Original Research

Sport, Disability, and Gender in the Global South: An Intersectional Study of Women's Sports Participation in Lao PDR (Laos)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the multilayered constraints and negotiation processes experienced by women with disabilities in Lao PDR (Laos). A qualitative case study approach was adopted, involving in-depth interviews with eight women actively engaged in sport. Drawing on the Hierarchical Model of Leisure Constraints (HMLC) and an intersectional perspective, the analysis examines how constraints on sport participation are shaped by the interaction of gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence. The findings reveal key intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints, including low self-efficacy, limited access to education and transport, restrictive family expectations, and stigma within the community. Despite these challenges, participants negotiated constraints through relocation to urban areas, the development of peer networks, engagement with disability support organizations, participation in sport competitions, and the maintenance of employment. These processes enabled participants to sustain sport participation and to gain greater recognition and support from their families and communities. By demonstrating how intersecting inequalities shape both constraints and negotiation processes in a Global South context, this study contributes to research on disability sport participation and highlights the value of intersectionality for understanding diverse experiences of sport participation.

INTRODUCTION

The development of sport environments for persons with disabilities has been conceptualized not only as a means of promoting health, but also as a matter of disability rights (Haslett et al., 2023). In high-income countries in particular, legal frameworks and policy measures related to disability sport have been progressively established, leading to expanded participation opportunities and improvements in competitive and institutional environments (Patatas et al., 2020). At the international level, a broad framework for the promotion of disability sport has thus been developed to a certain extent, and the diffusion of disability sport has incrementally advanced not only in the Global North but also in the Global South (Nagata et al., 2025).

However, compared with men with disabilities, women with disabilities have been shown to experience greater barriers to participation in sport and physical activity (Martin Ginis et al., 2021). In many countries in the Global South in particular, gender equality is not positioned as a top policy priority, and women are placed under structural constraints that differ qualitatively from those faced by women in high-income countries across key domains of everyday life, including education, employment, mobility, and leisure (UN Women, 2023). The disproportionate concentration of unpaid care work on women, the persistence of traditional gender role norms, and restricted access to public space and transportation have repeatedly been identified as factors that substantially limit women's everyday choices and opportunities for social participation (Kabeer, 2016). Within such social contexts, women with disabilities are therefore more likely to be placed in a particularly disadvantaged position in terms of access to physical activity and sport, compared with men with disabilities and women without disabilities (Mitra et al., 2013).

Although previous studies have increasingly examined broad structural barriers related to disability sport in the Global South, including limited institutional support, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, restricted mobility, and weak public understanding of disability sport (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Madhushani & Burnett, 2020; Nagata et al., 2025; Novak, 2014; Ojwang et al., 2025), systematic empirical research remains limited regarding how such barriers are experienced by women with disabilities in relation to multiple and intersecting social identities, including gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and place of residence. In particular, few studies have explicitly examined how these social identities intersect with constraints on sport participation and shape the ways in which women with disabilities engage with, respond to, or negotiate participation

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in everyday practice. Addressing this gap requires an analytical approach that can both organize constraints across different levels and interpret how those constraints become layered and qualitatively distinct in specific social contexts.

This study focuses on the Lao People's Democratic Republic (hereafter, Laos) as its study setting. Laos is classified by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country (United Nations, 2024). In recent years, institutional arrangements for the promotion of disability sport and participation in international competitions have gradually progressed (Endo et al., 2021; Nagata et al., 2025).

However, as Sánchez Rodríguez et al. (2021) argues, disability policy frameworks introduced at the international level do not always align with local social and cultural contexts, often overlooking intersecting factors such as poverty, place of residence, and gender. Against this background, Laos offers an important setting for examining how emerging institutional support for disability sport interacts with gendered norms, disability-related stigma, socioeconomic conditions, and rural–urban inequalities to shape women's opportunities for sport participation.

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to examine how women with disabilities in Laos experience and negotiate constraints on sport participation. More specifically, the aims of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints shaping sport participation among women with disabilities in Laos, and to examine how gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence intersect to shape these constraints within specific social and cultural contexts.
2. To examine how women with disabilities negotiate intersecting constraints and sustain their participation in sport over time.

This study focuses specifically on sport participation, understood as participation in organized, rule-governed, and often competitive physical activities (Coakley & Pike, 2014). Although the study draws on the leisure constraints literature, its empirical focus is women's participation in disability sport rather than physical activity or leisure more broadly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constraints and Negotiation Strategies in Sport Participation among Persons with Disabilities

Previous research has drawn on leisure constraints theory to examine why people with disabilities may be unable to begin or sustain participation in sport. Studies have identified multiple and interacting constraints, including health conditions, fatigue, pain, low self-efficacy, and fear of failure; limited understanding and support from family members, peers, and coaches; and inaccessible facilities, transportation difficulties, financial costs, and institutional barriers (Chen et al., 2024; Darcy et al., 2017). The nature and significance of these constraints may also vary according to impairment, support needs, and broader social context, indicating that they should not be understood as uniform across people with disabilities (Rimmer et al., 2004).

Research on constraints negotiation has further shown that the presence of constraints does not necessarily result in non-participation. Individuals may use cognitive and behavioral strategies, such as reframing constraints, developing relevant skills, adjusting their participation practices, and seeking information about programs and facilities (Alexandris et al., 2017; Jackson & Rucks, 1995; White, 2008). Research involving people with disabilities has similarly found that participants may adapt their practices and mobilize available resources to begin or sustain participation (Lyu & Lee, 2016).

However, negotiation should not be understood solely as a matter of individual effort or adaptive capacity. More broadly, leisure and recreational sport research has shown that access to information, opportunities for skill development, supportive relationships, and communities that facilitate knowledge sharing can strengthen individuals' capacity to negotiate participation constraints (Ntovoli et al., 2025). Research involving people with disabilities has similarly emphasized the importance of relational and environmental resources in sustaining sport participation (Darcy et al., 2020). These findings suggest that continued participation depends not only on the strategies adopted by individuals but also on the social, organizational, and environmental resources available to them.

Disability Sport in the Global South

Against the backdrop of the international diffusion of the Paralympic Movement and the expansion of Sport for Development initiatives, scholarly interest in disability sport in the Global South has increased (Brittain & Beacom, 2016; Novak, 2014). Previous studies have shown that persons with disabilities in Global South contexts often participate in sport under conditions of limited institutional support, inadequate infrastructure, unstable funding, restricted mobility, and insufficient public understanding of disability sport.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of locally embedded and informal forms of support in sustaining disability sport participation in institutionally under-resourced contexts. For example, Madhushani and Burnett (2020) found that people with disabilities in Sri Lanka, including athletes competing at the Paralympic level, continued to participate in sport despite limited public support and unstable institutional structures. Their study showed that, under conditions of inadequate competitive opportunities, restricted funding, and

limited mobility, financial and practical assistance from family members, support from local communities, and relationships with coaches and acquaintances served as important resources for continued participation. Rather than depending solely on formal sport development pathways, participants also relied on support networks embedded in their everyday lives.

Similarly, a study of para-athletes in Kenya by Ojwang et al. (2025) illustrates how individuals strategically respond to structural barriers such as financial constraints, lack of equipment, and limited transportation options.

Specifically, the authors document how para-athletes secure resources by building local support networks, leveraging connections with international competitions and support organizations, and assuming meaningful roles within their communities, thereby sustaining sport participation in institutionally under-resourced environments. Their continued participation depended not only on formal national sport development systems but also on informal relationships and support networks within local communities and international sport contexts.

Research on Laos has similarly shown that the development of parasport depends on more than the establishment of competitive opportunities. Nagata et al. (2025) identified constraints associated with limited institutional and organizational capacity, insufficient public understanding of parasport, and a lack of supportive conditions in everyday life. Their findings suggest that the sustainable development of parasport requires not only competitive structures but also locally grounded initiatives that improve social understanding, strengthen community support, and expand opportunities for participation.

While these studies have contributed to understanding disability sport in Global South contexts, much of the existing literature has focused on general structural barriers or the experiences of persons with disabilities as a broad category. Less attention has been paid to how such barriers are experienced differently by women with disabilities, particularly in relation to gendered social norms, rural–urban inequalities, poverty, and other intersecting social conditions.

Intersectionality and Sport Participation among Women with Disabilities

Intersectionality provides a useful analytical perspective for examining the experiences of women with disabilities in the Global South because it draws attention to how multiple dimensions of inequality operate simultaneously rather than independently (Alhumaid et al., 2024). The significance of these intersecting inequalities is also recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which identifies the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by women with disabilities as an important policy concern (Kobayashi, 2017).

In many Global South contexts, the constraints experienced by women with disabilities are shaped not only by disability but also by gendered expectations, socioeconomic marginalization, and place-based inequalities. A substantial proportion of women with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are reported to live in rural areas outside national capitals, where access to education, employment, transport, and public services may be particularly limited (UN Women, 2017). Research on rurality has traditionally examined issues such as spatial isolation, community relationships, poverty, gendered social roles, and unequal access to resources (Balfour et al., 2008; Bryant & Pini, 2009). Bryant and Pini (2009), for example, demonstrate that rurality interacts with gender and social class to shape women's identities, opportunities, and everyday experiences. However, less attention has been paid to how rurality interacts specifically with disability and gender to shape the everyday lives and sport participation of women with disabilities. This gap highlights the need to examine place of residence not as an isolated geographic characteristic, but as a social and structural condition that intersects with disability, gender, and socioeconomic circumstances.

This intersectional perspective is also important for understanding sport participation. Women with disabilities may experience distinctive constraints arising from the interaction of gender, disability, and the social and environmental conditions surrounding sport participation. Research involving women with physical impairments has identified barriers including restrictive gender norms, disability-related stereotypes, inadequate facilities and equipment, limited transport, insufficient financial and organizational support, and a lack of appropriately trained coaches (Alhumaid et al., 2024; Olasagasti-Ibargoien et al., 2023). At the policy and organizational levels, Munro-Cook et al. (2024) found that gender and disability were often addressed separately within Australian sport policies, annual reports, and organizational strategies. This separation contributed to the limited visibility of women with disabilities in participation data, policy priorities, and targeted initiatives. Taken together, these studies indicate that the sport participation of women with disabilities cannot be understood solely as the additive effects of gender-related and disability-related barriers. Rather, their experiences are shaped by the interaction of gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Disability and Disability Sport Policy in Laos

Research on disability policy and the situation of persons with disabilities in Laos has primarily focused on institutional and policy-level analyses. Durham et al. (2016) demonstrate that disability-related health information systems in Laos remain underdeveloped, resulting in limited statistical data and indicators and complicating evidence-based policy formulation. Focusing on employment experiences, Phanthalangsy (2023) shows that religious beliefs and social stigma continue to shape opportunities for social participation, highlighting everyday practices that cannot be fully captured through institutional analysis alone. From a postcolonial perspective, Sánchez Rodríguez et al. (2021) further argue that internationally introduced disability policy frameworks may not always align with local social and cultural contexts,

often overlooking factors such as poverty, place of residence, and gender.

Disability sport policy in Laos began with the establishment of the Lao Paralympic Committee (LPC) in 1996 and was initially framed as an extension of medical rehabilitation (Nakamura, 2015). Following government restructuring in 2011, responsibility for disability sport was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Sports (Endo, 2022). In 2018, governance of both Olympic and Paralympic sport was unified under the same minister, and more recently, the Ministry established a Sport for All Department to promote inclusive access to sport regardless of disability status (Ministry of Education and Sports of Lao People's Democratic Republic, 2020).

Despite these institutional developments, empirical research on disability sport participation in Laos remains limited, particularly with regard to the experiences of women with disabilities. Existing studies have provided important insights into disability policy, disability sport development, and broader social barriers in Laos, but they have not sufficiently examined how women with disabilities experience and negotiate constraints on sport participation in relation to gender, disability, poverty, and place of residence. This study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of women with disabilities in Laos and by examining how constraints and negotiation processes are shaped within this specific social, cultural, and institutional context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on the Hierarchical Model of Leisure Constraints (HMLC) and intersectionality as complementary theoretical frameworks for examining sport participation among women with disabilities in Laos. Leisure encompasses a broader range of activities than sport, while sport may constitute one form of leisure participation. The application of the HMLC in this study is therefore based on the understanding that organized sport participation can be examined as a specific form of leisure participation, while remaining conceptually distinct from leisure more broadly.

Crawford and Godbey (1987) initially distinguished among intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. Building on this classification, Crawford et al. (1991) proposed the HMLC to explain how these forms of constraint shape leisure preferences and participation. Although the original model presented constraints hierarchically, subsequent research has shown that they may overlap, interact, and change according to context rather than operate in a fixed or strictly sequential manner (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001).

In the present study, the HMLC provides an analytical structure for identifying and organizing constraints across these three interrelated levels. Intrapersonal constraints refer to psychological or internalized factors that may inhibit participation, such as fear, anxiety, low confidence, and limited self-efficacy. Interpersonal constraints arise through social relationships and interactions, including family expectations, community attitudes, and the availability or absence of supportive relationships. Structural constraints refer to broader material, institutional, and environmental conditions, such as transportation, facilities, economic resources, access to information, and organizational arrangements.

However, while the HMLC is useful for classifying constraints, it does not by itself fully explain why similar constraints may be experienced differently, intensified, or compounded among particular social groups. To address this limitation, this study incorporates an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality understands gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence not as separate or additive variables, but as mutually constitutive dimensions of social experience (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 2013). From this perspective, constraints on sport participation are not simply accumulated across separate categories. Rather, they are produced through the interaction of multiple social positions and power relations within particular social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The integration of these two frameworks enables the study to examine both where constraints operate and how they are differently produced and experienced. The HMLC is used to classify whether constraints operate primarily at intrapersonal, interpersonal, or structural levels, while intersectionality guides the interpretation of how these constraints are shaped by the intersections of gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence. For example, limited access to transportation is not treated solely as a structural constraint; it is also interpreted in relation to disability, gendered safety concerns, dependence on family members,

economic resources, and rural–urban inequalities. Similarly, fear of sport is not interpreted solely as an individual psychological constraint, but as an internalized response shaped by disability-related perceptions of risk, gendered expectations concerning appropriate behavior for women, and limited exposure to sport.

Accordingly, the integrated framework was operationalized in two stages. First, participants' accounts were coded inductively to identify recurring experiences, meanings, and constraints related to sport participation. These codes were then organized according to the three levels of the HMLC: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. Second, the interpretation of each theme examined how social positions and structural conditions intersected to shape the meaning, intensity, and consequences of these constraints, as well as the resources available for negotiating them. This approach enabled the study to move beyond listing barriers and to examine how constraints were produced, experienced, and negotiated within the specific social, cultural, and institutional context of Laos.

METHODS

Research Design and Study Context

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how women with disabilities in Laos experience and negotiate constraints on sport participation. A case study approach was selected because the phenomenon under investigation is deeply embedded in a specific social, cultural, institutional, and developmental context. In Laos, sport participation among women with disabilities is shaped not only by individual experiences of impairment, but also by family relationships, gender norms, rural–urban disparities, limited infrastructure, access to disability-related organizations, and the uneven development of disability sport systems. A qualitative case study design was therefore appropriate for generating an in-depth and contextualized understanding of how constraints are produced, experienced, and negotiated in everyday life.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences. This method was selected because it allowed participants to describe their pathways into sport, the constraints they encountered, and the strategies they used to sustain participation in their own words, while also enabling the interviewer to explore emerging themes in greater depth. The study focused on Laos as a theoretically significant case for examining disability sport participation in the Global South, where international disability policy frameworks, local cultural norms, and material constraints intersect in complex ways. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Subject Research Ethics Review Committee at Doshisha University (no. 22074).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were selected through criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). Eligible participants were women with physical disabilities who had experience participating in national-level disability sport competitions. This criterion was used because the study sought to examine the experiences of women who had encountered and negotiated constraints across personal, familial, social, organizational, and institutional contexts.

Potential participants were identified with the assistance of the Ministry of Education and Sports of Laos and an NGO involved in disability support. Initial contact was made in person through these organizations rather than directly by the researchers. Individuals who expressed interest were subsequently provided with information about the study purpose, interview procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw.

The final sample comprised eight women with physical disabilities, aged between 24 and 54 years, who were residing in Vientiane at the time of the interviews (see Table 1). Several participants had grown up in rural areas of Laos before relocating to Vientiane for rehabilitation, education, vocational training, employment, or other purposes. All participants had regularly participated in sport during the previous year and were employed at the time of the interviews. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

Table 1
Interview participants

no	Age	Place of origin	Sports	Impairment type and mobility
1	39	Outside the capital	Para-powerlifting/Wheelchair basketball	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user
2	33	Outside the capital	Wheelchair basketball	Physical impairment / wheelchair user
3	24	Outside the capital	Boccia	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user
4	40	Outside the capital	Wheelchair basketball	Physical impairment / wheelchair user
5	31	Outside the capital	Para-powerlifting	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user
6	26	Outside the capital	Para-powerlifting	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user
7	26	Outside the capital	Wheelchair basketball	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user
8	54	Capital	Boccia	Physical impairment / non-wheelchair user

Interviews

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in September 2024 at participants' homes or workplaces and lasted approximately one hour. Participants were invited to describe their life histories, motivations, challenges, and experiences of sport participation in quiet, private settings.

A bilingual Lao–English interpreter attended all interviews. The interpreter was a person with a disability, was actively involved in sport, and had previously participated in sport activities with the interviewees. This familiarity may have helped participants feel comfortable, although it may also have influenced how they presented their experiences. The interpreter also supported the interpretation of culturally specific expressions and contextual meanings; this contribution was treated as part of the interpretive process

rather than as a guarantee of objective accuracy.

Participants spoke primarily in Lao, with consecutive interpretation into English. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, and both the original Lao accounts and interpreted English responses were transcribed. The interpreter reviewed the Lao transcripts and their correspondence with the English transcripts. Where discrepancies or ambiguous meanings arose, the first author and interpreter revisited the recordings and discussed possible interpretations. English transcripts were used primarily for coding, with Lao transcripts and recordings consulted when clarification was needed.

The first author had conducted research in Laos for approximately nine years and had established relationships with disability-related organizations. Throughout the study, she reflected on how her position as a foreign, academic, and non-disabled researcher might shape the interviews and analysis. The interpreter provided additional contextual insight, but the authors recognized that their interpretations remained influenced by their own social and cultural positions.

Identifying information was removed or modified, and all recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files. Attention was paid to privacy, cultural sensitivity, and participants' comfort throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021) to examine the constraints and negotiation processes surrounding sport participation among women with disabilities in Laos. This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed not only to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts, but also to interpret how these patterns were shaped by social, cultural, and structural contexts. In line with a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, the analysis was understood as an interpretive process shaped by the researchers' theoretical perspectives, positionalities, and engagement with the data.

In the first stage of analysis, the first author conducted line-by-line coding across all interview transcripts to generate initial codes. At this stage, no a priori categorization by constraint level or social attributes was imposed. Instead, inductive coding was employed to capture participants' experiences and meanings as expressed in their narratives. The initial codes included both concrete experiences—such as lack of transportation, fear of injury, and opposition from family members—and cognitive or interpretive dimensions, including beliefs that sport is inappropriate for women with disabilities and anxiety about public visibility. When participants' accounts could not be adequately represented by existing codes, new codes were created iteratively.

In the subsequent stage, the first and second authors collaboratively advanced the analysis. The generated codes were organized based on conceptual similarity to construct sub-themes and overarching themes. During this process, the HMLC was used to identify the level of constraint associated with each code, while an intersectional perspective was applied to examine how these constraints were intensified or transformed through combinations of gender, disability, place of residence, and socioeconomic status. For example, constraints related to transportation and facilities were not treated solely as structural barriers. Rather, they were interpreted with attention to how they became more severe through their intersection with impairment characteristics, place of residence, gendered mobility norms, and economic conditions, resulting in heightened participation constraints for particular women.

Researcher reflexivity was incorporated throughout the analytical process. The first, second, and third authors are not from Laos and occupied different positions in the research process. The first and second authors contributed primarily as external academic researchers, whereas the third author contributed practice-based and contextual knowledge derived from approximately 30 years of engagement in disability support in Laos as the secretary-general of a disability support NGO. In particular, the first author reflected on how her position as a foreign, academic, and non-disabled researcher might influence the framing of interview questions, interactions with participants, and the interpretation of participants' narratives, especially given the local–global power relations inherent in research conducted in a Global South context. These differing perspectives and positionalities were discussed throughout the analytical process, particularly when interpreting narratives related to gender norms, disability-related stigma, poverty, and rural–urban inequalities.

Multiple procedures were adopted to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the first and second authors engaged in ongoing peer debriefing to critically examine the coherence and plausibility of the developing interpretations. Second, the third author reviewed the analytical findings and provided feedback on their consistency with local sociocultural contexts and the lived realities of persons with disabilities in Laos. These discussions supported a more context-sensitive interpretation of the data and helped the research team critically examine the possibility of imposing externally derived assumptions on participants' accounts.

Member checking was not conducted in this study. While member checking can be a valuable qualitative method, it is not considered a "gold standard" in interpretive and reflexive research and should be assessed in relation to epistemological and methodological coherence (Motulsky, 2021). Moreover,

re-contacting participants in socially vulnerable positions may impose additional psychological or cognitive burdens (Hallett, 2013). Accordingly, this study prioritized minimizing potential burden or harm to participants.

Results

This study examined how women with disabilities in Laos experienced and negotiated constraints on sport participation. In line with the aims of the study, the analysis focused on two related dimensions: first, the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints shaping sport participation and how these constraints were influenced by the intersections of gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence; and second, how participants negotiated these intersecting constraints by drawing on supportive relationships, information, organizational resources, employment, and competitive opportunities to sustain their participation in sport. Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data identified four overarching themes: intrapersonal constraints, interpersonal constraints, structural constraints, and negotiation strategies (Table 2).

Table 2
Themes and Subthemes of Constraints and Negotiation Strategies in Sport Participation among Women with Disabilities in Laos

Category	Subcategory
Intrapersonal Constraints	Lack of Sport Literacy
	Psychological Barriers to Participation
Interpersonal Constraints	Restrictions from Family
	Stigma from the Community
	Absence of Peers with Similar Experiences
Structural Constraints	Non-Inclusive Sport Facilities
	Accessibility Issues
	Constraints Rooted in Policy, Educational Access, and Economic Capital
Negotiation Strategies	Migration to Sport-Supportive Environments
	Gaining Social Support Through Participation in Competitions
	Stabilising Employment and Leveraging Resources Through Engagement with Support Organisations

Intrapersonal Constraints at the Intersection of Gender, Disability, and Place

Fear of sport and diminished self-efficacy emerged as central intrapersonal constraints shaping participants' sport participation. These constraints were not experienced solely as individual psychological responses but were shaped through the interaction of disability, gender, and place of residence. Many participants described growing up in rural areas where they had little access to information about sport. Limited opportunities for formal education and physical education meant that some participants had little knowledge of the sports available to them or whether participation was possible.

"Before I came to Vientiane and started playing basketball, I had only ever played pétanque in my hometown. I had never even thought about what kinds of sports were available, or what I could do. Most people in my village have only ever lived in rural areas. They still don't know what sport is. We move our bodies when we play, but in the countryside, people don't really know about sport." (Participant 1)

Within this context of limited sport literacy, participants reported repeatedly encountering messages from those around them that sport was "dangerous" for persons with disabilities and "dangerous" for women. Sport was commonly perceived as physically risky for people with impairments and as inappropriate for women, particularly in rural settings. These perceptions were expressed through protective attitudes within families and local communities, and participants described being exposed to such views in their everyday lives. As a result, even after becoming aware of sport and developing an interest, many participants experienced strong concerns related to health and safety and hesitated to participate.

"I was scared at first. I thought I would fall out of the wheelchair. I saw the male players falling out of their chairs, and I felt like I wanted to try but also didn't want to." (Participant 7)

Furthermore, due to the limited availability of women's teams, many participants were first introduced to sport in male-dominated environments. These settings were characterized by high levels of physical contact and competitiveness, which intensified feelings of psychological distance. Some participants questioned whether such environments were appropriate or suitable for them.

Taken together, these findings show that fear of sport and low self-efficacy were formed through the combined effects of limited sport knowledge, disability-based perceptions of danger, and gendered perceptions of risk. These intersecting conditions operated simultaneously in shaping participants' intrapersonal constraints toward sport participation.

Interpersonal Constraints within Gendered and Disability-Based Social Relations

Participants described interpersonal constraints arising from the interaction of disability-related family concerns, gendered restrictions on girls' activities outside the home, limited household resources, and expectations that women prioritize domestic and caregiving responsibilities. Participants frequently reported that family members expressed strong concern due to their disability, particularly regarding the risk of injury or further impairment. As a result, outdoor activities and sport participation were often discouraged or restricted.

"When I was small, my family saw me fall from my wheelchair and didn't want me going out to play. I already had a disability, and they didn't want me to be hurt again." (Participant 7)

These protective attitudes were closely linked to gender norms prevalent in rural communities. Participants described contexts in which girls' activities outside the home were viewed negatively, and their behavior was more tightly

controlled. In addition, limited knowledge about sport within families contributed to perceptions of sport as inherently dangerous. Participant 3 reported spending long periods alone at home while family members worked in the fields, with few opportunities to engage in activities outside the household.

"I used to stay at home alone. My parents were working in the fields, and I had nothing to do during that time. It was painful and very hard." (Participant 3)

Participant 4 further explained that caregiving responsibilities within the family were prioritized to such an extent that even schooling was not regarded as necessary, and sport participation was explicitly discouraged.

"Taking care of parents and children was considered the top priority, so my family believed that even going to school was unnecessary. Needless to say, participating in sport was not welcomed at all." (Participant 4)

These conditions overlapped with expectations placed on women to fulfill domestic and caregiving roles. Participant 4 noted that although she currently participated in sport in the capital, returning to her family home meant being expected to prioritize family care, making continued participation difficult. Sport was perceived as potentially interfering with work and household responsibilities.

"I now participate in sport in the capital, but when I return home, I am expected to care for my family and cannot continue participating. My family supports me because I compete in tournaments, but they are still worried that sport may interfere with my job or household duties." (Participant 4)

Under these intersecting conditions—disability-based protective attitudes, negative views of girls' outdoor activities, socioeconomic prioritization of household survival, and gendered caregiving expectations—participants described difficulty entering sport spaces alone.

Structural Constraints across Disability, Location, and Socioeconomic Status

Participants described structural constraints related to inaccessible sport facilities and public transportation, limited availability of suitable facilities outside Vientiane, and the failure of public infrastructure to accommodate their individual access needs. These constraints were shaped by the interaction of impairment-related needs, place of residence, and limited economic resources, restricting when, where, and for how long participants could engage in sport.

Participants reported that many sport facilities and public spaces were not designed with persons with disabilities in mind. Basic features such as ramps, handrails, sufficient corridor width, and wheelchair-accessible toilets were often absent, making safe use of facilities difficult. Under these conditions, reaching and remaining at sport venues constituted a barrier prior to participation itself.

"There are already very few sport facilities in Laos, and even fewer where persons with disabilities can participate safely." (Participant 2)

While a sport facility with basic barrier-free design exists at the National Rehabilitation Centre in Vientiane, similar facilities were described as extremely limited at the national level.

As a result, access to suitable environments differed substantially depending on place of residence.

Public transportation was also described as a significant structural constraint. In Laos, public transport relies primarily on buses, which are not designed for independent use by persons with disabilities. Participants who did not own a private vehicle or motorbike depended on family members or acquaintances for transport, which restricted the times and locations at which participation was possible.

"Even now, it's hard to go out by myself. I can only go to places where I can do sport if someone goes with me." (Participant 3)

Several participants described concrete difficulties related to the design of toilets in sport facilities and public spaces, noting that these designs did not accommodate their individual bodily and mobility-related needs. Participants reported that steps leading to toilets were too high, that the height and size of toilet fixtures were unsuitable for them, and that the facilities were difficult to use independently. Squat toilets were described as unusable, and even Western-style toilets were sometimes too high to use safely.

"Sometimes the steps to the toilet are too high. My body is smaller than that of women without disabilities, so the facilities don't fit me." (Participant 7)

"I can't use squat toilets. I also can't use high toilets because of my leg condition." (Participant 5)

These toilet-related difficulties reflected a mismatch between standardized facility design and participants' diverse bodily, mobility, and support needs. As a result, some participants limited the amount of time they spent at sport venues or refrained from participation because of concerns about toilet use.

Negotiating Sport Participation under Intersecting Constraints

The findings also showed that sport participation was not entirely blocked even under conditions in which the constraints discussed above persisted. Many participants began engaging in sport only after relocating from rural areas to the capital city, Vientiane. This relocation was not undertaken for the purpose of sport participation itself, but rather to address everyday needs such as prosthetic fitting, rehabilitation, vocational training, and employment. Nevertheless, moving to an urban setting placed participants in environments where disability support facilities and related organizations were concentrated, thereby enabling access to information about sport and contact with people involved in disability sport.

"When I started working in the capital, there was someone at my workplace who was involved in sport. That person said to me, 'There is this kind of sport—why don't you try it?' Until then, I had never had the opportunity to participate in sport and had never looked for it myself, but hearing directly from someone close to me made me realize that there was actually a place where I could participate." (Participant 3)

"When I was attending a vocational training school, a teacher introduced me to sport activities. The teacher explained that there was a sport like this and that people were practicing it, and I started attending boccia training. As I continued, the teacher told me, 'You can continue within your own limits,' and I kept participating." (Participant 6)

"I saw other people with the same disability playing sport, and I was invited to try a sport that suited me. After coming to the capital, I saw people with more severe disabilities playing even more powerfully than I was, and that made me want to challenge myself." (Participant 5)

These social relationships provided conditions that enabled participants to continue engaging in sport. In particular, through relocation from rural to urban areas and encounters with other women with disabilities or supporters who were knowledgeable about disability sport, participants gradually assembled the conditions necessary for sport participation. As this process unfolded, feelings of anxiety and hesitation toward sport diminished, and participants increasingly came to think that they wanted to continue and challenge themselves further.

Against this background, several participants proactively chose to participate in domestic and international competitions and accumulated experience through these opportunities. In the context of a late-developing, low-income country such as Laos, participation in the Paralympic Games entails substantial institutional and competitive barriers and is therefore not easily perceived as a realistic or immediate goal. Instead, semi-regional international competitions such as the ASEAN Para Games were positioned as attainable and meaningful international stages for participants. Participation in these competitions not only created opportunities to sustain sport involvement but also functioned as a means of demonstrating the legitimacy and safety of their sport participation in response to negative or skeptical reactions from family members and local communities. Drawing on the participation conditions that had been gradually established, participants sought to gain understanding and support from others through visible achievements such as participation in the ASEAN Para Games.

"I really enjoyed sport and felt that I had changed since I started. Some family members and people around me told me to stop, so at first I continued without telling them. They were angry at first, but after I started competing and travelling by plane to tournaments [such as the ASEAN Para Games], the criticism gradually decreased and it became easier to continue. Now my family supports me. I am the only person in my family who has travelled abroad. When they saw me win a medal at an international competition [the ASEAN Para Games], they stopped being angry and began cheering for me." (Participant 1)

"I try to be careful not to get injured so that people around me do not worry. I explain to concerned family members and friends that I can manage myself as an athlete, and sometimes I invite them to come with me to competitions [including the ASEAN Para Games]. Over time, they began to accept what I do." (Participant 3)

"After competing in the ASEAN Para Games, it felt as if I had returned from overseas. A neighbor said, 'Even ordinary people rarely get to travel abroad, but you went for a competition.'" (Participant 7)

These competitive experiences provided participants with visible evidence that they could engage in sport safely and successfully. They used their participation in competitions, international travel, and athletic achievements to reassure family members and challenge concerns about the risks and appropriateness of their sport participation. Participants also emphasized that stable employment and a secure living situation were important for sustaining sport participation. Several participants actively sought workplaces and support organizations that enabled them to combine employment with continued involvement in sport.

"After graduating from high school, I was looking for a job in fashion design. As a person with a disability, I was searching for a place where I could work, and I found a job advertisement from a support organization on Facebook. When I started working there, I was asked, 'Are you interested

in sport?' and was told, 'We can support both your work and your sport.' I had been looking for an environment where I could continue working while participating in sport, so I was very happy to know that I could do both." (Participant 6)

"Previously, I worked at another disability center for five years, but I did not have enough time or money to play sport. In 2018, I joined a wheelchair basketball tournament and met staff from a support organization. They told me that I could continue my sport career while working, so I changed jobs. Once my employment became stable, I had more opportunities to represent Laos at the ASEAN Para Games and the Asian Para Games." (Participant 1)

Maintaining employment provided participants not only with financial stability but also with time, organizational support, and access to institutional networks that facilitated continued sport participation.

More broadly, participants sustained their involvement in sport by gradually gaining access to peer relationships, support organizations, suitable employment, and competitive opportunities. These resources did not eliminate the constraints they faced, but they enabled participants to manage them, explain the value of sport participation to family and community members, and continue participating over time. Negotiation therefore emerged as a cumulative process shaped by access to multiple forms of relational, organizational, and material support.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how constraints on sport participation among women with disabilities in Laos are formed and intersect under specific social conditions, as well as how participants were able to engage in sport despite these constraints. The findings indicate that sport participation was constrained in multilayered ways, shaped by disability-related limitations, rural–urban disparities in access to education and information, and gendered expectations regarding safety and domestic roles. In particular, limited educational and physical education opportunities in rural areas restricted the ability to imagine sport participation, while negative evaluations related to disability and gender were internalized as fear and low self-efficacy.

At the same time, these constraints were not static. Participants were able to engage in sport through gradual processes such as relocation, contact with support organizations, the development of peer relationships, participation in competitions, and the securing of employment, which together enabled continued participation despite persistent constraints.

First, negative perceptions of sport participation held by family members and local communities were identified as key factors constraining initial engagement in sport. These perceptions were formed through the intersection of beliefs that sport participation by persons with disabilities is "dangerous" and gender norms that regard sport as unimportant for women. Existing research similarly indicates that the intersection of disability and gender tends to generate excessive protection and participation restrictions from families and others through perceptions of women with disabilities as "at risk," "inappropriate," or "in need of protection" (Smith & Bundon, 2018).

Such findings highlight how gender norms and social assumptions about disability, operating at the interpersonal level, diminish the recognition of women with disabilities as legitimate sporting subjects, a pattern that is consistent with the findings of the present study.

Previous research involving adults with intellectual disabilities has suggested that support for "positive risk-taking" may facilitate social participation, whereas an overriding emphasis on safety may restrict opportunities for participation (Boland & Guerin, 2023).

Although the population and context differ from those of the present study, this perspective helps illuminate how protective attitudes can simultaneously provide care and limit autonomy. In the present study, family concerns about injury similarly functioned as a form of protection while also constraining women's opportunities to participate in sport. Moreover, participants' accounts indicate that family attitudes were shaped partly through relationships with the wider community. Sport participation among women with disabilities should therefore be understood not only in relation to interactions within the family but also within the broader social relationships connecting families to their communities.

Relatedly, the findings demonstrate that constraints became more entrenched and multilayered when they intersected with place of residence, particularly rurality. Participants who had grown up outside Vientiane often had limited knowledge of different types of sport and available participation opportunities, and some had not considered sport participation to be possible for them. Bryant and Pini (2009) demonstrate that rurality interacts with gender and social class to shape women's social roles, identities, and opportunities. Building on this perspective, the present study suggests that rurality also intersects with disability to shape women's access to information, education, and opportunities for sport participation. Limited access to education and physical education in rural areas restricted participants' awareness of sport, while negative perceptions associated with disability and gender simultaneously reinforced interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints.

Subsequently, encounters with other women with disabilities—often facilitated by relocation to or visits to Vientiane—opened pathways into sport participation. This finding highlights the importance of peers who shared some disability-related experiences and could provide information, encouragement, and practical support. Previous research has similarly shown that sport-based gatherings can create spaces of belonging for women who have been positioned as "others" within their communities (Kunene, 2025). In the Lao context, these networks functioned not only as bases for sport participation but also as sources of information about employment, support services, and other life opportunities. However, such encounters were rarely available in participants' rural communities. Access to peer networks often depended on major transitions in living and employment circumstances, including relocation to Vientiane, vocational training, or changes in employment. Opportunities to develop these relationships were therefore shaped not simply by individual choice but also by unequal access to mobility, organizations, and urban-based services.

Ojwang et al. (2025), drawing on the experiences of para-athletes in Kenya, demonstrate that family support and parasport opportunities in schools can serve as important entry points into sport participation. The findings of the present study complement this insight by showing that access to such entry points is itself shaped by the intersection of disability, gender, and place of residence. In rural areas of Laos, limited educational infrastructure and physical education opportunities, combined with strong safety-oriented expectations concerning women and persons with disabilities, resulted in exclusion occurring before participants could access the types of opportunities identified by Ojwang et al. (2025). Accordingly, the present study suggests that access to commonly identified facilitators of sport participation, such as family support and school-based opportunities, is itself unevenly distributed and intersectionally constrained. At the same time, despite the presence of multiple constraints, participants became increasingly motivated as they gained access to the relationships and resources necessary for continued participation. They proactively entered international competitions and negotiated their relationships with family members and others. Previous research suggests that athletic identity can challenge disability-related stigma by providing an alternative to stereotypical representations of persons with disabilities as passive, dependent, or in need of care (Hardin, 2007). Through sport participation, individuals may come to be recognized—and to recognize themselves—as active, skilled, and competent athletes. However, in least developed country contexts such as Laos, participation in the Paralympic Games may be difficult to envision as an attainable goal because of substantial structural and institutional barriers (Brittain & Beacom, 2016). In this context, regional multi-sport events such as the ASEAN Para Games provided participants with more accessible and meaningful competitive opportunities. Participation in these events not only supported continued engagement in sport but also helped participants demonstrate to their families and communities that their involvement in sport was legitimate, manageable, and worthwhile. A key contribution of this study is its empirical demonstration of how regional competitions can strengthen the social recognition of women's disability sport participation in Global South contexts.

Finally, the integration of the HMLC and intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of sport participation constraints among women with disabilities. The HMLC offers a useful framework for identifying whether constraints operate primarily at intrapersonal, interpersonal, or structural levels (Darcy et al., 2017). However, on its own, it provides limited explanation of why similar constraints vary in their meaning, intensity, and consequences across different social groups and contexts. An intersectional perspective addresses this limitation by drawing attention to how gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence interact in shaping both the experience of constraints and the resources available for negotiating them. The two frameworks therefore serve complementary analytical functions: the HMLC identifies where constraints operate, while intersectionality helps explain how and why they are differently produced, experienced, and negotiated in a specific Global South context.

Limitations and Future Research

All participants lived in Vientiane at the time of the study. Although several reflected on growing up in rural communities, these retrospective accounts may not fully represent the experiences of women currently living in rural or remote areas. The sample was also limited to women who had entered national-level disability sport and continued participating. It therefore did not capture women who were unable to enter sport or who withdrew because of persistent constraints.

The reliance on retrospective accounts may also have influenced the findings, as participants' memories were shaped by subsequent experiences and present circumstances. Future research should include current rural residents, non-participants, former participants, and longitudinal or observational approaches.

Finally, although the analysis considered gender, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and place of residence, it did not examine other potentially relevant dimensions in depth, including age, type and severity of impairment, ethnicity, marital or parental status, and caregiving responsibilities. Further research should explore how these dimensions interact with broader social and institutional conditions to shape sport participation constraints and negotiation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest directly relevant to the content of this article.

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Footnote:

This study uses the terms "women with disabilities," "persons with disabilities," and "people with disabilities" in line with the terminology adopted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The authors recognize that preferences for person-first and identity-first language vary across individuals, communities, and cultural contexts. Person-first terminology is used consistently in this article to align with the language used in the CRPD and in the Lao policy context examined in this study.

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