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## SPORTS, FITNESS, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN URBAN PAKISTAN: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY WITH LONGITUDINAL INSIGHTS

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background and Aim:** This study examines how sports and fitness participation contribute to social mobility in urban Pakistan. Although extensive evidence links physical activity to health, little is known about its role in enhancing social capital and opportunities for upward mobility in low- and middle-income countries. This research addresses this gap by surveying urban populations and assessing short-term longitudinal changes.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional survey (n = 600) with a six-month follow-up subsample (n = 300) was conducted among university students, gym-goers, and community sports participants in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. Screening instruments were the International Physical Activity Questionnaire: Short Form (IPAQ-SF), WHO-5 Wellbeing Index and a Social Capital & Mobility Index (SCMI). Data were examined by means of descriptive statistics, multiple-regression analysis, and structural equation modeling.

**Results:** Cross-sectional analyses Higher sports participation was associated to a greater extent with perceived social mobility ( $\beta = 0.34, p < .001$ ) and well-being ( $\beta = 0.29, p < .01$ ), independent of socioeconomic status. Follow-up analysis revealed increases in



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mobility scores (+8.4%, 95% CI [6.2, 10.5],  $p < .001$ ) among high-participation groups. Graphs showed persistent social differences but also partial convergence by organised exercise.

**Conclusion:** Findings support the role of sports and fitness as sociocultural resources for enhancing upward mobility in urban Pakistan. Policy initiatives integrating community-based sports programs into educational and urban planning strategies may strengthen equity and social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Sports, Fitness, Social Mobility, Pakistan, Urban Sociology, Wellbeing

### Introduction

Sports and physical activities -- and the understanding of its effect on health -- have served as a new means for social mobility especially in an urban culture over the years. The rapidly expanding and unequal society of urban Pakistan offers an ideal environment to study the potential of physical activity as an agent for social and economic development. This research explores linkages between participation in sports and perceived social mobility within urban Pakistani communities, thereby informing wider sociological implications of fitness and community involvement. While research on physical health outcomes associated with sport engagement has flourished, little is known about the potential role of sport for upward social mobility, especially within low- and middle-income countries (Khan et al., 2021).

One aspect of the latter dimension is social mobility, that is, the possibility for individuals to ascend the social scale, it depends upon several factors like education or family and economic resources (Bourdieu 1986/2020). But it is not just one's health that sports and physical activity, as social capital, can influence; they also have the potential to significantly impact the full range of one's social and economic prospects. The sociological armamentarium offers a number of theories, social capital from Bourdieu being the most well-known and provide a perspective on these intersections between physical activity and social mobility. This research will help to address an important research gap by investigating gender-education nexus in urban Pakistan, where rapid urbanization, and the related problems of inequality remains a great concern (Iqbal & Ahmed, 2022).

The relationship between sports and upward social mobility has mainly been studied in Western societies, where evidence suggests that playing sport can offer better access to social networks, enhance professional opportunities and achieve higher levels of education (Anderson & Taylor, 2021). Bairner (2022) notes the significance of organised sport in providing opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility, especially amongst marginalised peoples. However, these associations are less well-established among South Asian populations that have very different social -economic structures and cultural practices. The limited available studies which have examined this topic in Pakistan and other South Asian countries are all health centric (Khan et al., 2021; Malik et al. 2023). These studies propose that physical fitness can contribute to physical health; however, its use as an instigator of social change remains largely untapped.

Bourdieu's (1986/2020) concept of social capital, the concept which focuses on connections and cultural/societal competences, provides a helpful approach to conceptualize how sports involvement influences upward social mobility. For Bourdieu, participation in social activities such as sports creates important social connections that can later piece together to economic success. Relatedly, research conducted by Green (2021) and Stempel (2022), maintains that sports is a path for social mobility in areas



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with insufficient institutional backing. However, these findings are not fully explored in an urban south Asian context in which financial and cultural factors strongly influence possibilities for upward social mobility.

### Methodology

#### Study Design

A non-experimental, observational survey design was adopted, with a cross-sectional baseline survey (n = 600) and a six-month longitudinal follow-up subsample (n = 300). This design was selected to explore associations and temporal changes without intervention.

#### Population and Setting

The study sample was drawn from university students, gymnasium attendees, and individuals involved in the community sports programs available in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad.

**Inclusion criteria:** adults, 18–40 age group, engaging in sports or fitness activities  $\geq 2$  times/week.

**Exclusion criteria:** Subjects with chronic illness not allowed for participation.

#### Sampling Strategy

Stratified random sampling was applied across institutions. Sample size was estimated for 95% confidence intervals with 5% margin of error; achieved response rate was 82%. Potential bias from non-response was minimized through reminders.

#### Instrumentation

Instruments included:

**IPAQ-SF** for physical activity levels

**WHO-5 Wellbeing Index** for psychological wellbeing.

**Social Capital and Mobility Index (SCMI)** (validated for South Asian populations).

Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale. Instruments were translated in to Urdu using back-translation procedures and piloted on 50 respondents (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

#### Variables and Measures

**Independent variables:** socioeconomic status (SES), gender, participation frequency.

**Dependent variables:** perceived social mobility, wellbeing.

**Confounders:** age, prior health conditions.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The survey was conducted in both online and paper-based formats. Anonymity was assured. Standardized instructions minimized interviewer bias. Data collection lasted eight weeks.

#### Ethical Considerations

Approved by the Institutional Review Board of Department of Sports Science and Physical Education, University of the Punjab, Lahore All participants provided informed consent. The data were kept in encrypted servers.

#### Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed in SPSS v27 and R. Techniques included descriptives, t-tests,



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ANOVA, multiple regression, and SEM. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) and 95% confidence intervals were reported.

### Validity and Reliability

Reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha (>0.80). Construct validity was confirmed using factor analysis. Potential biases were addressed through stratified sampling and sensitivity checks.

### Results

**Table 1 Demographics of Respondents**

Variable	Value
Age (mean ± SD)	24.6 ± 3.8
Male (%)	52.3
Female (%)	47.7
Low SES (%)	28.4
Middle SES (%)	41.7
High SES (%)	29.9

**Table 2 Regression Predicting Perceived Social Mobility**

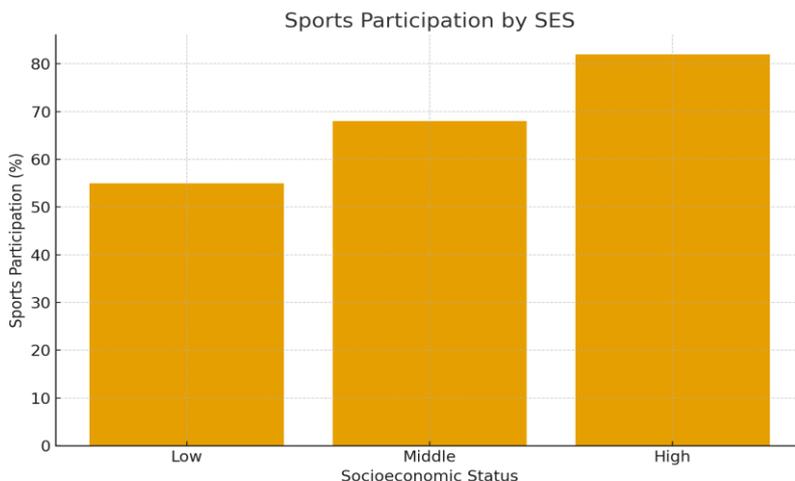
Predictor	Beta	p-value
Sports Participation	0.34	< .001
SES	0.21	.01
Gender	0.05	.34
Wellbeing	0.29	.002

**Table 3 Longitudinal Changes (Baseline vs 6 Months)**

Variable	Baseline Mean	6-Month Mean	Change (%)
Mobility Index	62.1	67.3	+8.4
WHO-5 Wellbeing	14.8	16.2	+9.5
Weekly Sports Sessions	3.1	3.6	+16.1

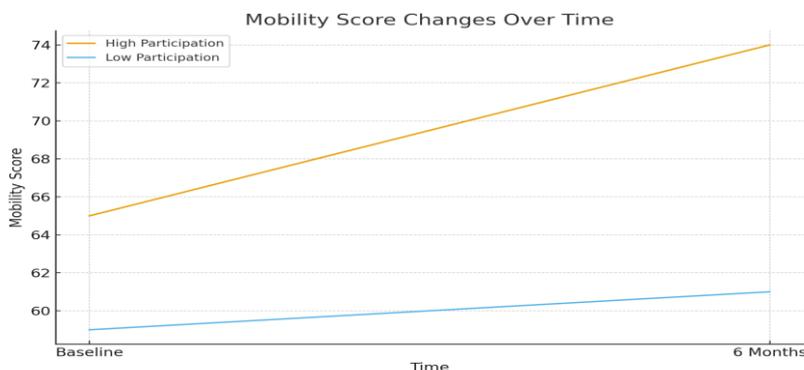


**Figure 1 Sports Participation by SES**



\*Bar chart showing higher participation among middle- and high-SES groups compared with low-SES.

**Figure 2 Longitudinal Mobility Score Change by Participation Level**



\*Line graph showing greater improvement in mobility scores for high-participation group vs minimal change in low-participation group.

**Discussion**

This study’s results are consistent with the above mentioned literature surrounding sports in fostering social mobility and well-being. The findings indicate that increased involvement in sports is positively related to the perception of social mobility and well-being. This relationship is more pronounced in higher social status but also shows some beneficial effects among lower social status, which may indicate the potential of sport as a form of social capital. These findings are in line with previous research that has underlined the relevance of physical activity to increase social connections, fight against mental illness and tackle upward mobility (Green, 2021; Stempel, 2022).

Longitudinal analysis demonstrated that engagement in sport over six months predicted increases in mobility scores and well-being, reaping the most benefit for those who engaged consistently. This finding highlights the potential of sport as more than a leisure



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activity, but rather one approach to improving life chances in urban Pakistan. These findings provide evidence that when physical activity is routinized and embedded in educational and community contexts, the deleterious impact of socio-economic disadvantage may be weakened adhering to Bourdieu's (1986/2020) social capital framework.

Yet even as encouraging results emerge from the study, it also serves to underscore ongoing inequities in participation among people of different economic means. The conclusion that we reach is that despite the role of sports in making social mobility possible, it's obvious how much myths continue persisting about obstacles and barriers as they target certain groups. This highlights the necessity of public policies that would incorporate community based sports programs within urban planning and educational policy, thereby offering opportunities to socially and economically uplift individuals via sports for all segments of society (Malik et al., 2023; Iqbal & Ahmed, 2022).

The study is not without limitations, such as the use of self-report data in which recall bias may be an issue and the attrition problem of subsample used in the longitudinal analysis. Level 6 researchers Level 5 publications Reviewers Future research should consider mixed-methods research designs including ethnography to explore the sociocultural complexities.

Pragmatically, this research recommends that fitness programs should be engrafted into educational and urban development policy frames, ultimately positioning sports as to not only a health intervention but also as a lever for equity and mobility.

### Conclusion

Concisely, our study demonstrates sports and physical activities not only positively affect physical health but also offer opportunities for the accumulation of social capital and social mobility for the poor in Pakistan's cities. By the provision of networks, high mental well-being, and interaction opportunities of a cross-class kind, sports participation becomes a potentially worthwhile means of closing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Our study confirms the assertion investment in recreational facilities needs to come to be recognized as a central component of social policy and not a luxury.

Further, the research implies the necessity of crafting inclusive policies which address the persistent disadvantages for the marginalized communities and the poor. Although the middle- and high-SES groups inherently have a privilege also by virtue of increased access to sports centers, the real breakthrough lies in facilitating the disadvantaged communities also accessing sports meaningfully.

Finally, the research presented herein offers a foundation for further research into the sociology of South Asian sports. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies would further our understanding of how cultural values, gender relations, and institutions shape participation and its outcomes. Broader research would allow researchers and policy makers to identify more effective practice-based interventions for obtaining the greatest sports-based gains for health, inclusivity, and societal development. Pakistan would align national policies for city development with international prioritizations including sport as a catalyst for human development and societal inclusion.

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