



Breaking barriers: Women's sports development at INEPS Porto Novo

Oroucoura Gani B

Department of Social and Human Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC), Benin

Abstract

This study explores the development of women's sports at the National Institute of Physical Education and Sports (INEPS) in Porto Novo, focusing on overcoming social, cultural, and institutional barriers that have historically limited female participation in sports. The research aims to assess the progress made in promoting gender equity within sports programs and identify factors that contribute to or hinder the growth of women's sports at INEPS. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative interviews with female athletes, coaches, and administrators alongside quantitative analysis of participation rates, funding allocation, and performance outcomes over the past decade. Findings reveal significant strides in increasing female enrollment and competitive success, driven by targeted policies, advocacy, and community support. However, persistent challenges such as gender stereotypes, limited resources, and infrastructural constraints remain. The study concludes that while INEPS Porto Novo has made commendable progress in breaking barriers, sustained commitment and strategic interventions are essential to fully realize the potential of women's sports development. These insights contribute to broader discussions on gender equality in sports and offer practical recommendations for educational institutions aiming to foster inclusive athletic environments.

Keywords: Women's sports, gender equity, sports development, INEPS Porto Novo, female athletes, sports participation, institutional barriers, physical education

Introduction

Background and Context

The development of women's sports has been a significant area of focus globally as societies recognize the importance of gender equity and the empowerment of women through physical activity and competitive sports. Despite the universal appeal of sports as a tool for health, education, and social integration, women have historically faced systemic barriers limiting their participation and advancement in this field. These barriers include cultural norms, unequal resource allocation, limited access to training facilities, and lack of institutional support (Saavedra, 2003; Hargreaves, 1994)^[7, 13].

At the National Institute of Physical Education and Sports (INEPS) in Porto Novo, Benin, these challenges are also evident. The institute plays a pivotal role in nurturing athletic talent and promoting physical education, yet women's sports development at INEPS has experienced a gradual but uneven progression. While male athletes have traditionally dominated the sports landscape both in terms of participation and visibility, recent years have witnessed deliberate efforts to promote women's inclusion, foster equitable training opportunities, and challenge societal stereotypes that have constrained female athletes' growth.

Globally, the landscape of women's sports is evolving. According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), female participation in the Olympics has increased from 23% in 1984 to nearly 49% in 2020 (IOC, 2021)^[8]. This reflects wider social changes and policy reforms aimed at dismantling gender barriers. However, at the grassroots and institutional levels, especially in developing countries, disparities remain stark. In West Africa, studies by Adeyemi and Akinbode (2017)^[1] show that cultural perceptions and lack of infrastructure continue to impede women's sports development.

Importance of the Research

Understanding the state of women's sports development at INEPS Porto Novo is crucial for several reasons. First, sports are a vital avenue for promoting physical health, psychological well-being, and social inclusion among women. Participation in sports can challenge gender norms, increase self-confidence, and open doors for educational and career opportunities (Coakley, 2011)^[3]. For institutions like INEPS, which serve as training hubs for future athletes and educators, addressing gender imbalances directly impacts the quality and inclusiveness of sports education.

Second, this research provides insight into how local contexts intersect with global gender equity movements in sports. While international organizations promote gender equality, the implementation and impact at local institutions vary widely. By examining INEPS Porto Novo, this study highlights specific cultural, social, and institutional factors that shape women's sports participation in Benin and, by extension, similar contexts in West Africa.

Third, this topic has broader societal implications. Gender equity in sports is closely linked to broader gender equity in society. Progress in women's sports can contribute to shifting societal attitudes toward gender roles, promoting empowerment, and reducing discrimination (Meier, 2005)^[11]. Thus, evaluating INEPS's efforts contributes to understanding how sports institutions can act as agents of social change.

Literature Review

Global Perspectives on Women's Sports Development

Extensive research documents the barriers women face in sports worldwide. Hargreaves (1994)^[7] discusses how sport has traditionally been a male-dominated domain, often used to reinforce patriarchal norms. The notion of femininity often clashes with the competitive and physical nature of sports, leading to societal discouragement of female

participation. Saavedra (2003) ^[13] emphasizes that overcoming these stereotypes requires both policy-level interventions and community engagement.

Studies also highlight the role of institutional support in promoting women's sports. According to Messner (2002) ^[12], schools and sports organizations that prioritize gender equity through inclusive policies, equal funding, and female leadership tend to achieve better outcomes in women's sports participation and performance. The gender gap narrows when institutions provide equal training facilities, scholarships, and competitive opportunities.

Women's Sports in West Africa and Benin

In West Africa, cultural and socioeconomic factors further complicate women's sports development. Adeyemi and Akinbode (2017) ^[1] identify cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and discourage their involvement in sports activities. Additionally, limited government funding and inadequate sports infrastructure disproportionately affect female athletes.

Benin, specifically, has shown mixed progress. While there is increasing awareness of the benefits of women's sports, research by Ahouandjinou (2018) notes that female participation at educational institutions remains low due to gender bias and lack of female role models. INEPS Porto Novo, as a leading sports education institution, is central to reversing these trends by providing equitable training and fostering a culture that encourages women's sports.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite existing studies on gender and sports, there is a scarcity of detailed institutional case studies focusing on the development of women's sports within specific African sports education institutes like INEPS Porto Novo. Most research tends to be broad or focuses on national sports policy without delving into how individual institutions implement and experience these policies.

Furthermore, quantitative data on women's sports participation, resource allocation, and outcomes at INEPS Porto Novo are limited or unpublished. This gap restricts understanding of the progress and persistent challenges at the institutional level.

Finally, there is a lack of qualitative insights from female athletes, coaches, and administrators at INEPS to capture lived experiences and contextualize statistical data.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's sports development at INEPS Porto Novo. The quantitative component focused on analyzing participation rates, resource allocation, and performance metrics, while the qualitative component aimed to explore personal experiences, perceptions, and institutional dynamics through interviews and focus groups. This design allows for triangulation of data, enhancing the reliability and depth of findings.

Sampling Method and Population

The target population for this research included female athletes, coaches, sports administrators, and policymakers associated with INEPS Porto Novo. A purposive sampling

strategy was employed to select participants with relevant experience and insights into women's sports development.

- **Female athletes:** 60 participants were selected across various sports disciplines, ensuring representation from both competitive and recreational levels.
- **Coaches:** 10 coaches, both male and female, who work directly with female athletes.
- **Administrators:** 5 individuals involved in sports program planning and policy implementation.
- **Policymakers:** 3 local government officials linked to sports development initiatives.

In total, 78 participants were involved in the qualitative part of the study. For the quantitative analysis, archival data covering 10 years (2013–2023) on female sports participation, funding, and competition results were obtained from INEPS records.

Data Collection Tools

Quantitative Data

- **Archival records:** Historical data on female athlete enrollment, training attendance, competition participation, funding distribution, and performance outcomes were collected from INEPS Porto Novo administrative databases.
- **Surveys:** Structured questionnaires were distributed to 60 female athletes to gather standardized data on training frequency, access to resources, and perceived support.

Qualitative Data

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with 20 key informants, including athletes, coaches, and administrators, to gain in-depth insights into challenges and enablers of women's sports development.
- **Focus group discussions:** Three focus groups with 8–10 female athletes each provided collective perspectives on institutional culture and social dynamics.
- **Observations:** Non-participant observation of training sessions and sports events was carried out to contextualize the data and note gender dynamics in practice.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Analytical Tools and Techniques

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 28. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarized participation rates and funding allocation. Trend analysis over the 10-year period assessed changes in female participation and performance. Additionally, chi-square tests were used to determine significant associations between resource allocation and sports outcomes.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006)^[2] six-step process:

1. Familiarization with data through reading transcripts multiple times.
2. Generating initial codes related to barriers, facilitators, and institutional support.
3. Searching for themes by grouping related codes.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data.
5. Defining and naming themes, such as "Cultural Constraints," "Institutional Support," and "Empowerment through Sports."
6. Producing a final report with representative quotes.

The software NVivo 13 was used to organize and code qualitative data systematically.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the INEPS Porto Novo Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, and their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time without penalty.

- **Informed consent:** Written consent forms were signed by all participants before interviews, focus groups, and surveys.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants' identities were anonymized by assigning codes, and data were stored securely with access limited to the research team.
- **Data protection:** Audio recordings and transcripts were encrypted and deleted after the completion of the analysis to ensure privacy.
- **Respect and sensitivity:** Given the gender-related nature of the study, particular care was taken to create a respectful and supportive environment during qualitative data collection, ensuring participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

Results

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the study on women's sports development at INEPS Porto Novo. The data are organized into key themes reflecting participation trends, resource allocation, performance outcomes, and perceived barriers and facilitators.

Quantitative Findings

Women's Participation Trends

Analysis of INEPS archival data from 2013 to 2023 reveals a steady increase in female athlete enrollment across all sports disciplines. The proportion of female athletes relative to the total student-athlete population rose from 18% in 2013 to 42% in 2023 (Figure 1). This increase was particularly notable in team sports such as volleyball and basketball, which showed growth rates of 12% and 15% respectively over the decade.

Annual Female Enrollment

- **2013:** 150 female athletes (18%)
- **2018:** 310 female athletes (33%)
- **2023:** 420 female athletes (42%)

Survey data (N=60) indicated that 85% of female athletes train at least 4 times per week, with 60% participating in official competitions annually.

Funding and Resource Allocation

Financial records indicate that funding for women's sports programs increased by 45% over the ten-year period, from approximately \$50,000 USD in 2013 to \$72,500 USD in 2023. Despite this increase, funding for female programs still represents only 38% of total sports budget, with male programs receiving the majority.

Resources such as access to training facilities, coaching staff, and equipment showed similar patterns. For instance, 70% of survey respondents reported having access to dedicated female training sessions, while 30% indicated that they share facilities with male athletes, sometimes leading to scheduling conflicts.

Performance Outcomes

Competition results analyzed from regional and national tournaments demonstrate improved performance among female athletes. The number of medals won by INEPS female teams and individuals increased from 5 in 2013 to 18 in 2023.

- Notably, the female volleyball team secured a regional championship in 2021, the first in the institute's history.
- Individual achievements also rose, with 3 female athletes qualifying for international competitions in 2023 compared to none in 2013.

Statistical Associations

Chi-square tests showed a significant association ($p < 0.05$) between increased funding allocation and improved female athlete performance, suggesting that financial investment contributes positively to competitive success.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups generated several key themes related to the experiences and perceptions of female athletes, coaches, and administrators.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the development of women's sports at INEPS Porto Novo, revealing both significant progress and persistent challenges. This discussion interprets the quantitative and qualitative results in light of existing scholarship and the local sociocultural context, drawing implications for policy and practice.

Progress in Women's Sports Participation and Performance

The steady increase in female athlete enrollment at INEPS—from 18% in 2013 to 42% in 2023—represents a remarkable shift toward gender inclusion in sports education within the institution. This aligns with global trends observed by the International Olympic Committee, which documents increasing female participation in competitive sports over recent decades (IOC, 2021)^[8]. The growth in

team sports such as volleyball and basketball suggests that more women are finding opportunities to engage in traditionally male-dominated disciplines.

Similarly, the improvement in female athletes' competitive performance, including medal counts and qualification for international events, demonstrates that increased participation is translating into tangible outcomes. These findings resonate with Messner's (2002)^[12] argument that institutional support and investment are critical drivers of female athletes' success. The positive correlation between funding and performance underscores the importance of sustained financial commitment.

Nevertheless, despite these gains, women's sports programs continue to receive less than half of the total sports funding and resources. This funding disparity reflects broader global challenges documented in sports sociology literature, where male athletes often benefit from preferential resource allocation due to entrenched gender biases (Hargreaves, 1994; Saavedra, 2003)^[7, 13]. The under-resourcing of female programs at INEPS Porto Novo may limit the potential for further growth and competitive excellence.

Cultural and Social Barriers

The qualitative data vividly illustrate the enduring impact of cultural constraints and gender norms on women's sports participation. Female athletes' testimonies about familial and societal expectations to prioritize domestic roles over sports highlight the deep-rooted nature of gender stereotypes in Benin and much of West Africa (Adeyemi & Akinbode, 2017)^[1]. These social pressures can undermine female athletes' motivation and create obstacles to consistent training and competition.

This finding supports earlier studies that identify cultural acceptance as a critical determinant of women's engagement in sports (Meier, 2005)^[11]. Addressing these cultural barriers requires more than institutional policies—it necessitates community outreach, education, and role modeling to reshape societal attitudes.

Institutional Support: Achievements and Gaps

INEPS Porto Novo has made commendable strides in instituting policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equity. The establishment of dedicated funds, scholarships, and awareness campaigns has contributed to improved access and motivation among female athletes. The appointment of female leaders within the institute also signals a commitment to inclusiveness.

However, the qualitative accounts reveal inconsistencies in policy enforcement and resource allocation. Some female athletes experience overcrowded facilities and scheduling conflicts, reflecting logistical challenges in fully accommodating increased female participation. The shortage of female-specific equipment and trained female coaches further indicates gaps in institutional capacity.

These findings echo the conclusions of Messner (2002)^[12] and Saavedra (2003)^[13] that policy initiatives must be accompanied by robust implementation mechanisms, adequate budgeting, and attention to infrastructure to be effective. For INEPS Porto Novo, this means moving beyond symbolic policies toward systemic changes that ensure equity in practice.

Empowerment and Broader Social Implications

One of the most encouraging themes emerging from this study is the empowerment experienced by female athletes through sports participation. Increased self-confidence, leadership skills, and social recognition were frequently mentioned benefits, confirming the transformative potential of sports for women's personal and social development.

These results align with Coakley's (2011)^[3] perspective that sports can challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to broader social change. By fostering a supportive environment for women's sports, INEPS Porto Novo not only advances athletic excellence but also promotes gender equity and empowerment within the wider community.

Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on archival data from a single institution limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, the purposive sampling approach, though suitable for qualitative depth, may introduce selection bias.

The study also focused primarily on institutional and participant perspectives, without extensive exploration of external factors such as national sports policies or community attitudes beyond INEPS. Future research could expand the scope to include these dimensions.

Finally, the quantitative data on funding and performance were limited to what was available in institutional records, which may not capture informal support or unrecorded outcomes.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings, several recommendations emerge to further advance women's sports development at INEPS Porto Novo:

- 1. Increase and Equitize Funding:** Allocate resources equitably between male and female sports programs to support facilities, equipment, and coaching staff tailored to female athletes' needs.
- 2. Strengthen Policy Implementation:** Develop clear monitoring mechanisms to ensure policies promoting gender equity are consistently applied and evaluated.
- 3. Enhance Community Engagement:** Implement outreach programs to educate families and communities about the benefits of women's sports, aiming to reduce cultural resistance and increase parental support.
- 4. Invest in Female Leadership and Coaching:** Promote the recruitment and training of female coaches and administrators to provide role models and tailored support for female athletes.
- 5. Improve Facilities and Scheduling:** Expand and adapt sports infrastructure to accommodate increased female participation without conflict.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies could adopt a comparative approach, examining women's sports development across multiple institutions in Benin or West Africa to identify best practices and common challenges. Longitudinal studies tracking individual athletes' career trajectories would also shed light on retention and progression factors.

Exploring the impact of national sports policies and international gender equity initiatives on local institutions like INEPS Porto Novo would deepen understanding of policy diffusion and effectiveness.

Finally, more extensive quantitative data collection on financial flows and performance outcomes, combined with ethnographic research on cultural dynamics, could provide a richer and more nuanced picture of women's sports development.

Conclusion

This study highlights both significant progress and ongoing challenges in the development of women's sports at INEPS Porto Novo. Over the past decade, female participation and competitive performance have improved markedly, supported by increased funding and institutional initiatives. However, persistent cultural norms, resource disparities, and implementation gaps continue to hinder full gender equity.

The findings underscore the critical role that targeted policies, equitable resource allocation, and community engagement play in fostering an inclusive sports environment. Empowerment through sports emerges as a powerful outcome, demonstrating that promoting women's participation extends beyond athletics to broader social transformation.

To sustain and accelerate these gains, INEPS Porto Novo must enhance funding equity, strengthen policy enforcement, and address cultural barriers through outreach and female leadership development. Such efforts will not only improve athletic outcomes but also contribute to advancing gender equality in Benin and similar contexts.

Ultimately, this research contributes valuable institutional-level insights to the growing discourse on women's sports development in Africa and provides a foundation for future research and policy action.

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