Dimensions of Constraining Factors Affecting Physical Activity Participation of Iranian Women

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To attain the health benefits of participating in physical activities (PA), sport participation is a prioritized approach for public health and social care by many national governments and community organizations. Following recommendations from health advocates, major efforts to increase PA have been made by many countries (Yu et al., 2014); for example, the Iranian government recently developed and postulated the “Master Plan for Physical Education and Sports.” Although there has been an increased interest in PA, current promotional strategies and available PA program are inadequate to address the prevailing epidemic of obesity and related issues worldwide. Recent studies reveal alarming evidence for insufficient levels of PA among Iranian women (Kelishadi et al., 2010). Understanding barriers and constraints that hamper Iranian women’s PA participation would be necessarily to be the first step to develop effective strategies, programs, and procedures for reversing the situation. Despite global advocacy for PA, many societies and communities have not yet provided equal rights and opportunities for women to participate in PA. In Iran, sports are a male dominated world and women are lagging behind men in terms of opportunities of participating in PA. In addition to various barriers, such as lack of time and money, marriage and childbearing, work commitments, personal security, and unsupportive attitudes of politicians, Muslim women often face other barriers in engaging in PA, such as cultural, religious, and ethnic regulations including dress codes, attitudes toward the body related to privacy and modesty, mixed-gender classes, exercise during the month of fasting (Ramadan), limited resources, and restrictions in extracurricular activities for women. Although many studies have been conducted and noticeable information has been found about constraints of women's PA, there is a major void of religious, ethnic and cultural analyses about PA participation of Muslim women in Middle Eastern countries in previous studies. The purpose of this study was to examine the dimensions of constraining factors affecting PA participation of Iranian women via conducting mixed-method investigations. Findings resulted from the qualitative inquiry based on constraint theories were adopted as the foundation to develop the Scale of PA Barriers for Iranian Women (SPABIW). A sample of Iranian women who seldom participated in PA (N = 688) responded to a survey. Data were randomly split into two halves, one for an exploratory factor analysis and the for a confirmatory factor analysis and SEM. Research findings revealed that the identified barriers fell into nine dimensions, including political-administrative, socio-cultural, intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, place, price, product, and promotion barriers. Overall, respondents perceived high barriers for attending in PA and that all of the barriers were considered important for participants. While the actual items in the developed SPABIW may be specifically relevant to the setting of studying Iranian women, the nine sub-concepts of constraints in their collectiveness are consistent with the indications in the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), the health belief model (Kirscht, 1988), and the hierarchical model (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Discussions are centred on the theoretical and practical implications for studying and overcoming the identified constraints.