

# Participation in Paralympic sports: What it means to female student-athletes with disabilities

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**Abstract**—Women’s involvement in sports continues to evolve over the years. This scenario has affected their socialization process and altered their life expectations. This paper examines the non-sport factors of sports participation among female student-athletes with disabilities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Ten participants (N=10) were recruited using the purposive sampling technique. All participants were female student-athletes with disabilities, aged between 13-17 years old, from the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic group. They have competed in goalball, para-athletics and para-swimming. All data were analysed using thematic analysis. Results of this study show: i) sport is considered a mechanism to achieve different life goals, ii) sport is an avenue to express their emotions and iii) civic identity is promoted through their participation in sports. In short, sport is vital in the life of female student-athletes with disabilities as it empowers them to be their best and makes them feel good about themselves.

**Keywords**—disability; education; female; health; Paralympic sports

## I. INTRODUCTION

The participation of athletes with disabilities has been systematically organised and prevailed since the 1960s. This trend continues to evolve from one decade to another; marking the needs of all nations to vigilantly observe the requirements of their special athletes. In the case of female athletes with disabilities; their involvement has shown improvement due to numerous factors which are personal; social and cultural determinants. Among the SEAMEO nations; for instance; Thailand and Singapore have proven unassailable when many of their female athletes with disabilities have qualified for the Paralympics based on merit. Also; data (on Paralympic participation) from Singapore and Vietnam have surprisingly revealed the dominance and qualification of female athletes with disabilities into the Paralympics over their male counterparts. The engagement of SEAMEO nations in the Paralympics; particularly among female athletes with disabilities has thus far been encouraging.

TABLE I. SEAMEO NATIONS’ FEMALE PARA-ATHLETES’ PARTICIPATION IN PARALYMPICS (1972-2016)

| SEAMEO Nations | Starting Year of Participation | Number of Female Para-athletes | Medals Obtained |
|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Indonesia      | 1976                           | 9                              | 2               |
| Cambodia       | 2000                           | 2                              | 0               |
| Myanmar        | 1992                           | 0                              | 0               |
| Thailand       | 1984                           | 49                             | 9               |
| Vietnam        | 2000                           | 19                             | 0               |
| Brunei         | 2012                           | 0                              | 0               |
| Laos           | 2000                           | 1                              | 0               |
| Malaysia       | 1972                           | 19                             | 1               |
| Singapore      | 1988                           | 30                             | 9               |
| Philippines    | 1988                           | 11                             | 2               |

No. The above data were retrieved from <https://www.paralympic.org>

Table 1 shows the participation and achievements of female para-athletes across SEAMEO nations. Though most of the countries have representations of female para-athletes; some governments blithely emphasize on these special athletes’ participation. The different numbers of athletes who qualify for Paralympics rely on the respective nations’ policies and the amount of investment harvested on sports for disabilities; especially Paralympic sports. The significant and insignificant numbers of qualified athletes are also linked to the system that the athletes belong to and their earlier involvement in sports; especially in schools. This paper aims to study the non-sports factors of sports participation among female student-athletes with disabilities. It also intends to explore the meaning of their involvement in sports. Two questions were formulated to guide the research:

**Research Question 1 [RQ1]:** What are the non-sports determinants that encourage female student-athletes with disabilities to participate in sports?

**Research Question 2 [RQ2]:** How do female student-athletes with disabilities conceptualize the meaning of their sports participation?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Enhancing Life Skills and Civic Characters through Sports

Over the years; there has been a profusion of theoretical and empirical research relating to sports as a tool to learn life skills and build up civic characters; particularly among youth with disabilities. Gould and Carson [13]; for example; have critically suggested that valid life skills development can be gained through sports activities. Their view has been supported by Petitpas; Van Raalte; Cornelius and Presbrey [27] who found that sports (and physical activities) have positive impacts on academic achievements. Therefore; sports programmes should be adequately tailored to bring positive experiences and outcomes [12]; particularly among youth of different abilities.

To shape the character of good citizens among youth with disabilities; Nixon II [24] proposed the presence of disabled athletes in mainstream sports programmes. He suggested that non-disabled sports organisers welcome the participation of disabled athletes and adapt to the needs of these athletes. By allowing them to compete against able-bodied athletes; it creates new opportunities for these special athletes to make themselves visible and at the same time; encourages the freedom of choice and fairness in society.

From the empirical perspective; sports have a significant impact on employment opportunities and psychological well-being among disabled people too. For instance; based on a survey on 139 people with disabilities; Lastuka and Cottingham [20] reveal that by spending more years playing in adaptive sports; the probability of getting hired has increased by 4%. Moreover; the multi-dimensional roles played by sports peers as reported by Orr; Tamminen; Sweet; Tomasone and Arbour-Nicitopoulos [25] have also supported their basic psychological needs.

Interestingly; in the schooling context; sports have helped students in many aspects of their lives. In the interviews conducted with 20 participants; Camiré; Trudel and Forneris [8] indicate that the participation of high school athletes has not only resulted in the development of various life skills; but more importantly; allowed them to apply those skills in another sphere of their life. Their life learning lessons could be realised with the help of coaches. In the interview sessions conducted by Gould; Collins; Lauer and Chung [14] with ten football coaches; they found that the personal development of the footballers was the priority of the coaches which marks the need to understand the role of coaches in nurturing sporting talents in schools.

### B. Reasons for Participation

The understanding behind sports participation is necessary; particularly for policy-makers and stakeholders. The motives of sports participation among able- and disable-bodied athletes are indeed different [32]. Sports among people with disabilities symbolize affirming competence (despite physical limitations); typical social passage and delaying the effects of physical disability [26]. These elements are hardly touched upon in the Malaysian context.

Kristén; Patriksson and Fridlund [18] have also identified six concepts that are related to sports participation such as making new friends; going through a learning process; improving physical strength; becoming someone; experiencing nature and having a good time. Allan; Evan; Latimer-Cheung; and Côté [2] have identified four essential themes that are related to experiences in disability sports; such as motives; coaches' knowledge; beliefs and behaviours. In Malaysia; they found significant differences in social integration and ego-oriented motives over fitness; social-affective and task-oriented motives [1].

It is also pertinent that gender differences play a vital role in cultivating the participation in sports of students with disabilities. For instance; male wheelchair-bound students perform better in competitions while females are slightly better in goal orientations [28]. This scenario is driven by a set of goals which is beyond winning a match. Interestingly; in the study on girls with physical disabilities; Anderson [3] found that the interests are personal and in line with their values. In a similar vein; Wang [31] has listed three determinants - personal; physical and social - which triggered the inclusion of special needs students in physical education. However; little baseline information about disabled female athletes' personal motives and values in sports has been found in Malaysia. Therefore; this study is designed to reduce the gap.

## III. METHODS

### A. Research Participants

TABLE II RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS' BACKGROUND

| Athlete | Age | Type of Disability    | Ethnicity | Sport           |
|---------|-----|-----------------------|-----------|-----------------|
| A       | 17  | Visual impairment     | Malay     | Goalball        |
| B       | 17  | Visual impairment     | Indian    | Goalball        |
| C       | 17  | Visual impairment     | Malay     | Goalball        |
| D       | 16  | Visual impairment     | Malay     | Goalball        |
| E       | 15  | Visual impairment     | Malay     | Goalball        |
| F       | 14  | Visual impairment     | Malay     | Goalball        |
| G       | 13  | Visual impairment     | Chinese   | Goalball        |
| H       | 16  | Learning disabilities | Indian    | Track and field |
| I       | 17  | Learning disabilities | Malay     | Swimming        |
| J       | 14  | Learning disabilities | Malay     | Track and field |

Table 2 shows the demography of the participants. The study recruited ten high profile female student-athletes with disabilities from two secondary schools in Kuala Lumpur; Malaysia. Both schools are known to train and produce disabled athletes. They have a structured development programme to nurture sporting talents among students with disabilities. The female student-athletes with disabilities are between 13 to 17 years old and were chosen using the purposive sampling technique. Their coaches and school administrators assisted the researchers in identifying the sample.

### B. Instrument

The researchers constructed an interview guide based on the research questions. The interview guide helped the researchers to direct the interview sessions based on the topics and issues that need to be investigated. The interview guide is divided into two parts: i) the demographic background of the female student-athletes with disabilities and ii) their sports participating experiences.

### C. Interview Protocol

Ethics in research is essential. Permission to conduct this research was approved by the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD); Ministry of Education Malaysia; the state education department and the two schools. Overall; it took the researchers almost six months to collect significant information. Seven in-depth interview sessions were conducted with the participants. Prior to the interviews; all participants were briefed about the interviews and they consented to this research.

### D. Data Analysis

Data for this research were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis is commonly utilised in qualitative researches [7]; [23]; [33]. All data underwent four different stages namely: i) initialization – reading (transcribe; code and write); ii) construction – describing (classify; compare; label; translate and define); iii) rectification – immersing (distance; relate to the theme and stable); and iv) finalization – developing storyline [30].

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study reveals that although their engagement in sports is optional; sports have indeed fulfilled their personal goals and beyond; sport is therefore a platform for them to express their emotions as well as promote civic identity. All these have moved them to commit seriously in sports activities.

### A. Sport is a Mechanism to Achieve Different Life Goals

It is genuinely understood that sport has multi-dimensional purposes and objectives. Based on the interviews; these female student-athletes with disabilities have expressed that their engagement in sports is crucial for long term benefits such as continuing tertiary education; securing better job opportunities and for personal growth.

*Many teachers advised me to keep active in sports. I saw it as an opportunity to strengthen my future education application apart from getting good results in public exams. I witnessed many of them have continued their studies and had a better life.*

*(Participant B)*

*I believed that this activity (sports) could guarantee something in the future for me. For people like myself (visually impaired person); sports engagement can expose us to the outside world. It would be easier for me to get employment opportunity after graduation.*

*(Participant A)*

*When I participate in sports; I have the chance to understand my life (despite my limitations) better and of course have many friends. I knew most of them since we were in primary school. Sports activities bring us closer to one another.*

*(Participant E)*

### B. Expressing Emotions through Sports

Participants in this study have indicated that participating in sports helps them to combat anxiety; low self-esteem; lack of confidence and others. In other words; sport is a fruitful way to channel those feelings into something more beneficial.

*At the beginning of my participation; I almost surrendered. Thanks to my team mates; who supported me and made me feel good. In our training sessions; we trained hard; and most of the time; challenges our mental limits. That was good because we must learn to control our anger and emotion better. This (training regime) is the key to our success.*

*(Participant J)*

*In my view; this activity (sports) can show what I can do despite my limitations. By putting my talents into action; I have set an excellent example to my fellow friends in school.*

*(Participant D)*

*There are ups and downs in the training sessions. My coach knew the limit. When I don't feel good; he will quickly change his training style to reduce the tensions. Though the training was hard; I noticed that in the end; all sacrifices are paid off when we won the competitions.*

*(Participant C)*

### C. Sports Promote Civic Identity

Participating in sports has enabled them to appreciate the meaning of team spirit; understand the need to connect with others and have a strong attachment with society. Living in isolation will do more harm to their well-being.

*Team spirit is crucially important. I need support from other co-players; especially before and after the game. With a practical training set up; we learnt not only new skills from the trainers; at the same time learnt to understand and respect the differences between us.*

*(Participant F)*

*Winning or losing in a competition is healthy. Sometimes we win; sometimes we lost. If we win; we celebrate like a family. If we lost the game; we will sit and weep together. The attachment between us is strong ever since we joined the school team.*

(Participant I)

*When I join the sports community; my self-centeredness disappeared because we are told to do things collectively and work with diverse individuals. During competitions; many of our friends from mainstream education came to support us. They also supported the programmes we participated in.*

(Participant H)

The findings suggest that sport has a multi-dimensional role for students with special education needs. Sport is indeed beyond physical abilities and activities. It plays a multi-faceted role in society in comprehending the sophisticated ways of making meanings and interactions in our daily activities. Sport is used as a tool for integration [15]; [16]; [29]; for disability promotion and awareness [22]; for inclusion and exclusion [11]; [21]; for peace-building in the community [10]; [17]; [19] as well as for enhancing socialisation and life skills [5]; [8]; [9]; [14]; [27]. Almost all roles played by sports are relevant for students with special education needs.

Despite its multi-dimensional roles; sport for disability in Malaysia is evolving and progressing gradually. But it is in need of a suitable approach in managing the activities through programmes like the non-disabled sporting activities that offer a different spectrum of opportunities to athletes. Additionally; sports may be among the entities that create challenges for students because of the exclusionary nature of their system (in education and sports). Hence; it is not an exaggeration that the exclusion of education and sporting systems for students with special education needs provides positive and negative outcomes [4] as the nation continues to move towards becoming a comprehensive and inclusive society.

Nevertheless; the findings of this research should not be generalized. It recommends that education and sports sectors; especially stakeholders and policy-makers; play a more active role to engage students with disabilities in sports. The aims of becoming a sporting nation will be in jeopardy if the direction of sports for disabled people; especially among females; is uncertain and restricted. It is virtuous that they participate in sports to achieve a different set of goals in their life. However; the assurance of continuing interest in sports after completing school; especially among female athletes with disabilities is somewhat disturbing [4]; [6]. The government; through the ministries of education and sports; has invested significantly to ensure their maximum participation in sports; physical and leisure activities. The achievements of Malaysian female athletes with disabilities at the international stage have improved significantly. Indeed; designing the right strategies and plans in the educational system will allow future disabled sporting stars; particularly among female athletes with disabilities; to shine.

## V. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell; this study generates social awareness about the experiences in sports among female student-athletes with disabilities. Every relevant entity such as school managers; parents; peers and coaches are responsible for making the lessons more meaningful. They must play their role to encourage present athletes to continue their interest in sports. Sports participation has proven a life-changing experience in which athletes learn about the principles of team spirit; leadership and create a sense of belonging in the community. All these will enhance their motivation; happiness as well as health and well-being. By supporting them to participate in sports; actively and competitively; it debunks the outdated belief that this segment of society is vulnerable and helpless.

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