniforms, facilities, and participation monitoring; and (4) Student Agency and Leadership, which prioritises student-led initiatives and pathways for leadership among women and

marginalized groups. This illustrative pilot framework aims to inform policy, pedagogy, and practice in PE, aligning with global commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality and inclusive education.

The data suggest each pillar is necessary and interdependent:

- *Inclusive Curriculum and Pedagogy*: Introduce elective options, rotate activity offerings, and adapt assessment to multiple embodiments (UDL principles). Example action: revise syllabi to mandate at least one student-designed module per semester.
- *Faculty Development and Accountability*: Implement gender-sensitivity and inclusive pedagogy training; integrate inclusivity metrics into teaching evaluation. Example action: mandatory annual workshop plus peer observation focusing on inclusive practices.

- *Institutional Policy and Infrastructure:* Adopt flexible, uniform policies; gender-neutral facilities where possible; and transparent participation monitoring disaggregated by gender. Example action: create uniform guidelines that permit alternatives and anonymise fitness assessments.
- *Student Agency and Leadership:* Support student-led initiatives, leadership pipelines for women and marginalised students, and channels for feedback on classroom climate. Example action: seed funding for student inclusion projects and student representation on curriculum committees.

Implementation and monitoring indicators

To pilot the framework, institutions might adopt a 2-year demonstration project with measurable indicators:

- Participation rates by gender per activity (baseline and annual comparison).
- Leadership representation in PE-related student organisations (per cent female leadership positions).
- Student satisfaction and sense of belonging (survey instrument administered annually).
- Number of faculty completing inclusive pedagogy training and implementation evidence (teaching portfolios).

These indicators offer pragmatic ways to monitor change while allowing local adaptation.

Limitations and Reflexivity

The sample size and purposive selection of three universities in Central Luzon limit generalisability beyond similar contexts. Snowball sampling may have biased the sample toward participants who engage in or are aware of inclusion work. The study did not collect systematic data on class, ethnicity, disability, or sexuality, limiting the ability to make intersectional claims. Finally, as noted in the Ethical Considerations section, formal IRB or REC approval

was not obtained; departmental-level endorsement served as the oversight in place. This is a recognised limitation in contexts where independent ethical clearance is a standard requirement for publication and peer review; thus, future research should seek such oversight from the outset.

The researcher is a PE faculty member in the region; this positionality provided access and subject matter familiarity but may also influence interpretation and participant disclosure. Reflexive journaling recorded these influences; peer debriefing and member checking were used to mitigate bias. Quotations were selected to represent recurring patterns rather than single anomalous statements.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that university PE in the Philippines remains a site where gendered norms are reproduced through curriculum design, embodied practices, and leadership structures. The findings directly address the issues identified in the introduction, particularly gendered curriculum tracking, experiences of discomfort and surveillance, and the exclusion of women from leadership opportunities.

At the same time, the presence of innovative and inclusive practices across institutions highlights the potential for meaningful reform. The proposed Gender-Just PE Framework provides a structured, practical response to these challenges by identifying four key areas for intervention: inclusive curriculum and pedagogy; faculty development and accountability; institutional policy and infrastructure; and student agency and leadership.

Addressing gender inequities in PE requires not only awareness but sustained institutional commitment. By aligning policy, pedagogy, and practice, higher education institutions can transform PE into a more inclusive and empowering space. Future research should further test and refine this framework across diverse contexts and incorporate more explicitly

intersectional data to deepen understanding of equity in PE.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest. Any personal circumstances or interests that could influence the interpretation of the research have been disclosed.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Quillbot to improve language clarity, grammar, and phrasing. The author carefully reviewed and revised the output to ensure accuracy and took full responsibility for the content of the final manuscript.

Note on the Contributor

Dr Michael E. Santos is a Professor of the College of Education's Institute of Sports, Physical Education, and Leisure Studies at Central Luzon State University, Philippines. He is currently ranked 10th among scientists in the field of Physical Education and Sports Science 2025 in the Philippines, per the AD Scientific Index. Please direct correspondence to *Michael.santaos@clsu2.edu.ph*

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