

Negotiating Gender Equity in College Physical Education: Lived Experiences of Female Bachelor of Physical Education Students

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Abstract: Physical Education (PE) is important for student health and growth, but gender stereotypes still cause problems in college PE programs. Most studies look at younger students, so we know less about female college students who are training to become PE teachers. This study looks at the real-life experiences of female Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) students regarding fairness, challenges, and support in their classes. This study used a qualitative research design focused on real-life experiences. The researchers interviewed 20 female BPED students using open-ended questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission, written down, and organized in Microsoft Excel to find common topics and answers. The findings show clear differences in expectations for male and female students. People usually expect male students to be stronger, faster, and better at hard physical activities. Female students are mostly expected to do well in dance, flexibility, and coordination or are seen as less physical. Sexist expectations still exist in college PE teacher training. To fix this, schools need better facilities, fairer grading, equal support, and inclusive teaching methods to help female PE students succeed.

1. Introduction

Physical education (PE) is an essential component of holistic development, fostering physical fitness, mental health, motor skills, and social competencies that equip individuals for lifelong active engagement (UNESCO, 2015). To fully realize these benefits, PE programs must offer equal and inclusive learning environments for all students regardless of gender. However, ingrained gender stereotypes continue to shape students' experiences and participation despite ongoing legislative initiatives promoting equity. Boys are traditionally expected to demonstrate superior physical strength, competitiveness, and skill, whereas girls are frequently perceived as less athletic or less interested in sports (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2022). These prejudices manifest as unequal access to facilities, biased performance evaluations, restricted leadership opportunities, and exclusion from male-dominated sports all of which erode female students' self-esteem, motivation, and sense of belonging (Miller, 2026).

Dismantling these barriers is particularly critical for female students enrolled in the Bachelor of Physical Education (BPED) program. As pre-service educators preparing to become PE teachers and sports coaches, these women must develop strong competencies in instruction, leadership, and athletic performance to foster equitable learning environments for future generations (Avraam & Anagnostou, 2022). Nevertheless, female BPED students frequently encounter systemic obstacles during their professional preparation, including gendered expectations, biased assessments, and limited access to male-dominated sports. Overcoming these

hurdles requires targeted support mechanisms; research indicates that peer collaboration, inclusive pedagogical approaches, positive mentorship, and equal learning conditions significantly enhance pre-service teachers' resilience, self-efficacy, and professional identity (Kannangara et al., 2023). Understanding how these barriers and support systems intersect is vital for shaping the teaching philosophies and inclusive practices of future educators.

Despite expanding literature on gender equity in physical education, a notable gap remains. Existing research primarily focuses on the experiences of elementary and secondary school students, leaving the experiences of pre-service PE teachers in higher education teacher preparation programs largely unexplored (Luguetti et al., 2022). Consequently, teacher preparation programs lack adequate insights into how aspiring PE educators encounter, interpret, and address gender equity during their training.

To address this gap, this study examines the lived experiences, views, and perceptions of female Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd) students regarding gender equity, inclusion, diversity, and equality within their college physical education coursework. Specifically, it explores the gender-based challenges, barriers, and facility constraints that limit female students from fully benefiting from physical activities, as well as the growth-enabling opportunities they encounter (Işıkgöz et al., 2025; Manalad et al., 2026). Furthermore, this study gathers student-driven suggestions and recommendations to inform gender-aware PE curricula, instructional strategies, and resource allocation (Santos, 2026). Ultimately, the findings aim to guide curriculum design in higher education, support equitable teacher preparation environments, and ensure that physical education programs provide inclusive, accessible learning opportunities for all students regardless of gender.

Statement of the problem

This study will examine the barriers that female BPEd students encounter and describe how they perceive equity in their PE classes, specifically whether they are treated equally or not. It will also determine whether these barriers affect their participation in class and whether they encourage or hinder their interest in participating. Lastly, it will identify the support systems that aid their development and gather their recommendations for improving gender equity in teacher education. It aims to contribute to more inclusive and gender-responsive Physical Education programs.

1. How do female BPEd students describe their experiences of gender equity in Physical Education classes?
 - 1.1 (Expectations): What differences have you noticed in how male and female BPEd students are treated or expected to perform in your PE classes?
 - 1.2 (Classroom Environment): How do you feel about the way your professors grade and give feedback to female students compared to male students during practical activities?
2. What barriers and opportunities influence their participation in PE activities?
 - 2.1 Barriers: What challenges, unfair treatment, or facility problems make it hard for female students to fully join PE activities?
 - 2.2 Opportunities: What support from your professors or classmates has helped you build confidence and stay motivated in your BPEd classes?
3. What recommendations can they provide for creating gender-responsive PE programs?
 - 3.1 Teaching & Curriculum: What changes should be made to BPEd lessons and teaching methods to make activities fairer and more inclusive for female students?
 - 3.2 Facilities & Support: What improvements in school facilities, equipment, or policies are needed to better support female BPEd students?
 - 3.3

2. Methodology

In order to methodically investigate and comprehend the lived experiences, perceptions, and opinions of female Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd) students regarding gender equity in their college physical education classes, this study uses a qualitative phenomenological research design. Because it focuses on

capturing the essence of how people perceive, interpret, and make sense of a shared phenomenon within their natural academic setting, phenomenological inquiry is particularly well suited for this investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By adopting this approach, the study prioritizes the authentic voices of pre-service female educators, allowing for a deep examination of the subtle realities, gender-based barriers, and supportive structures they navigate throughout their professional preparation. Ultimately, this qualitative design provides a robust framework to uncover meaningful insights that can inform more inclusive, gender-responsive physical education curricula and teaching practices.

Sampling

This study utilizes a purposive sampling technique to select at least 20 female Bachelor of Physical Education (BPEd) students as participants. Purposive sampling was selected because it enables the deliberate recruitment of individuals with direct, firsthand experience navigating gender equity in college PE classes. A minimum of 20 participants ensures sufficient data depth to achieve thematic saturation, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of their shared experiences, challenges, and recommendations.

Data collection

Data will be collected using a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions designed to explore participants' lived experiences, gender-based barriers, facility constraints, growth opportunities, and recommendations for gender-responsive PE programs. To ensure accuracy and preserve the authenticity of responses, all interviews will be audio-recorded with the participants' explicit consent. Open-ended probing questions will be utilized during the interviews to obtain deeper qualitative insights and clarify specific participant responses. Following data collection, the qualitative responses will be organized and structured row-by-row in Microsoft Excel to facilitate thematic organization and algorithmic data analysis.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, supported by computer-assisted text processing. Transcribed participant responses will first be organized systematically in Microsoft Excel according to each research question. The data will then undergo algorithmic parsing to extract keywords, detect semantic patterns, and group recurring statements into initial codes. Through iterative review, these codes will be synthesized into overarching themes reflecting the lived experiences, gender-based barriers, growth-enabling opportunities, and recommendations of female BPEd students. To maintain qualitative rigor and confirmability, all identified themes will be substantiated by direct verbatim quotes from the participants.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the highest standards of integrity and participant protection, strict ethical protocols will be maintained throughout the study following institutional guidelines and applicable data privacy laws. Prior to data collection, administrative approval will be obtained from college authorities, and voluntary participation will be secured via written informed consent detailing the study's purpose, procedures, minimal risks, and the explicit right to withdraw at any time without academic penalty. To safeguard participant privacy and confidentiality, all personal identifiers will be anonymized using pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1), and audio recordings, transcripts, and data files will be stored in secure, password-protected cloud repositories accessible solely to the research team. All collected data will be utilized exclusively for academic purposes and permanently deleted upon the successful completion and defense of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

1.1 Differences in Expectations Placed on Male and Female Students

When it comes to physical ability, performance, and strength, female BPEd students frequently report a clear disparity in expectations. It is typically assumed that male students are inherently faster, stronger, and better able to manage physically demanding, high-intensity assignments. On the other hand, female students are often expected to perform better in activities that emphasize flexibility, dance, and fundamental movements, or they are perceived as having more limited physical capabilities.

"during our dance routines; they always ensured we could participate in every movement..." P1

"Professors or trainers tend to expect male students to be stronger and more competitive in strength-based activities, whereas female students are expected to excel in dance and flexibility..." P15

"Female students, on the other hand, may sometimes be expected to focus more on activities that require flexibility or coordination..." P2

"The guys are usually expected to be naturally stronger, faster, and better at high-contact sports, while the girls sometimes get lower expectations..." P4

While some students note that professors provide supportive encouragement, others express that lower physical expectations can subtly undermine female students' confidence, forcing them to work harder to prove their competence on the field.

These observations align with findings by Antalan (2026), who highlighted how gendered assumptions and traditional physical expectations create participation barriers for female students in higher education physical education settings.

1.2 Grading Practices and Feedback Dynamics

Most participants agree that formal grading systems (such as rubrics) are generally fair, objective, and based on effort, individual movement, and overall participation rather than gender. However, a key challenge arises when professors expect female students to match male physical output identically believing whatever men can do, women should do too. While intended to avoid double standards, this equal expectation creates excessive pressure during practical activities.

"I think the professors are fair to both male and female students, and their grades are based on performance..." P7

"One of the challenges we face here is encountering professors who believe that whatever men can do, women should be able to do as well..." P4

Professors tend to provide male students with more detailed, technical, and rigorous instruction when mistakes occur. For female students, feedback is often brief, overly lenient, or focused primarily on form rather than competitive performance. While some perceive this leniency as an advantage, many feel it reflects a subtle bias that fails to take female performance as seriously.

"Whenever they give feedback after a practical performance, it usually focuses on helping you fix your form and do better next time, which keeps things equal for everyone..." P4

"But the feedback differs; the focus for males is often on strength and competitiveness, while for females, it is on form. Sometimes, this creates a divide within the team—viewed by some as underestimating what we are actually capable of doing." P9

2.1 Physical, Structural, and Social Barriers

Female BPED students face significant structural and social challenges that impede their full participation, notably including inaccessible or poorly maintained changing facilities that lack privacy, a scarcity of sports equipment scaled to female body proportions, and persistent gender stereotyping that restricts their involvement in leadership and high-exertion activities.

"For me, one challenge is the lack of facilities, such as clean changing rooms and restrooms for female students..." P9

"Although the restroom at the SPEAR building has been improved, the space is still insufficient to accommodate many female students attending to personal needs. There are also times when there is a lack of equipment suitable for us..." P11

"They under-estimating the things can women do..." P8

These findings resonate with Narciso (2026), who noted that inadequate facilities, rigid gender expectations, and limited physical representation in PE programs compromise students' sense of safety and inclusion.

2.2 Motivational Factors and Support Systems

Support from professors, peers, and female classmates plays a crucial role in building confidence and sustaining motivation. Participants highlight that seeing female peers succeed, receiving non-judgmental

encouragement, and being granted equal leadership opportunities inspire them to push beyond perceived physical limits.

"What keeps me going is the people around me. Whenever I struggle with a workout or feel unsure about my skills, my professors and classmates step in to help and encourage me..." P4

"The encouragement and support of my professors and classmates help me build confidence and stay motivated..." P2

"For me, having equal opportunities to take on leadership roles and receiving constructive feedback from our professors is a huge help..." P8

As Manalad et al. (2026) observed, supportive social dynamics and positive reinforcement directly mitigate low motivation and anxiety among female college students in physical education.

3.1 Gender-Sensitive Teaching and Inclusive Curriculum

To create a more equitable learning environment, students emphasize the need for inclusive pedagogical strategies such as breaking down complex physical skills into manageable progressions, rotating leadership roles equally among all genders, and evaluating progress based on individual growth and teamwork rather than raw power.

"Practical activities shouldn't solely revolve around raw strength and agility..." P16

"Teaching methods should feature progressive learning, starting with foundational exercises before moving on to higher-intensity tasks for female students..." P18

"Physical activities shouldn't just be about strength and agility, and not comparing people so much, so that there is less fear of trying out different tasks..." P17

This perspective aligns with Santos (2026), who advocated for flexible, gender-equitable curricula and participatory teaching methodologies to ensure all college students can engage meaningfully in sports and physical education.

3.2 Facility Maintenance, Equipment Provision, and Institutional Policies

To support an equitable learning environment, participants highlighted several necessary institutional improvements across the university, including the maintenance of clean, safe, and accessible changing facilities near training areas, the provision of appropriately sized sports equipment to accommodate diverse physical capabilities, and the enforcement of clear anti-discrimination policies to prevent gender bias and exclusion during instruction.

"The university should also invest in various sizes of sports equipment and implement clear policies to prevent gender stereotyping or discrimination during training..." P6

"The school should also have clear policies against bias and programs that specifically support female students in sports and leadership roles so we can know we truly belong here..." P7

"Furthermore, upgrading our sports facilities and ensuring adequate equipment would make a huge difference in encouraging female students to participate fully and comfortably..." P18

By addressing facility shortages, standardizing gender-inclusive instructional methods, and delivering equal technical feedback, the BPED program can foster an environment where female students feel fully valued, capable, and empowered as future physical educators (Santos, 2024).

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that female BPED students experience a complex interplay of systemic support and persistent challenges in achieving true gender equity within physical education. Participants reported that pervasive gender-based expectations continue to influence performance perceptions, particularly in activities emphasizing strength, speed, and competitiveness. While grading systems were generally perceived as fair, some students experienced implicit pressure to match male physical standards, alongside instructional feedback disparities that undermined their confidence. Furthermore, female students encounter significant structural and social barriers, including inadequate changing facilities, limited access to equipment, and restrictive gender labeling that constrains leadership opportunities and active participation. Ultimately, these findings underscore that gender equity requires more than equal treatment; it demands responsive

institutional conditions, equitable resources, and sustained social support to foster fully inclusive and empowering learning environments.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings, colleges should strengthen gender-equitable policies and ensure equal access to facilities, equipment, sports participation, leadership opportunities, and training for all BPED students. PE instructors should adopt gender-sensitive and inclusive teaching and assessment practices that provide equal opportunities for students to participate, develop their skills, and demonstrate their abilities without gender-based assumptions regarding physical capabilities. Creating a supportive and non-discriminatory learning environment through positive encouragement from instructors and peers can help enhance students' confidence, participation, and engagement, particularly among female BPED students. Schools should also implement gender-sensitivity and awareness programs that challenge traditional gender stereotypes, promote gender equality in sports and physical activities, and provide support mechanisms for students who experience discrimination or exclusion. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies involving larger and more diverse samples across different institutions and educational settings to further strengthen the understanding of gender equity and students' gendered experiences in physical education.

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