

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Playing on Unequal Ground: Gender Exclusion and Barriers in Coeducational College Volleyball

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### Abstract

Volleyball is a staple in the Physical Education (PE) curriculum in many higher education institutions in the Philippines. However, many female students often encounter challenges that hinder their participation, learning, and enjoyment of the sport. Grounded in Feminist Theory, which frames gender inequality as rooted in patriarchal structures and socially constructed norms that privilege masculinity, this study examined how gendered dynamics shape female students' experiences in volleyball classes. The study addressed the research question: How do non-elite female college students experience participation in volleyball classes at a public state university in the Philippines, and how do gendered structures shape the barriers and enabling processes that influence their engagement? A descriptive phenomenological design guided this qualitative inquiry. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively recruited female college students (mean age = 22) enrolled in Education, Psychology, and Agriculture courses, none of whom had prior volleyball experience. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The findings revealed three key themes that captured the students' gendered experiences in volleyball class: (1) feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, (2) embarrassment and fear of judgment, and (3) perceived gender inequity and lack of belonging. Reported challenges included exclusion or undervaluation on the basis of gender, physical discomfort and injury, and unequal opportunities and limited playtime. To address the challenges, participants suggested promoting inclusion and equal participation, adopting gender-sensitive teaching approaches, and improving the structure and support system. The findings of the study underscore the critical need for gender-sensitive, inclusive, and supportive approaches in PE volleyball classes to enhance female students' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging.

### Keywords:

female students, gender equity, good health and well-being, inclusive pedagogy, quality physical education

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## Introduction

Sport participation is shaped by gendered cultural stereotypes and structural inequalities that perpetuate inequity. Female athletes frequently encounter discrimination and restricted opportunities, which can diminish self-efficacy and reduce long-term commitment to sports. For example, Bangayan (2023) documented persistent sex discrimination against women in male-dominated sports in the Philippines, highlighting the conflation of femininity with perceived weakness. Similarly, Betzer-Tayar et al. (2017) identified the underrepresentation of women in volleyball leadership roles and noted disciplinary barriers within educational settings that limit full engagement in sports. These issues underscore the barriers faced by women athletes, particularly in volleyball, within higher education physical education curricula.

Volleyball is among the most popular team sports in higher education due to its accessibility, collective nature, and wide-ranging benefits. The sport fosters physical fitness, social cooperation, resilience, and identity development. Wang (2022) reported that volleyball electives can positively influence physical health outcomes, while Panatier (2022) highlighted volleyball's role in enhancing effective group work and psychosocial development. Volleyball also contributes to identity development, particularly for women. For example, Pattison (2013) examined how collegiate female athletes negotiate personal and social identities through volleyball, and Graham and Blackett (2022) investigated women's experiences navigating gendered spaces in volleyball coaching contexts. Therefore, volleyball functions both as a health-promoting activity and as a platform for identity development.

Female students' experiences in volleyball are often complex and multifaceted. While participation can foster friendships and learning, it is also influenced by gendered behaviours and body image concerns. Kantanista et al. (2018) and

Gualdi-Russo et al. (2022) reported that women frequently evaluate themselves against standards of femininity and athleticism, which can either encourage or hinder participation. In the Philippine context, Fernandez et al. (2023) demonstrated that confidence and instructional design significantly affect skill development, highlighting the interplay of internal and external factors. Additionally, Gamutin et al. (2024) examined mixed student-athlete perspectives on LGBTQIA+ participation, illustrating how broader cultural and social issues permeate the volleyball classroom. Collectively, these studies indicate that female students' experiences in volleyball extend beyond skill acquisition to encompass negotiations of gender, inclusivity, and belonging.

Persistent challenges exacerbate barriers to participation. Physical issues such as breast discomfort and body dissatisfaction have been identified as contextual constraints for female students engaging in physical activity (Scurr et al., 2016). Social factors, including peer acceptance, self-worth, and societal expectations, also significantly influence participation (Hopkins et al., 2022; Towobola, 2023). In higher education, these constraints manifest as feelings of inadequacy, social exclusion, and heightened sensitivity to peer perceptions. Research indicates that group acceptance and peer support are positively associated with sport commitment and continued participation (Garn, 2016; McDonough & Crocker, 2005). Motivation is central, with students participating for both intrinsic and social rewards. Female players draw on peer support, resilience, and a sense of belonging to motivate themselves (Martin et al., 2016). Nevertheless, unequal treatment and stereotypes can undermine motivation and contribute to disengagement.

Several related studies have examined gender inequities, motivation, and the physical benefits of volleyball participation (Fernandez et al., 2023; Sebold, 2020). However, most research has focused on

elite athletes (Panatier, 2022; Pattison, 2013) or broad adolescent cohorts (Duncan et al., 2015; Hopkins et al., 2022) and has left a gap in the literature to understand the everyday lived experiences of non-elite female students in college physical education contexts in the Philippines.

The literature on female participation in volleyball highlights both its benefits and the persistent barriers shaped by gendered structures. Volleyball is recognised as an accessible, team-oriented sport that promotes physical fitness, social cooperation, resilience, and identity development (Panatier, 2022), with studies demonstrating how female athletes negotiate personal and social identities (Pattison, 2013) and navigate gendered coaching spaces (Taylor-Toomay, 2024). Peer support, confidence, and instructional design further influence skill development, motivation, and belonging (Fernandez et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2016). Yet women continue to face discrimination, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and institutional constraints (Bangayan, 2023; Betzer-Tayar et al., 2017), as well as physical and psychosocial challenges, including body image concerns, peer evaluation, and societal expectations (Kantanista et al., 2018; Gualdi-Russo et al., 2022; Scurr et al., 2016; Hopkins et al., 2022; Daniels & Leaper, 2006). This creates a tension in the literature: while volleyball can facilitate empowerment, identity formation, and social development, structural inequalities and gendered expectations limit sustained engagement.

Much of the existing research focuses on elite athletes or adolescent cohorts, leaving a gap in understanding the everyday lived experiences of non-elite female students in higher education, particularly within the Philippine context.

To address this gap, the present study is grounded in Feminist Theory, which conceptualises gender inequality as rooted in patriarchal structures embedded within institutions such as sport and education. Gender is socially constructed through cultural practices that privilege masculinity

and subordinate femininity (Butler, 1990). From this perspective, sport is not neutral, but a gendered institution shaped by power relations that advantage men and marginalise women (Knoppers et al., 2021). These inequalities are reproduced through leadership hierarchies, cultural expectations, and embodied standards that regulate women's participation and self-perception (Naidu-Young et al., 2024). Feminist theory further highlights how discrimination and normative ideals of femininity influence women's self-efficacy, identity formation, and sustained engagement in sport (Rind & Naz, 2025). Anchoring the study in this theoretical framework enables a critical examination of volleyball classes in higher education as both sites of structural constraint and potential spaces for resistance, empowerment, and inclusive pedagogical practices.

Building on this framework, the study addresses the following research question: How do non-elite female college students experience participation in volleyball classes at a public state university in the Philippines, and how do gendered structures shape the barriers and enabling processes that influence their engagement? This articulation explicitly positions the study within ongoing scholarly conversations about gender inequity in sport while clarifying its focus on lived experiences, structural constraints, and opportunities for empowerment in higher education physical education contexts.

### Methods and Materials

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of female students participating in volleyball classes, aiming to uncover the essence of their perspectives and experiences. Phenomenology was selected because it allows researchers to explore participants' subjective realities in depth, capturing the nuanced ways in which gendered structures, peer interactions, and instructional practices shape their engagement, self-efficacy, and identity develop-

ment (Faraji et al., 2024; Shorey & Ng, 2022).

The purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit ten female college students enrolled in coeducational, mandatory volleyball courses led by certified physical education instructors. The volleyball course within the institution's curriculum was structured to promote both fitness and skill development, with student performance evaluated using a competency-based rubric. This selection approach ensured that all participants had direct, firsthand experience with gender interactions in a structured sports environment, which was central to the study's focus on gender dynamics.

A total of 10 female college students—aged 21–23, enrolled in their second year of Education, Psychology, or Agriculture courses, and with no prior volleyball

experience—were purposively recruited to ensure a consistent baseline for examining initial experiences in a coeducational athletic context. By recruiting participants with comparable skill levels, similar year levels, and shared course experiences, the study minimised potential confounding variables associated with prior expertise. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, including age, year level, and course.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their perspectives while guiding the discussion toward topics relevant to the study. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, using a combination of Filipino and English according to participants' preferences, and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent.

*Table 1. Participant Profile*

Participant	Age	Course
P1	21	Education
P2	22	Education
P3	21	Agriculture
P4	23	Education
P5	22	Psychology
P6	24	Agriculture
P7	23	Agriculture
P8	22	Psychology
P9	23	Agriculture
P10	21	Education

To ensure that the original meaning, nuance, and emotional register of participants' responses were preserved, all Filipino responses were translated into English by a qualified Filipino-English translation expert. The translations were carefully reviewed to maintain fidelity to culturally specific expressions, idiomatic language, and the emotional tone of participants' responses, ensuring that their intended meanings and subtleties were accurately captured for analysis.

Ethical considerations were followed for all participants and procedures, with each participant receiving information

about the research, its purpose, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time, in accordance with ethical guidelines for qualitative research (Leahy, 2022). Participants were assigned a pseudonym for anonymity.

To ensure the trustworthiness, credibility, and rigour of the study, the researchers implemented several phenomenologically grounded strategies. Prior to data collection, the researchers engaged in bracketing, documenting and setting aside their own preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases to minimise their influence on participants' accounts. During

data collection, reflexive practices were maintained through an ongoing audit trail that captured decisions, interpretations, and reflections to monitor potential researcher influence on the interviews. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews formed the primary dataset for analysis, which was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. This iterative process involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, providing clear definitions and labels, and producing the final report. Furthermore, to enhance trustworthiness and confirm accuracy, transcripts were returned to participants for verification and approval through member checking. Collectively, these procedures—bracketing, reflexive engagement, reliability checks, and systematic thematic analysis—strengthened the transparency, credibility, and analytic robustness of the study, facilitating the identification of key themes that captured the complex and gendered experiences of participants in volleyball classes.

## Results

The study revealed detailed, multifaceted illustrations of female students' lives, experiences, issues, struggles, and suggestions for volleyball classes. Their recounting of experiences demonstrated emotional and social struggles, including feelings of inadequacy, being judged by fellow students, and experiencing gender inequity, while also signalling the potential for advancement stemming from equity structures, supportive teaching, and active participation. The findings illuminate how confidence, belonging, and motivation in playing volleyball are affected by personal insecurities, social context, and classroom practices.

## Personal Experiences in Volleyball

Students' narratives emphasized that volleyball is not just a physical activity but also a layered social experience. While some

participants found it enjoyable, positive moments were often overshadowed by insecurities, embarrassment, and exclusion. These experiences are reflected in three central themes.

### *Theme 1: Feelings of Inadequacy and Self-Doubt*

A recurring theme among students was a lack of confidence, often linked to perceived skill deficits relative to peers, particularly male classmates. Several participants reported initial reluctance to play due to shyness and nervousness, which hindered full participation. For those with limited prior experience, the skill demands of volleyball intensified feelings of unpreparedness.

"It was fun and enjoyable, although I don't play volleyball as my male classmates do."

"Sometimes I feel shy or nervous, especially when I play with boys who seem to be more confident or play rough."

"I never played volleyball or a sport like it before, so it was hard and I didn't feel prepared."

### *Theme 2: Embarrassment and Fear of Judgment*

In addition to concerns about their abilities, students recalled instances in which classmates ridiculed, teased, or ignored them. These experiences intensified embarrassment and decreased motivation. Being treated with ridicule or disrespect by male classmates was especially debilitating and even caused some students to disengage both socially and emotionally.

"Every time I don't hit the ball, my classmates laugh at me."

"Some of the boys in my class called me 'little' and said I wouldn't be able to hit the net."

"Sometimes I didn't get to play or nobody took me seriously."

### ***Theme 3: Perceived Gender Inequity and Lack of Belonging***

Entrenched with gender roles increased feelings of exclusion. In many instances, the boys led the games, held the ball, and took on the lead role while the girls, especially the quieter girls, were left out. This disparity led to a sense of not belonging.

“The boys didn’t really pass the ball to the girls. It made me feel like I was left out and not important.”

“I think sometimes girls, especially the quiet ones, were just ignored or weren’t passed the ball.”

“It felt like the boys were deemed more trustworthy to be leaders, or to take on stronger roles in the game.”

In bringing these experiences into the light, students recognised barriers of self-doubt, embarrassment, and inequity, but they began to identify and expose more tangible factors that limited their physical ability and sense of belongingness in volleyball.

### **Challenges in Volleyball**

Students mentioned obstacles that extended beyond emotional experiences and incorporated specific barriers to engagement. These obstacles demonstrated gendered dynamics, physical discomfort, and structural inequalities concerning playtime.

### ***Theme 1: Exclusion or Undervaluation on the Basis of Gender***

In line with their experiences, several students reported feeling excluded from or underestimated in mixed-gender games. The ways in which play was structured often placed boys in dominant roles such that girls were ignored, teased, or considered inferior and therefore had fewer opportunities to engage equally.

"The boys wouldn't pass the ball to the girls. It made me feel like I didn't matter."

"Some of the boys make fun of me because I can't jump as high as they do."

"Sometimes I just wasn't taken seriously because I was a girl."

### ***Theme 2: Physical Discomfort and Injury***

Playing volleyball was also difficult because they experienced physical pain. Students often cited hand pain, general pain from repeated ball contact, and fear of injury. All these factors further dampened enthusiasm and caused female students to hesitate during practice and competition.

"My hands hurt when we practice too long, and sometimes it just takes the fun out."

"When the ball hits in certain areas of the body, like in the chest it hurts, and I get nervous."

"The tension from the ball coming toward me froze me up."

### ***Theme 3: Unequal Opportunities and Limited Playtime***

Another notable issue was the unequal distribution of playtime. Students reported that opportunities to participate were often reserved for more vocal or skilled players, while quieter or less experienced players were frequently overlooked, contributing to feelings of exclusion and stagnation.

"I didn't get to play because the boys were leading all the time."

"The better players got the chance to stand out."

"I was often not paid due attention on the court, and it definitely sucked."

While challenges had created emotional, physical, and social barriers, students also suggested potential solutions. Their recommendations indicated they

wanted changes to class structure, teacher interventions, and cultural changes to promote greater equity and participation in volleyball classes.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

Students proposed ideas to improve volleyball classes, making them more inclusive and supportive. Their suggestions focused on creating environments that emphasise inclusiveness, promote equal opportunities, and implement and strengthen support systems to establish a positive learning environment.

#### ***Theme 1: Promote Inclusion and Equal Participation***

The most common recommendation was to ensure that all students, regardless of skill or gender, had a fair opportunity to participate. Equal play opportunities were viewed as paramount to building confidence and team togetherness.

“Encourage equal teamwork and provide every student with a chance to play.”

“Be sure that all students are treated equally and you are kind to them.”

“Let girls have more opportunities, particularly in co-ed games.”

#### ***Theme 2: Gender-Sensitive Teaching Approaches***

Participants highlighted the role of teachers in addressing inequities. They called for better-balanced teams, more gradual progression of the basics (skills), and more constructive feedback. In addition, participants viewed teachers as role models who promoted fairness and discouraged gender-based comparisons.

“Teachers should use skill level to divide teams, not gender.”

“Start with the basics, so that everyone learns equally.”

“Offer motivational messages after class so all participants have the chance to grow.”

#### ***Theme 3: Improved Structure and Support Systems***

Finally, participants called for stronger structural and emotional support from teachers and classmates, emphasising the need for appropriate equipment, clear instructional guidelines, and consistent peer reinforcement. Establishing a safe and supportive classroom was considered essential to increasing participation and, ultimately, personal growth.

“There should be appropriate equipment and an instructor who uses a clear set of directions for dos and don’ts.”

“Teachers should promote respect and continually remind students.”

“Establish a classroom environment where all students feel safe to speak and freely participate.”

### **Discussion**

This study provides an in-depth analysis of female students’ experiences, challenges, and recommendations in volleyball classes, emphasising the complex interplay among confidence, belonging, and motivation as shaped by personal, social, pedagogical, and intersectional factors. The narratives frame volleyball as a multidimensional social experience rather than merely a physical activity. Although some students reported enjoyment and engagement, many described feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, embarrassment, and exclusion. A considerable number experienced self-doubt, particularly in comparison to male peers, with those lacking prior experience being especially vulnerable to low confidence and withdrawal (Aguillon et al., 2020). These patterns are consistent with gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), which asserts that internalised social expectations regarding gendered abilities influence girls’ perceptions of competence and their willingness to

participate in activities perceived as male-dominated. These reflections indicate that such experiences are embedded in broader socialised norms about gender and athleticism, highlighting the need for instructional approaches that address and mitigate internalised barriers.

Through a feminist theoretical lens, the findings indicate that volleyball classes function as socially and structurally gendered environments in which power relations shape visibility, leadership, and participation (Acker, 1992). Reports of marginalisation, ridicule, and exclusion, often initiated by male peers, illustrate how inequities in participation are sustained through peer dynamics and classroom structures. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) further clarifies the diversity of experiences, as quieter, less skilled, or less experienced students are disproportionately affected by social and structural barriers. This layered vulnerability demonstrates that inequity is not uniform but is shaped by the intersection of gender, prior experience, skill, and social positioning, revealing nuanced mechanisms of marginalisation frequently overlooked in Physical Education research (Marqués-Sánchez et al., 2024).

The challenges identified by students included emotional, physical, and structural barriers. Gendered dynamics frequently limited girls' opportunities for meaningful engagement, as more vocal or skilled students, particularly boys, dominated gameplay and leadership roles. Physical discomfort and fear of injury further restricted participation, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and reducing engagement and motivation (Sheehan et al., 2024). Unequal playtime and the undervaluation of girls' contributions reinforced these challenges (Morgan, 2021). These findings align with previous research indicating that girls in coeducational Physical Education often experience marginalisation, peer surveillance, and limited access to meaningful play (Uğraş et al., 2025). Importantly, the students' accounts provide

analytic detail by identifying specific mechanisms of marginalisation, including peer judgment, monopolisation of leadership, and exclusionary role assignments (Mazerolle et al., 2012). This evidence demonstrates that confidence, belonging, and motivation are shaped by social and pedagogical contexts rather than being inherent traits.

Students offered targeted recommendations for improvement, emphasising equitable, structured, and gender-sensitive pedagogical approaches. They advocated for deliberate role rotations, balanced teams, and sequenced skill instruction to facilitate meaningful participation for all students. These strategies directly address the gendered power dynamics identified in their experiences and are consistent with feminist and intersectional frameworks that seek to disrupt normative hierarchies in Physical Education classrooms (Acker, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989). Emotional and structural supports, such as adequate equipment, clear instructional guidelines, and reinforcement of respectful peer behaviour, were identified as essential for fostering confidence, belonging, and motivation (Su & Liu, 2025). Teachers' intentional feedback, encouragement, and facilitation of shared leadership opportunities between boys and girls further promoted inclusive participation and engagement (Miñao, 2024).

Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of gender-responsive pedagogy in establishing the social and motivational conditions necessary for equitable participation. In summary, the students' narratives converge on a clear pedagogical implication: confidence, belonging, and motivation in volleyball are shaped by the interaction of personal, social, and pedagogical factors (Jafarova, 2025). The study underscores the critical role of teachers in fostering equitable experiences, both by structuring participation and by identifying and addressing subtle mechanisms of exclusion in coeducational con-

texts. By centring students' lived experiences and integrating gender schema, feminist, and intersectional theories, this study advances theoretical and practical understanding of equity in Physical Education and offers educators actionable guidance to create inclusive, supportive, and motivating learning environments for all students.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Physical Education educators design volleyball activities to ensure meaningful participation for all students, regardless of skill level or gender. Implementing role rotation and structured opportunities for equal participation can help reduce disparities in engagement. Strategies rooted in gender-sensitive pedagogy, including balanced teams, progressive skill sequencing, and intentional, constructive feedback, are likely to further address inequities and foster inclusiveness. Fostering both structural and emotional supports is crucial. Providing adequate equipment, clearly communicating instructional expectations, and normalising respectful peer interactions can create an environment where students feel safe taking risks and building confidence. For quieter or more reserved students, targeted encouragement, opportunities for leadership in small group tasks, and positive reinforcement for effort can strengthen self-efficacy and motivation. These approaches collectively sustain participation, support social-emotional growth, and help prevent marginalisation, ensuring that all students experience a sense of competence and belonging in physical education settings.

While the results offer valuable insights into female students' experiences in volleyball, they are limited by reliance on self-reported accounts from a specific subset of participants. Self-report data may be subject to recall bias or personal interpretation, limiting the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations and different cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, the study primarily reflects the female

perspective, omitting male students' experiences and potentially overlooking aspects of mixed-gender dynamics from both viewpoints.

Future research should include more diverse and representative samples, incorporate observational methods, and utilise mixed-method designs to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of participation dynamics in volleyball classes. Studies should also examine the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies to address feelings of inadequacy, discomfort, and gender inequity. Evaluating inclusive teaching models, cooperative learning structures, and gender-transformative practices will generate evidence for approaches that enhance students' confidence, sense of belonging, and sustained engagement in physical education. Research that includes both male and female participants and employs mixed-methods approaches can yield a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how supportive teaching practices foster equitable participation and cultivate inclusive learning environments.

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

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

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## Notes on Contributors

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