

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Gendered Physical Education Facilities in Philippine Junior High Schools: Pathways Toward Gender Equity

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Abstract

Despite national commitments to gender mainstreaming in Philippine education, physical education (PE) and sports facilities in junior high schools often reproduce structural inequalities that disadvantage girls. This study critically examines how PE facilities promote or hinder gender equity and identifies pathways for transformation. A qualitative multi-site case study was conducted in four junior high schools in Southern Luzon, Philippines, using purposive and snowball sampling. Participants included 20 female students (Grades 7-9) and eight PE teachers. Data were generated through 28 semi-structured interviews, facility audits using a validated gender-responsiveness assessment tool (Santos, 2024), and document analysis. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Four major themes were generated through reflexive thematic analysis: (1) institutional prioritisation of boys' sports limited girls' access; (2) inadequate privacy and safety infrastructure contributed to discomfort and absenteeism; (3) facilities were culturally constructed as male-dominated spaces; and (4) student-led initiatives demonstrated agency and demand for inclusive reform. The findings indicate that spatial arrangements function as a hidden curriculum, reinforcing gender hierarchies. However, participatory and student-driven practices offer viable pathways toward gender-responsive transformation. The study contributes to international scholarship on gendered sport spaces and advances context-specific recommendations aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5.

Keywords:

gender equity, physical education, inclusive facilities, junior high school, Philippines

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Introduction

In recent years, gender equality in education has gained momentum globally, with schools expected to provide equitable opportunities across curricular and extracurricular domains. Physical education (PE), however, continues to reflect entrenched gender disparities, particularly in the area of infrastructure and facility access. Santillan et al. (2018) reported that school-based physical spaces such as gymnasiums, locker rooms, and courts, play a critical role in shaping students' phy-

sical activity patterns, confidence, and engagement. For senior high school girls, access to safe, inclusive, and gender-sensitive facilities is not merely a logistical concern but a fundamental equity issue (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2023; Martin & Santos, 2015). Despite policy-level commitments to gender fairness, the design and allocation of PE and sports facilities often reproduce gendered hierarchies, marginalising women-identifying students in both subtle and overt ways.

Philippine education policy has embraced gender mainstreaming through instruments such as the Magna Carta of Women and DepEd's gender-responsive mandates. However, gaps remain between national policy and on-the-ground implementation, especially within public senior high schools (CHED, 2015). Facility usage often favours boys' sports, with prime schedules, larger spaces, and newer equipment allocated to traditionally male-dominated activities such as basketball and football.

Meanwhile, girls are either pushed into secondary spaces or limited to "feminine" activities like aerobics or dance, which are frequently under-resourced and undervalued (Stride et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2017). These perpetuate gender stereotypes and dissuade equal involvement in physical education - further entrenching the cycle of exclusion and disengagement.

To these issues is added the physical discomfort and safety concerns reported by many female students: not only the lack of care and maintenance, but also the lack of attention to good design. Studies have reported that the lack of private changing rooms, poor lighting, and the presence of surveillance or harassment contribute to girls' withdrawal from PE classes (Meier et al., 2022; Streetman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, when infrastructure neglects the needs of gender-diverse learners, including non-binary and transgender students, it reinforces normative assumptions about bodies and participation (Kelly et al., 2019). These spatial barriers are not neutral; they actively shape students' relationships with movement, health, and self-esteem during a formative stage of life.

While international research has made strides in examining gendered space and inclusion in school sports, significant gaps remain in the Philippine context particularly at the senior high school level. Much of the existing literature focuses on pedagogy, curriculum, and teacher bias, with limited attention to the spatial dimensions of inequality. Moreover, there is

a lack of research that integrates facility assessment with student voice, particularly that of women students from public schools in both urban and rural settings. The absence of intersectional, school-based studies that examine how gender inequity is structurally embedded in PE facilities leaves a critical gap in both scholarship and practice (Brussino & McBrien, 2022; Killen & Rutland, 2022).

To address these gaps, this study investigates how PE and sports facilities in Philippine senior high schools promote or hinder gender equality for women students. Drawing on feminist pedagogy and critical spatial theory, the research explores both the institutional structures and lived experiences that shape facility access and use. By focusing on the voices of female students alongside facility audits and document analysis, this study provides a multi-dimensional understanding of how physical space intersects with gender justice in education.

Literature Review

Gendered Sport Spaces and Spatial Politics in PE

International scholarship has established that school sport spaces are deeply gendered (Azzarito, 2010; Flintoff, 2018; Kirk, 2010). Basketball courts, football fields, and weight rooms are often socially constructed as masculine domains, reinforcing norms of strength, competitiveness, and bodily dominance (Vertinsky, 1992). Girls frequently experience marginalization through spatial displacement, reduced access, or symbolic exclusion (Oliver & Kirk, 2016).

Rich (2018) and Leahy et al. (2017) further argued that PE spaces operate through embodied surveillance, where girls' bodies are scrutinized, regulated, and disciplined. The absence of privacy in locker rooms or poorly designed changing areas can produce shame, anxiety, and withdrawal from participation. Thorpe (2017) highlights how spatial politics intersect with gendered power, shaping

who feels entitled to occupy space and who learns to yield it.

Embodiment, Surveillance, and Infrastructure

Embodiment scholarship emphasizes how physical environments influence bodily confidence and agency (Azzarito & Hill, 2013). Inadequate facilities, particularly those lacking privacy, hygiene, or safety, can function as structural deterrents to participation. Studies in Europe and North America demonstrate that girls' absenteeism in PE is often linked to discomfort in changing areas and fear of exposure (Flintoff & Fitzgerald, 2012; Rich, 2018).

Girls' Voice, Agency, and Participatory Reform

Feminist pedagogical frameworks emphasize student voice and participatory planning (Oliver & Kirk, 2016). When girls are engaged as co-constructors of PE environments, institutional norms can shift. However, such participatory approaches remain underexplored in Southeast Asian contexts.

This study builds upon international scholarship by situating gendered space analysis within Philippine junior high schools and integrating infrastructure assessment with lived experience.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

A qualitative multi-site case study design was employed to examine gender equity in PE facilities. This approach enabled in-depth exploration of institutional contexts, spatial practices, and participant experiences.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in Southern Luzon, a major geographic region in the Philippines located south of Metro Manila. Southern Luzon includes the CALABARZON region (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon) and the Bicol Region (Albay, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Catanduanes, Masbate, and

Sorsogon). The area includes highly urbanized cities, peri-urban municipalities, and rural coastal and agricultural communities. Southern Luzon contains more than 1,500 public and private secondary schools serving diverse socio-economic populations. The four selected junior high schools represented urban and peri-urban municipalities within the CALABARZON sub-region, allowing examination of gender equity issues across varied infrastructural contexts.

Participants

Four junior high schools (two private and two public) were purposively selected to represent diverse geographical and infrastructural conditions. Twenty junior high school female students (aged 13-15) and eight PE teachers (four female, four male) participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to include those with substantial experience with PE classes and facilities.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through three main methods: (1) semi-structured interviews focusing on experiences of facility access, safety, and inclusion; (2) facility audits using a modified version of the validated assessment tool developed in Santos (2024), which measures gender responsiveness and inclusivity in fitness environments; and (3) document analysis of school development plans, PE syllabi, and maintenance records.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Initial code generation
3. Constructing candidate themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Codes were generated inductively from interview transcripts and deductively from

feminist spatial theory. Reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos that documented the researchers' positionalities and interpretive decisions.

Both inductive and deductive codes were applied to interview transcripts, audit checklists, and documents. NVivo 12 software was used to organise and code data systematically.

Triangulation and Trustworthiness

Credibility was strengthened through:

- Data triangulation (interviews, audits, documents)
- Investigator triangulation (three researchers independently coded data before synthesis)
- Theoretical triangulation (feminist pedagogy and spatial theory)
- Peer debriefing (two external qualitative researchers reviewed coding decisions and theme development)
- Member checking with selected participants

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles for low-risk educational research. Formal IRB review was not required because the research involved non-sensitive topics related to physical education facilities and routine school practices, posing no foreseeable physical, psychological, or legal risk to participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent (and parental consent where applicable) was obtained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through coded identifiers and secure data handling. The study complied with the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice consistent with recognised educational research standards.

Results

The thematic analysis of interview data, facility audits, and document review revealed four interrelated themes that explain how physical education (PE)

facilities reproduce and, at times, challenge gender inequities in junior high school contexts. These themes illustrate the interplay between structural conditions, cultural meanings of space, and emergent forms of student agency.

Theme 1: Prioritised Access for Boys' Sports Limited Girls' Opportunities

The institutional prioritisation of boys' sports, particularly basketball, served as a structural mechanism that systematically limited girls' access to physical education facilities and participation opportunities. Across all case sites, scheduling practices and spatial allocation consistently favoured male-dominated sports, reflecting entrenched gender hierarchies within school environments.

Students reported frequent displacement from primary facilities, which constrained their ability to engage meaningfully in skill development and organised sport. As one participant explained, "*The boys always dominate the main court... we end up in hallways,*" illustrating how unequal access to space directly affects participation and motivation.

This pattern demonstrates how institutional practices reproduce gendered inequalities by assigning greater value to boys' athletic activities. Such findings align with international research showing that facility allocation often reflects and reinforces "gendered power" relations in physical education (Stride et al., 2022). In the Philippine context, the cultural dominance of basketball further intensifies this imbalance, privileging male participation while marginalising girls' engagement. Moreover, these spatial inequities exemplify the gap between policy commitments to gender equity and their implementation in practice (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2023). As a result, facility scheduling operates as a hidden curriculum, shaping students' perceptions of belonging and reinforcing the notion that girls' participation is secondary in PE environments (Weiler, 2023). While access inequities shaped participation, the

physical conditions of facilities further intensified gendered exclusion.

Theme 2: Inadequate Privacy and Safety Infrastructure Contributed to Discomfort and Absenteeism

Inadequate privacy and safety infrastructure functioned as a structural barrier, directly discouraging female students' participation in physical education. Across the case sites, the absence or poor condition of changing rooms, restrooms, and washing facilities created environments marked by discomfort, anxiety, and perceived risk, thereby limiting sustained engagement in PE activities.

Students consistently reported the lack of secure and hygienic changing spaces as a critical concern. As one participant noted, *"We don't have proper changing rooms... sometimes boys will just walk in... it's humiliating and uncomfortable,"* highlighting the vulnerability associated with inadequate facilities.

This evidence demonstrates that infrastructural deficits extend beyond inconvenience and operate as mechanisms of exclusion. The lack of privacy reinforces embodied surveillance and discomfort, consistent with findings that unsafe or poorly designed facilities deter participation among girls (Meier et al., 2022; Rich, 2018). Moreover, these conditions disproportionately affect female students, particularly in relation to menstrual health and bodily autonomy, further contributing to absenteeism. In this sense, infrastructure acts as a form of "body pedagogics," implicitly communicating that female students' safety and dignity are not institutional priorities (Kelly et al., 2019). Beyond material limitations, these spatial conditions also contributed to the cultural construction of facilities as gendered environments.

Theme 3: Facilities Were Perceived and Used as Male-Dominated Spaces

Physical education facilities were not only structurally unequal but also culturally

constructed as male-dominated spaces, shaping participation through implicit norms of belonging and exclusion. These gendered spatial meanings were reinforced through peer interactions, teacher attitudes, and habitual patterns of space occupation, resulting in reduced confidence and engagement among female students.

Participants described key facilities, such as weight rooms and basketball courts, as implicitly reserved for boys. One student explained, *"I wanted to try weight training... but it feels like boys' territory... I feel judged just entering that space,"* illustrating how perceived social boundaries limit access even in the absence of formal restrictions.

This perception reflects the broader social construction of sport spaces as masculine domains, aligning with research on gendered spatial politics in PE (Azzarito, 2010; Kirk, 2010; Vertinsky, 1992). The normalisation of boys' dominance, often reinforced by teacher inaction, further institutionalises these patterns (Preece & Bullingham, 2022; Martin et al., 2016). As a result, facilities become sites where gender hierarchies are reproduced through everyday practice, teaching girls to yield space and internalise marginality. This underscores that spatial inequity is not only material but also symbolic, requiring both cultural and structural interventions. Despite these structural and cultural constraints, students were not passive recipients of inequality.

Theme 4: Student-Led Initiatives Demonstrated Agency and Demand for Inclusive Reform

Despite structural and cultural constraints, female students demonstrated agency by initiating participatory actions to challenge inequitable conditions and advocate for more inclusive PE environments. These student-led efforts reveal that learners are not passive recipients of inequality but active agents capable of disrupting institutional norms. In one case, students collectively petitioned for equitable sched-

uling of facilities. As a participant recounted, “*We wrote a letter... proposed a rotation schedule... and got all the girls to sign it,*” reflecting organised and strategic advocacy.

Such initiatives illustrate how participatory practices can serve as catalysts for institutional change. Consistent with feminist pedagogical frameworks, student voice operates as a critical mechanism for transforming inequitable structures (Oliver & Kirk, 2016). These micro-level reforms, while limited in scale, demonstrate the potential for bottom-up approaches to complement policy-level interventions. They also highlight the importance of recognising students as co-constructors of educational spaces, reinforcing calls for inclusive and participatory governance in PE (Killen & Rutland, 2022). Ultimately, student agency functions as a transformative pathway that can disrupt entrenched gender norms and promote more equitable spatial practices.

Discussion

The findings align with international research demonstrating that PE spaces reproduce gender hierarchies (Azzarito, 2010; Flintoff, 2018; Kirk, 2010). Similar to studies in the UK and Australia (Oliver & Kirk, 2016; Thorpe, 2017), prime sporting spaces were symbolically and materially masculinized. Spatial inequities functioned as a hidden curriculum, communicating differential value attached to boys’ and girls’ participation. Inadequate privacy infrastructure reinforced embodied surveillance dynamics identified by Rich (2018) and Leahy et al. (2017).

Similar to findings in university contexts, physical space is not a neutral backdrop but a site of social reproduction

and resistance (Gerdin & Pringle, 2022; Greey, 2023; Martin et al., 2023).

The presence of prioritised access for male students, combined with inadequate privacy infrastructure for female students, replicates unequal power dynamics. These findings also reinforce the argument that spatial inequality is as critical as curricular inequality when addressing gender justice in PE (Philpot et al., 2021). The validated audit tool (Santos, 2024) proved transferable to school environments, offering a replicable framework for institutional self-assessment.

Student-led equity activities can indicate a shift in agency. When institutional tools are restricted, students take an active role in lobbying for inclusive improvements. Furthermore, innovative approaches to teaching, such as the use of technology, are also promoted (Prevandos & Martin, 2022). These micro-reforms demonstrate that fairness may be achieved even in constrained circumstances through participatory planning and gender-sensitive leadership.

To synthesize these interrelated dynamics, Figure 1 presents a conceptual map illustrating how structural conditions, spatial practices, and student agency interact to reproduce and potentially transform gendered inequalities in PE facilities. Structural inequalities (institutional prioritisation and inadequate infrastructure) produce gendered spatial practices that function as a hidden curriculum, shaping facilities as male-dominated spaces. These conditions influence participation and reinforce gender hierarchies. However, student-led agency operates as a transformative pathway, challenging inequitable structures through participatory reform and feedback mechanisms that may reshape institutional practices.

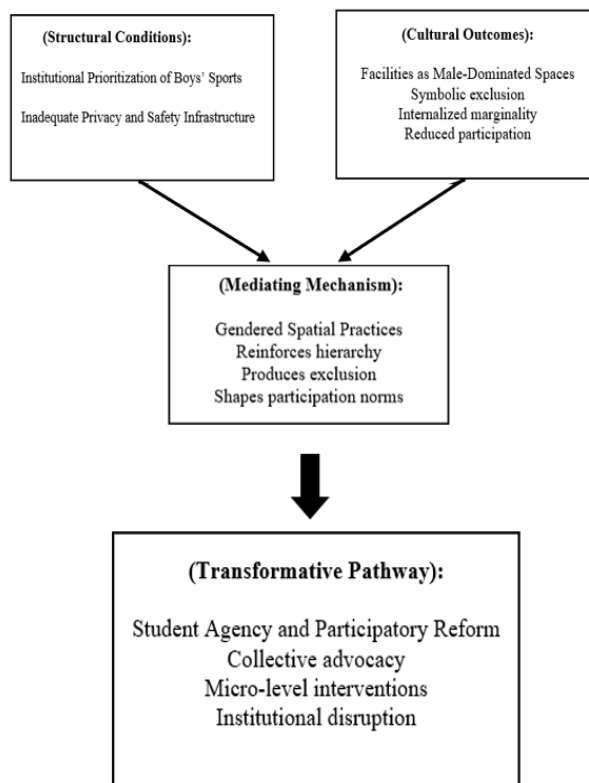


Figure 1. Structural and Cultural Pathways of Gendered Physical Education Facilities and Transformative Agency

Conclusion and Recommendations

By integrating feminist pedagogy, inclusive design, and participatory governance, schools can transform PE facilities into equitable learning environments. Junior high school girls continue to encounter structural and cultural barriers to accessing safe, inclusive physical spaces, thereby limiting their full participation in education. Drawing from a validated assessment model (Santos, 2024), the study provides evidence that inclusive design standards can be adopted in school settings to evaluate and improve facility equity. Future initiatives should institutionalise these standards, involve students in planning, and ensure that PE is an empowering experience for all genders.

This study contributes to global scholarship on gendered sport spaces and advances actionable strategies aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5.

Gender equity in PE requires structural transformation of physical space, not solely curricular reform. Based on the findings, the following context-specific recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutionalized rotational facility scheduling policies
2. Minimum national standards for gender-responsive changing facilities
3. Participatory infrastructure planning involving students
4. Regular gender-equity facility audits using validated tools
5. Teacher training on spatial inclusion and gender-sensitive supervision

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

The author used Grammarly to improve phrasing, grammar, and clarity when pre-

paring this work. The author took full responsibility for the final manuscript's content and meticulously checked and edited the output to guarantee accuracy.

Note on Contributor

David Christian D. Pascual is a researcher in physical education and sport pedagogy, with research interests in gender equity, inclusive education, and physical activity environments. He may be reached via davepascual2480@gmail.com.

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