



## A LITERATURE REVIEW ON GENDER STEREOTYPES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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### Abstract:

Regardless of the continued efforts towards gender equality, gender stereotypes are still apparent within the educational framework. The present paper is selectively reviewing women's history in domains such as society, education, sports, and physical education (PE). For this review, important research findings were examined that address equality issues. Throughout the review, a comparison was further attempted between the available literature on gender stereotypes in Physical Education in Cyprus and around the Globe. In conclusion, it was recognised that although women's role in sports is increasingly perceived as more important, there is still a lot of work to be done aiming at the furtherment of equality in many aspects including Physical Education.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, physical education, review, gender equality

### 1. Background of Gender Differences in Education

Gender stereotypes in the school curriculum, regardless of the country of origin, have been well studied (Aggeli & Lesta, 2018, Tsiakalos, 2002). In the class of physical education, secondary schools had the divided-sex teaching in PE as something standard for many years and in some schools, they still practice it. This contradicts the fact that regardless of many years receiving lessons together in subjects including Maths, Languages, Science, etc (mixed genders), nevertheless, the subject of PE was (and in some

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cases still is) taught separating boys from girls and choosing different physical activities for each gender (Mckenzie, Prochaska, Sallis, & LaMaster, 2004). Additionally, although in primary schools, children are mainly taught together PE, they are still separated on certain occasions such as playing team sports. Therefore, it is not surprising that gender stereotypes that are evident in PE have been well examined throughout the years (Flintoff, 1993; Waddington, Malcolm & Cobb, 1998; Mckenzie, *et al.*, 2004; Shimon, 2005; Metcalfe, 2018; Alonso Gomez, Rosa Camacho & Ruiz Herrero, 2021). An example of an evident gender segregation in PE was given by Hargreaves and Anderson (2014) when back in the nineteenth-century girls participated in more feminine appropriated sports such as gymnastics and boys participated in more team games like rugby and cricket. While generally, education has evolved, the progress has been more in theory than reality, as the prevailing ideas concerning genders in PE have only faintly changed. Lastly, Hargreaves argues that *“most secondary-aged boys are systematically shut off from expressive movement experience and are schooled into physical robustness and aggressive competition, whilst girls are guided into creativity and co-operation”* (1994, p.153).

An important step towards equality in PE was the official alteration from boys' and girls' groups to mixed groups in school PE, which took place gradually in Europe in the early 80s. Unfortunately, this change occurred hastily in many countries, without the PE teachers obtaining the appropriate training, and as a result, had the mixed teaching strengthen gender inequalities (Chroni, 2006; Hargreaves and Anderson, 2014). Further, Brown (2005) mentioned that the essential role the PE teacher has, who during his/her socialisation, he/she grows up being taught to separate the gender in all the aspects of the social life. Consequently, when this individual is in the position of educator, he/she teaches in the same way that he/she was trained, by using typical gender approaches, thus maintaining the already existing gender situation (see also: Preece & Bullingham, 2022).

O'Sullivan *et al.* (in Penney, 2002), further mentioned that the mixed environment in PE is not fully compatible with equality of opportunity, as on the one hand, it is recorded abstention, reluctance, and passivity by girls and on the other hand, participation, effort, and energy by boys. It has also been reported that in a mixed class, each gender chooses to participate in different sports but also, if females choose to participate together with males in the same sport, they do it in different ways. These views are also mentioned in the PE Teacher's manual for the third grade of high school in Greece and Cyprus (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2003). Specifically, within the teacher's manual, it is pointed out that girls prefer physical activities that do not include physical contact, such as volleyball and racquet sports, while boys prefer dynamic sports with intense physical activity, such as basketball, football, and handball. However, considering that many schools in Cyprus do not have the sports facilities for the sports liked by girls, this limitation gives further opportunities for participation in sports that boys like more, such as football or basketball, and much less in those preferred by girls. This is further supported by the fact that many times in Greek and Cypriot schools, there is no volleyball court available, but even if there was, most of the time the net will not be operational,

while it is much easier to find a way to create goal posts and play football (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2003).

In a study by Lirgg (1991), it was claimed by girls that when they exercise with peers of their gender, they can get leadership roles that are usually predominantly occupied by boys. They can also develop their existing support networks and avoid unnecessary criticisms. Additionally, when Schippers (2007) studied the views of female students, he concluded that single-gender classes in PE have in general further advantages, as the presence of the opposite gender tends to create an unpleasant environment in the class, orienting to the problems of coexistence of the two genders rather than learning. However, a study by Hill *et al.* (2012) identified that a significant percentage of secondary school teachers believed that mixed classes are more effective towards gender socialisation. Hence, through this method, more positive attitudes are developed between the genders. Similarly, Couturier *et al.* (2007), suggest that girls' interaction with boys in the PE lesson makes the lesson more attractive and although boys may be playing differently than girls, they can still find it very interesting to cooperate with them and further learn through their skills and strategies.

Concluding, the problem of gender equality in education and more specifically in PE is global (Sekhar & Parameswari, 2020; Preece & Bullingham, 2020; Islam & Asadullah, 2018). Governments around the world, are trying to face this issue using policies and promoting different educational models. However, the direct impact of these efforts is not yet evident. Education is considered the key to eliminating gender stereotypes which lead to gender discrimination and gender inequalities in social life overall (EIGE, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to find the most effective way in which education will be the vessel of gender equality.

## 2. The Woman in Society and Education

The woman, in the long history of mankind, had nothing to do with politics, economics, art, etc. She was mostly concerned only with domestic activities allowed by the male of the family and with what nature itself endowed her with, the motherhood. The woman's involvement in sports, over time, advanced slowly, similarly to her social status (Flintoff, & Scraton, 2011; Flintoff & Scraton, 2013). But despite the many obstacles and barriers imposed by society in different sectors such as political, social, labour, cultural, etc., which are predominated by men, women have demonstrated equality.

Women, for many years, in most societies have had fewer opportunities than men in the workplace. Even now in the 21st century, men continue to have dominance, albeit to a lesser degree. This ascendancy is due to the patriarchy which lurks behind attitudes where that have become part of people's lives without them even realising it (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). However, lately, women's role in society has improved, and in many cases are considered to be multifunctional beings (Camus, 2015). In addition to mother and wife, as is the case of countless women around the world, they are also heads of household with the fruits of their labour. But despite this, many women still face distressing, unfair, violent, and other situations which are very similar to those identified

back in the Middle Ages. Hence, in some parts of the world, societies are still not fully evolved, as there are individuals who are incapable of understanding the equality between men and women, only thinking that feminism is the superiority of women over men, being afraid of what might happen to them (Alonso Gomez *et al.*, 2021). To conclude, despite the evolution of women, the problems of unequal treatment of the two gender problems still exist, but fortunately to a lesser extent than in the past. For this reason, women's struggle may continue.

Research has further revealed that males and females have different choices in occupations (*see* Francis & Skelton, 2005; Wessel, 2005); a phenomenon that does not seem surprising taking into consideration the continuous contact with role models and tendencies that they try to reproduce. For example, in Cyprus, a country in which gender stereotypes are still vivid, girls tend to choose more “female” subjects and occupations such as History (6% boys compared to 21.4% girls) whereas boys choose fields and subjects more “male” oriented such as technology (16.5% boys compared to 3.7% girls) (*see* Statistical Service, 2017). These results are generalised across Europe where females in higher education choose mainly from the social sciences fields and males from technology, mathematics engineering, and science (Caprile *et al.*, 2015; European Commission, 2016). This stereotyping pattern of choices towards their careers results in women being concentrated in low-income occupations in Europe. Consequently, a pay disparity between men and women is created reaching 16.4% (Eurostat, 2016). These facts are active restrictions on future occupational choices of both genders, as it is difficult to go against the “nature” of your gender by choosing an occupation that does not meet gender expectations (Kalantari, 2012). Fighting against gender stereotyping cultures will provide boys and girls with the opportunity to choose freely, without being influenced, their future occupation. Once this is established, then gender equality in labour will be also limited.

### **3. Women’s History in Sport and Physical Education**

Today, women still participate in physical activities and sports less than men. A recent example of this discrepancy is the Cyprus delegation that attended the 19th Mediterranean Games in Algeria. Out of 111 athletes, only 39 were women. In 2018, in Spain, a total of 3648 athletes attended of which only 1468 were women (*see* Mediterranean Games official website). Historically, it was not until 1900 that women began to appear in important competitions such as the Olympic Games, limited to tennis and golf. In 1922, the International Athletics Federation refused to include women's events in the World Championships, but in 1928, Alice Milliat, an influential female in women’s sport managed to get some events included in the World Championships. While the 1950s and 60s saw some developments for women’s sports, it wouldn’t be until the movement of the Federal Legislation (commonly referred to as Title IX) of the Education Act in 1972 that women were handled more equally in sports (Park & Hult, 1993).

While equal access to sports is assured under laws and regulations in most countries, the continuous fight for genuine equal opportunity remains to this day. Specifically, most educational systems such as the one in Cyprus ensure, at least in theory, the equal treatment of all students. However, the school, in general, could not claim to be free of social and gender stereotypes. As feminist theory (Brabeck and Brown, 1997) has established through several studies on education, the school has the tendency to reflect and promote gender inequality, gender stereotypes, and male domination (Deligianni & Kouimtzi, 2010). Hence, it is interesting that in Cyprus very few studies focused on gender stereotypes and education and none of them examined this issue within the physical education domain.

#### **4. Practices and Recommendations**

##### **4.1. Education Practices Associated with Gender Stereotypes**

There are several situations in which both teachers and students encourage the separation/difference between the two genders. Hidalgo and Almonacid (2014) examined the gender stereotypes that occur in PE classes, from the teachers' and the students' perspectives. Four classes were analysed, and a survey was carried out with four female teachers and one male teacher. Thirty-two hours of observation also took place to note anything related to the aim. The results of this study showed that in general, PE classes were carried out in mixed groups, although this was not always the case. Sometimes girls were given different activities than boys, with teachers supporting that the two genders have different physical abilities and therefore different activities would be more suitable for girls. In contrast, a study by Preece and Bullingham (2020) remarked that PE teachers did not attribute stereotype reproduction to themselves. Overall, this study demonstrated that gender discrimination and discourses on feminine or masculine character, are still noticeable within physical education.

When a PE teacher develops positive or negative expectations based on the gender of his or her students, then the teacher can influence their behaviours and even reinforce gender inequality, both, in terms of achievement, and participation. This phenomenon is described as a self-fulfilling prophecy and research has shown that the gender factor can positively influence its existence (Papaioannou, Theodorakis & Goudas, 1999). When illustrating this phenomenon in PE, when a PE teacher starts teaching at the beginning of the year, he/she develops certain expectations for the behaviour and the performance of the boys and girls participating in the class. Based on these expectations, teachers treat boys and girls differently and this behaviour is recognised by both male and female students, and it further indicates to them how they are expected to behave and perform.

##### **2.2 Recommendations for Maintaining Gender Equality**

Further, the World Health Organisation (WHO) is strongly suggesting that the Physical Education class should move away from the "girl-friendly" sports framework and look for ways to make all sports and physical activities accessible to all children, regardless of their gender (World Health Organization, 2004). Although teachers can play a significant

role in recreating gender stereotypes, they can also have an essential role in eliminating those stereotypes. WHO (2004) is also stating that the PE teachers must recognise that their subject is setting the foundation of gaining the habit of a lifelong physical activity and therefore any strategies they use, should be oriented towards increasing the participation of both genders. Further, PE teachers need to adjust the class programmes to meet children's interests, encourage, reward effort, and differentiate between children in terms of ability rather than gender. Finally, using appropriate language, utilising role models of both genders, and correcting any behaviour related to gender discrimination could address any gender inequalities that occur during the class (Chroni, Koskeridou, Hasandra, Zourbanos, Goudas, and Theodorakis, 2011).

As Chroni *et al.*, (2011) indicated, PE teachers should be careful not to discriminate nor reproduce stereotypes. At the same time, when they interact with students, they must respect the rights, values, and abilities of all pupils. Where inequality is recorded between students, the PE teacher can help them understand the principles of equality in the classroom.

## 5. Gender Stereotypes in PE around the World

As gender stereotypes have been a well-researched subject, it is a surprise that around the Globe, only several studies occurred assessing gender stereotypes in the subject of PE. Specifically, in Spain, Alonso *et al.*, (2021), after they reviewed the gender stereotypes in PE classes, also surveyed PE teachers from primary and secondary schools. Results of the survey revealed that some teachers still have some negative attitudes towards a change in equality, both in physical education and in other areas such as sports. This was revealed by acts such as the allocation of one gender to a particular sport. Their results were in line with Flintoff's (1993) conclusion that UK teachers were still against equal gender learning. Further, a survey in England by Waddington, Malcolm, and Cobb (1998), revealed that the actions and attitudes of PE teachers continued to affect gender stereotypes. Within this survey, on the one hand, male PE teachers perceived for example dance as a more "female" activity, and on the other hand, female teachers perceived activities occurring outside as "male's".

While it appears that initially, male and female PE teachers acknowledge gender equality as a principle, their views on certain gender-specific issues and the educational practices they follow, often do not support their general beliefs (Tzikas, 1994). Teachers on many occasions, do not realise that they are operating stereotypically, in which the traditional male values are produced and reproduced (Deligianni & Ziogou, 1999). Nicaise, Bois, Fairclough, Amorose and Coggerino, (2007) noted in France that many physical education teachers often use praising and offer technical information more to female students than the male. Such alleged "anti-stereotypical" behaviours instead of eliminating stereotypes can even lead to an evolution of stereotypes in favour of women (Bois *et al.*, 2002; Schippers, 2007). Papaioannou *et al.*, (2003) pointed out that in Greece, numerous times PE teachers introduce customised rules in the teaching of sports based on the gender of their students to encourage girls and gender cooperation. However, this

approach is considered mainly problematic as it can reinforce stereotypes about the superiority of boys and the inferiority of girls (Kelly *et al.*, 2005).

Considering that the information PE teachers promote has a crucial impact on defining gender stereotypes, it is frustrating to realise that some PE teachers around the world do not assume it the same way. For example, in Spain, several PE teachers still follow the traditional teaching models (Castillo, 2009; Castillo, Romero, González, & Campos, 2012), meaning that the teachers who follow these models continue practicing gender discrimination in PE/education (Brown & Chu, 2012). Additionally, in the United States, a study by Leaper and Brown (2008) indicated that teachers of both genders had different behaviour in the classroom toward male and female students. This difference in their behaviour was directly reflected in the behaviour of their students. Studies from France and Greece further supported the conclusion by Leaper and Brown (Trouilloud, Sarrazin, Martinek, and Guillet, 2002). Zaravigka and Pantazis (2012) in Greece, identified that PE teachers did not provide even opportunities for male and female students in their classes. Moreover, studies in France (Lentillon, Cogérino, & Kaestner, 2006), Canada (Duffy, Warren, & Walsh, 2001), and the United States (Davis, 2003) reported that gender inequality is enhanced by the teachers' encouragement of male students which on numerous occasions was more than their female peers. In Turkey, Temel and Gullu (2016) mentioned that although the national PE education structure is set out in a way that does not inspire gender stereotypes, the reality within the classes was observed to be different.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, women's history was reviewed, in areas including society, education, sports, and physical education. As noted earlier, a comparison of the literature on gender stereotypes in physical education in Cyprus and around the Globe was also attempted. In general, it was recognised that even though the role of women in sports is improved and developed, there is still a lot to be done and many divergences to be met. This review further supports and agrees with Scraton's (1993, p.152) statement that the elimination of gender stereotypes in PE *'will require both short-term reforms within the school and longer-term structural change within the social, political, and economic system'*. The same view was supported by many other recent studies (See Carcamo *et al.*, 2020, Wingrave, 2018). It is recommended that in the future, studies should be focused on understanding the growth of the stereotypical attitudes that lead the genders' motivations towards the performance of physical activities.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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