

How Can Gender-Related SDP Programmes Enhance Gender Inclusion? A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Since the emergence of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) programmes in the early 21st century, these initiatives have become a global effort to leverage sport in addressing social challenges and advancing the SDGs, with the promotion of gender equality (Goal 5) being one of their key objectives. In male-dominated sports environments, both women and sexual and gender minorities (SGM) face persistent barriers such as gender stereotypes, exclusion, inequitable regulations, and discrimination, highlighting the critical need for interventions that promote gender inclusivity. While some studies have examined the role of SDP programmes in promoting gender inclusion, the field remains fragmented and largely overlooks SGM. There is also a lack of systematic analysis of how SDP programmes specifically impact the inclusion of women and SGM. To address this gap, we conducted a scoping review of 18 academic articles on SDP programmes that focus on gender inclusivity, employing thematic analysis to categorise findings based on research contexts, contents, methods, and outcomes. By synthesising existing literature, this article seeks to map the development of this emerging field, identify existing contributions and ongoing challenges, and provide insights to enhance the effectiveness of future SDP initiatives in promoting gender inclusion. Findings suggest that while some SDP programmes can empower women and SGM, their effectiveness is often constrained by structural inequalities and varying programme designs. Our review also identifies gaps in long-term evaluation and inclusivity for diverse gender identities.

Keywords

females in sports; gender; gender in sports; LGBTQ+; social inclusion; Sport for Development and Peace

1. Introduction

Women and sexual and gender minorities (SGM) have long faced exclusion and discriminatory practices in sport environments, creating multiple structural barriers shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and media factors (McKay, 2020). Against this backdrop, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality through sports face significant challenges (Patil & Doherty, 2023). Messner (1988, 2002) highlighted that modern sport has been heavily influenced by male-dominated cultural norms since the late 19th century, evolving as a practice to “express masculinity.” The rules of sports and programme designs, which often prioritise male physical advantages, have relegated women to subordinate positions (Burstyn, 1999). Hargreaves (2002) further analysed how gender stereotypes and the systemic devaluation of women’s physical abilities in patriarchal societies have led to women’s sport being viewed as “unnatural” or “inconsistent with femininity.” Additionally, studies by Cooky et al. (2015) and Schmidt (2013) reveal that women receive minimal coverage in sports media, with reporting often focusing on appearance or personal lives rather than athletic performance. This lack of representation reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines the social legitimacy of women’s sports.

Economic resource disparities further exacerbate this marginalisation. Deaner (2012) found that male sports teams and events attract most sponsorships and resource support, while women and SGM often face financial shortages due to perceived lower market value, leading to disadvantages in professional development and infrastructure. Furthermore, Travers (2008) highlighted that men overwhelmingly dominate coaching, management, and decision-making roles in sports, leaving women and SGM largely absent from policy-making and organisational leadership. This lack of representation hinders the implementation of inclusive policies. Overall, male dominance in sports is the result of multifaceted factors, including historical, media, economic, and professional dimensions. This dominance not only limits the participation and development of women and SGM in sports, but also reinforces broader societal gender inequalities. Scholars have called for policy interventions, media reforms, and resource redistribution to dismantle these structural barriers. Such efforts aim to create a more equitable and inclusive sports environment where women and SGM can fully experience the physical, psychological, and social benefits of participation in sports (Joy, 2019; Richman & Shaffer, 2000).

Participating in sports has shown numerous benefits, including improved physical health, prevention of chronic diseases (Joy, 2019), reduced risk of depression (Jay, 1997), enhanced self-esteem (Richman & Shaffer, 2000), greater self-confidence, and improved social skills and leadership abilities (Huggins & Randell, 2007). However, these benefits remain largely inaccessible to women and SGM, who are significantly excluded due to systemic barriers. The exclusionary nature of sports environments fosters discrimination (Doull et al., 2018), unwelcoming rules and policies (Emmonds et al., 2019), and cultures of sexual harassment and homophobia (Calzo et al., 2014). These factors not only hinder the active participation of women and SGM but often lead many to abandon the possibility of engaging in sports altogether. This persistent exclusion highlights the urgent need to address the systemic factors that hinder women’s and SGM’s involvement in sport. By challenging entrenched biases, adopting inclusive approaches, and fostering supportive sports environments, it is possible to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to experience the transformative power of sports.

SDP is an international movement centred on ensuring the right of all members of society to participate in sports and recreational activities while emphasising development goals and inclusivity (Youker, 2013).

Promoting gender equality is one of the key principles of SDP, aiming to create more opportunities for women and SGM to engage in sports and to foster a more inclusive and supportive sports environment (Beutler, 2008; Chong et al., 2022). Despite some positive outcomes, particularly through specific projects that have successfully brought some positive effects to women and SGM, their credibility and scalability remain insufficiently validated, and there is a pressing need to further explore their effectiveness in achieving gender inclusivity (Collison et al., 2016). In addition, before applying sports values more widely to promote gender inclusion, the progress and challenges of this approach should be clarified, and the mechanism for cultivating a sports culture that welcomes all genders should be more deeply explored and understood (Harmon, 2020). This understanding is crucial to removing the deeply rooted male domination and heterosexual structures in the sport environment and creating a fairer and more inclusive future for all participants, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

1.1. Research Design and Aim

Based on the background above, this study aims to examine the existing literature on the contribution of SDP programmes that explicitly focus on promoting gender inclusion. Specifically, we seek to:

1. Analyse how current studies investigate the role of these SDP programmes in fostering gender inclusion and the key themes they explore (RQ 1);
2. Identify the research methods used in studying how such SDP programmes promote gender inclusion and their main findings (RQ 2);
3. Evaluate the impact and effectiveness of such programmes in enhancing the inclusion of women and SGM, while highlighting key limitations and directions for future research (RQ 3).

To address these questions, this study adopts a scoping review approach, which is suitable for emerging fields or research areas where the scope and focus are not yet well-defined. It requires broad and exploratory research questions and is well-suited for complex, interdisciplinary topics. This method enables the identification and clarification of research progress within a given field, mapping existing studies, identifying research gaps, and providing guidance on future research directions. The decision to use a scoping review in this study is based on the fact that the relationship between the impact of SDP programmes on women and SGM remains highly complex and insufficiently explored in existing academic research. A deeper and more systematic investigation is needed to provide a clearer picture of the current state of knowledge. By conducting a scoping review, this study aims to analyse how on-the-ground SDP programmes could influence women and SGM while identifying key challenges that require further attention. From a broader societal perspective, the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the effectiveness of real-world SDP initiatives, ultimately supporting the development of more impactful programmes aimed at promoting gender equality. From a scientific perspective, this study will help identify key research themes and existing gaps in the relationship between SDP and gender inclusion, thereby providing insights to encourage further academic engagement in this field.

From a more specific theoretical framework perspective, this study follows the framework established by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Through an in-depth review of the selected studies, a thematic analysis is conducted to categorise research contexts, contents, methods, and key findings. This approach helps to systematically address RQ 1 and RQ 2, while a critical discussion of the results further informs

RQ 3. The study concludes with recommendations to achieve the research aim and invites further scholarly discussion.

This review aims to systematically examine the current state of research on SDP programmes with a specific focus on gender inclusion, identifying key themes, methodological characteristics, and research outcomes. The study selection criteria are designed to align directly with the research questions, with SDP and gender as the core focus. To ensure comprehensive coverage, the search strategy includes expanded synonyms for SDP and gender-related terms across three major academic databases. However, given that terms like “SDP” and “SFD” (sport for development) have multiple meanings beyond sport-based initiatives, the initial search yielded an extensive number of studies. Through the first round of relevance-based filtering, 40 key articles directly addressing SDP and gender were selected. Following Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) iterative approach, further inclusion and exclusion criteria were continuously refined throughout the selection process to ensure alignment with the research questions. The specific selection criteria will be elaborated in the following section.

2. Methodology

2.1. Literature Review Procedure

To conduct a thorough exploration of the literature related to gender within the framework of SDP, we meticulously devised a search strategy. We targeted three prominent databases—Web of Science, EBSCO, and Proquest—employing a range of key terms. Specifically, we used the following formula as “searching words”:

(“sport for development” OR SFD OR S4D OR SDP OR “sport for development and peace”) AND
 (“sexual minority” OR gender OR female OR girl OR LGBT OR “non-binary” OR women)

This approach was aimed at capturing a wide array of relevant materials. The search for this study was conducted up to September 2024 to capture the most recent and relevant research in the field. The initial search across three databases yielded 25,559 results—9,654 from Web of Science, 6,697 from EBSCO, and 9,208 from ProQuest.

To refine the selection process, relevance sorting was applied within each database, followed by a review of titles and abstracts, initially identifying 41 articles that met the basic criteria of focusing on SDP projects and discussing gender inclusion. After organising and removing duplicates, the number was reduced to 40. Then, in the process of continuous familiarisation with this literature, the following series of strict inclusion standards have been gradually formed to ensure the quality and relevance of the analysis:

1. Only articles examining specific SDP projects or organisations were included to gain deeper insights into practical applications rather than broader theoretical discussions within the SDP field;
2. Studies that targeted the promotion of inclusion for women or SGM were selected to align with the study’s focus on gender issues;
3. Emphasis was placed on recreational sport rather than elite sport;
4. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were considered to maintain academic rigour;

5. Articles in English with international relevance were included for accessibility and ease of analysis;
6. Only open-access, full-text articles were selected to facilitate a comprehensive literature review.

The first two criteria establish the thematic relevance of the included articles, ensuring the included literature can directly and practically illustrate how SDP projects enhance the inclusivity of women and SGM, rather than discussing broad topics about sport and gender. The third criterion, based on the fundamental differences between professional sports and recreational sports as well as the development goals of SDP projects, excludes articles related to elite sports. The fourth criterion guarantees the quality of the included articles, preventing the introduction of unreviewed information. The fifth criterion prevents geographical and linguistic biases from influencing the understanding of the article content. The sixth criterion ensures a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the articles. We did not set any restrictions on research types and research methodologies. In addition, we welcome all types of research and methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, to ensure that multi-level evidence is obtained to fully understand the impact and effectiveness of SDP.

Furthermore, it is important to note the distinction between elite sports and recreational sports regarding their target audiences and social values (Collins, 2010). While the former emphasises competition, performance, and national prestige—catering to a small group of elite participants (Houlihan & Green, 2007, pp. 1–25)—the latter focuses on accessibility, community engagement, and individual well-being, prioritising social inclusion and grassroots development (Eichberg, 2015). As SDP initiatives primarily align with recreational and community-based sports, this study centres on grassroots sports within the SDP framework to explore its potential in promoting gender inclusion and achieving broader social development goals. After clarifying all the filter criteria, we then conducted two rounds of detailed screening, reaching a consensus on articles where inclusion was uncertain. Finally, out of the 40 articles, 15 were ultimately confirmed to meet all inclusion criteria. During the review of 15 selected articles, three additional studies meeting all inclusion criteria were identified through snowballing. Ultimately, 18 articles were confirmed to meet the inclusion criteria. These articles form the core dataset for analysis, providing valuable insights and practical implications for research at the intersection of gender and SDP. The research topics and key findings of these articles are presented in the following appendix.

2.2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely utilised qualitative research method designed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns within data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It is regarded as an effective and accessible qualitative tool (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This method was chosen for our study because discussions on gender in the context of SDP are relatively fragmented and lack a cohesive academic framework (Kidd, 2008). Moreover, the marginalisation of women and SGM in sports arises from a complex interplay of historical, social, cultural, and economic factors. This complexity often complicates clear analysis of gender dynamics and outcomes in the literature (Reeves, 2012). By adopting thematic analysis, we aim to clarify the current development of the field of SDP and gender inclusion, provide a clearer view of the current progress and challenges, and offer a basis for more effectively advancing the role of sport in promoting gender inclusion.

In this study, we strictly follow the logic of developing themes in the scoping review mentioned in Arksey and O'Malley (2005). First, we applied an Excel table to create a data charting form and extract the

article's key information. We then collated the data while familiarising ourselves with the literature, initially classifying different topics and subsequently summarising the data to form four final topics: (a) research contexts, (b) research contents, (c) research methods, and (d) research findings. This method allows systematic classification and analysis of data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research progress of gender-related SDP programmes. These four identified topics summarise the core elements of the research and provide a clear perspective for explaining the complexity of gender inclusion in sport-related development plans, which is conducive to the effective development of further practice and research.

3. Results

3.1. Research Contexts

Our review examines SDP projects across diverse geographical and cultural contexts, highlighting their global impact. These projects include initiatives in developed countries, such as the Netherlands (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), Australia (Hayhurst et al., 2016; Rich et al., 2022), the United Kingdom (Caudwell, 2021), and Canada (Hayhurst et al., 2016), as well as in developing regions like Colombia (Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019), Brazil (Moura, 2021; Válková, 2021), Afghanistan (Burnett, 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018), Cambodia (Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2018), and South Africa (Burnett, 2022; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2018). Notably, research often reflects the institutional locations of the researchers, i.e., Dutch researchers usually study projects in Utrecht (Smits & Knoppers, 2022) as Canadian and Australian researchers analyse local projects in Vancouver and Perth (Hayhurst et al., 2016). However, there are also instances of cross-regional research, with scholars from the Global North exploring projects in the Global South, such as the study on marginalised Muslim women in Pakistan by Hussain and Cunningham (2021), on skateboarding initiatives in Afghanistan and Cambodia by Thorpe et al. (2018), and on community football projects in Tanzania (Johnston et al., 2019). These cases underscore the potential for cultural exchange and analytical bias. The varied contexts demonstrate the multifaceted role of sport in addressing gender inequality, reflecting the interplay between local and global dynamics in SDP research. Furthermore, the research mainly focused on people from impoverished regions, specifically girls and young women—aged 8–12 (Farmer et al., 2020), 10–12 (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), 12–15 (Burnett, 2022), and 12–17 (Zipp, 2020)—as well as LGBTQ+ groups (Válková, 2021). These studies explore the limitations and achievements of gender inclusion through the experiences of these participants in SDP programmes. Among the studies that explicitly mention participants' ages, the youngest is eight years old, with no participants over 20. In addition to focusing on participants' experiences, one study examines the roles and challenges faced by men in promoting gender inclusion in SDP programmes from a male perspective (Moura, 2021). Another study addresses the ethical risks of directly promoting sports participation for young girls in the Global South (Thorpe et al., 2018).

3.2. Research Contents

Although the current body of research on SDP programmes aimed at promoting gender inclusion is limited, the 18 selected studies discuss nearly 10 different sports. These studies cover not only common sports such as football (Farmer et al., 2020; Hayhurst & del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2019; Moura, 2021; Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019; Zipp, 2020) and basketball (Hayhurst et al., 2016; Johnston et al.,

2019), but also martial arts (Hayhurst, 2013), swimming (Caudwell, 2021), longboarding (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), and outdoor activities like stand-up paddleboarding (Rich et al., 2022).

The research highlights that many SDP projects adopt a “sport plus” model, integrating education, personal development, and employability enhancement for women to extend the value of sports programmes. For instance, Sarah Oxford analysed the VIDA programme in Colombia, which combines football with health education to help girls integrate into society and challenge traditional gender norms (Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019). Similarly, Smits and Knoppers (2022) examined the “U on Board” project, which pairs longboarding with group discussions to build resilience among girls. Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) explored various initiatives, including football and health education programmes promoting women’s sexual and reproductive health rights and basketball and martial arts programmes that provide career guidance and self-defence skills to enhance employability (Hayhurst, 2013; Hayhurst et al., 2016). Thorpe et al. (2018) focused on a skateboarding programme and showed how combining sports with education and leadership training helps street children return to school. Caudwell’s (2021) research focused on the inclusion of often marginalised groups in swimming activities, assessing the concept of “queering” in indoor recreational swimming. Last but certainly not least, Rich et al. (2022) highlighted a surfing programme that overcame barriers to women’s participation by providing flexible modes, reducing costs, and offering community-based childcare solutions.

3.3. Research Methods

The diverse research methods employed in the current literature provide a rich perspective on understanding the impact of SDP on gender inclusion. A few researchers have used quantitative approaches, such as Farmer et al.’s (2020) non-randomised pre-post control design to evaluate changes in physical activity, sports skills, and mental health among 120 participants. Burnett (2022) applied mixed methods, combining interviews and custom questionnaires to assess the effectiveness of the project in addressing youth employment.

Most studies primarily used qualitative methods. Ethnographic fieldwork was widely applied (Moura, 2021; Válková, 2021) alongside some common qualitative methods like observation (Hayhurst, 2013; Moura, 2021; Oxford, 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Smits & Knoppers, 2022; Válková, 2021), focus group discussions (Burnett, 2022; Caudwell, 2021; Hayhurst et al., 2016; Smits & Knoppers, 2022; Válková, 2021; Zipp, 2020), document analysis (Hayhurst, 2013; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018), and semi-structured in-depth interviews (Caudwell, 2021; Hayhurst, 2013; Hussain & Cunningham, 2021; Moura, 2021; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018; Rich et al., 2022; Thorpe & Chawansky, 2017; Válková, 2021). In addition, some studies also incorporated visual research methods. For instance, Smits and Knoppers (2022) collected 230 minutes of video footage captured by 49 disadvantaged girls using GoPros, providing a novel perspective for observation and allowing the girls to express their experiences through video. Caudwell (2021) used drawing methods to analyse the meaning of sport participation for queer groups by collecting their drawings of experiences before and after participating in activities. Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) employed photography, equipping participants with cameras to tell their stories through photos or videos, expressing their views on SDP projects.

Researchers have not only innovated in methods but also participant selection. Besides focusing on project participants (Burnett, 2022; Hayhurst & del Socorro Cruz Centeno, 2019; Oxford, 2019), some studies included project organisers, staff, and volunteers (Burnett, 2022; Rich et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018).

Other studies examined both project staff and sports participants (Hayhurst, 2013; Hayhurst et al., 2016; Johnston et al., 2019; Rich et al., 2022), and some even involved participants' parents (Oxford, 2019). Introducing more external perspectives for in-depth discussion may be an effective way to comprehensively understand the impact of sports projects on promoting gender inclusion (Válková, 2021).

3.4. Research Findings

Based on different goals and target participants, researchers have reached diverse findings. Some studies have explicitly shown the positive impacts of SDP on gender inclusion. For instance, Smits and Knoppers (2022) proposed that SFD holds practical potential in reshaping traditional gender roles, Burnett (2022) found that SDP projects had positive effects on employability and life skills, Johnston et al. (2019) found that sports activities designed based on the PYD model can effectively promote girls' connections with their social environment and are especially crucial for marginalised groups, Caudwell (2021) observed that queer groups experienced joy, freedom, and a sense of well-being through activities, and Farmer et al. (2020) reported that the projects significantly improved girls' levels of physical activity and mental health.

However, more studies suggest that the effectiveness of SDP projects in promoting gender inclusion is not entirely optimistic. Oxford and McLachlan (2018) pointed out that, although women felt a certain degree of autonomy in SDP activities and created a "new" normal within their social circles, traditional social structures still maintained the existing gender status quo. In this environment, power is controlled and organised by men, and it seems to have little impact on the broader patriarchal or class structures. Specifically, Hayhurst et al. (2022) highlighted the dual impact of cycling on gender equality, noting its risk of reinforcing women's caregiving roles. With access to bicycles, women and girls gain greater mobility, yet they will be expected to complete tasks more efficiently. In addition to bearing caregiving and financial responsibilities within the family, they also need to fulfil the traditional domestic roles assigned by society, thereby further reinforcing their burden as primary caregivers. More dramatically, Hayhurst and del Socorro Cruz Centeno (2019) suggested that women often bear marginal and undesirable tasks. In the processes of environmental degradation and climate change, women are frequently required to take on labour related to environmental restoration, while those who are most responsible for these consequences, such as large industrial factories, continue to intensify these harmful practices and have no real intention of preventing them. Furthermore, Zipp (2020) found that while single-gender sports projects enhanced self-efficacy and peer relationships among women, mixed-gender football activities had limitations in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting physical competence regarding body image.

For LGBTQ+ groups, Válková (2021) highlighted that indoor swimming projects provided supportive environments and relatively safe spaces, yet there were complexities in inclusivity, with some non-heterosexual beneficiaries reporting experiences of exclusion and alienation, including misunderstanding, scepticism, and rejection. Thorpe et al. (2018) revealed ethical challenges that women in the Global South might face due to the portrayal of female sports participation, while Moura (2021) uniquely discussed the role and value of men in gender-inclusive SDP projects, finding that male participants played diverse roles in promoting gender inclusion but also faced challenges from traditional masculinity concepts, which hindered their full support and contribution to the gender inclusion process.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Embrace Global South and More People*

Current research spans a wide range of global regions but often overlooks the Global South. There is a notable lack of contributions from local scholars in these regions, which results in a significant imbalance in the perspectives and findings presented. This imbalance is compounded by the economic and educational inequalities between the Global North and South, further exacerbating the development gap between these regions (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Scholars from the Global North, who typically dominate the research field, often lack a deep understanding of the local contexts in underdeveloped areas, leading to biases, misinterpretations, and oversimplifications concerning the challenges and needs specific to these regions (Connell, 2020, pp. 69–86). Moreover, many SDP projects tend to focus primarily on young women and overlook age groups who face entirely different conditions. For example, menopausal, older women, and those in other age demographics face distinct challenges in terms of physical health, social inclusion, and empowerment (Pilgaard, 2013). By narrowing the focus exclusively on young women, these articles may miss an opportunity to address the broader spectrum of gender-related needs, which can limit the overall effectiveness of SDP initiatives in promoting gender inclusion and equality (Appleby & Foster, 2013).

Furthermore, current research tends to approach gender as a binary concept—male and female—without adequately addressing the experiences and needs of SGM, whose challenges in sports participation and social inclusion can be vastly different (Kabeer, 2005). Gender is a spectrum, and fostering gender inclusion requires collective efforts from all gender groups within society (Odera & Mulusa, 2020). Unfortunately, the existing research often neglects these broader and more complex dimensions of gender identity, which can lead to a skewed understanding of the impact of SDP projects on marginalised communities. This suggests the need for expanding its scope beyond traditional, narrow views of gender, incorporating a more inclusive perspective in different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Addressing the specific needs of SGM, as well as considering the diverse age and demographic groups, is essential for creating a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of how SDP initiatives can contribute to gender inclusion and broader social change.

4.2. *The “Sport Plus” and “Plus Sport” Models*

In recent years, an increasing number of SDP projects have integrated a wide range of social, cultural, and educational elements to reach broader aims. These initiatives can be referred to as the “Sport Plus” model, which centres around sport and combines other elements, leveraging the direct influence of sport to achieve goals such as gender inclusion. However, the effectiveness of the Sport Plus model still needs further and deeper evaluation. Giulianotti et al. (2019) pointed out that sports are not inherently inclusive and every sport-centred intervention requires a systematic and critical assessment to clarify how and through which specific mechanisms to reach the aim. Such an assessment not only helps to avoid general assumptions about the effectiveness of sports projects but also reveals the real impact of sports in promoting gender inclusion. Against this backdrop, future research should delve deeply into the key role of sports. In particular, it should explore the core values of sports, such as teamwork, respect, and fair play to uncover the essential value of sports in challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms (Eastman & Billings, 2001; Thorpe, 2016). Meanwhile, Coakley (2002, 2011) reminded us that the positive impacts of sports are not universally

applicable to all groups. Especially in marginalised communities, socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts profoundly influence the practice of gender inclusion for SGM. Only by fully recognising and addressing these structural barriers, such as unequal access to resources, social stigma, or institutional discrimination, can the goal of gender inclusion be truly achieved (Elling & Knoppers, 2005; Storr et al., 2022). Therefore, when applying SDP to promote gender inclusion, it is necessary to consider the inherent values of sports and conduct an in-depth exploration of the more essential sports values to explain the value of sport in this process. Moreover, the characteristics of the environment should be fully taken into account. As Quinton et al. (2021) expressed in their research, increasing the role of baseline research in project design to gain a deep understanding of the environment and the characteristics of the population can minimise conflicts and dissatisfaction, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and satisfaction of the projects.

In addition, some SDP programmes also adopt the “Plus Sport” model, which emphasises incorporating sports elements into other social issues to promote broader social goals and endows sport with more supportive roles and possibilities. Different from the Sport Plus model, the Plus Sport model promotes the achievement of goals through cooperation with other social projects, resource integration, and flexible participation methods (such as reducing participation costs and expanding social networks). In the issue of promoting gender inclusion, this cross-sectoral cooperation can provide more participation opportunities for women and SGM, reduce the barriers they face in participating in sport, and promote gender equality by sharing social responsibilities (Rich et al., 2022). Currently, attention and practice in this area are still very limited. In this scoping review, no content can be fully understood as the Plus Sport model, which restricts the realisation of some sports values. Therefore, the flexible Plus Sport model deserves further attention as a means to expand the possibilities of sport-related projects.

4.3. Long-Term and Diverse Data

Current research predominantly uses qualitative methods, employing diverse approaches such as surveys, interviews, portraits, and videos to collect rich, multifaceted data. While these methods provide valuable insights, their appropriateness for addressing specific issues still requires further exploration (Bryman, 2016). The adaptability of these methods should be assessed based on the specific needs and context of the research to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the data. Long-term studies are crucial for capturing the dynamic changes of projects over time and uncovering their deeper social impacts and mechanisms. Presently, researchers tend to focus on whether SDP projects generate positive individual changes in the short term, such as improved sport skills and challenges to gender roles, but doubts remain about their potential to bring about long-term social transformation. The longest follow-up study in the current literature spans 11 months (Moura, 2021); the impact of SDP on gender inclusion is not instantaneous: It requires long-term tracking to systematically and critically discuss the relationships involved (Levermore, 2011). Most research lacks systematic long-term tracking, hindering a comprehensive evaluation of the long-term impact of sport on gender inclusion in various contexts. This reflects a significant gap in research, which calls for more longitudinal studies to capture the sustained effects of these initiatives. Continuous tracking and assessment of these development programmes will provide a more objective and accurate verification of how sport influences gender inclusion. Longitudinal studies following participants over time can offer valuable insights into the enduring impact of sport on individual lives and community dynamics (Reiner et al., 2013). Such studies should measure not only direct outcomes like skill development and confidence but also consider the broader social changes that sustained participation in these programmes

may bring. It is crucial to ensure that participants' voices are central to research, as this enhances the ability of stakeholders to make informed decisions (Meadmore et al., 2014).

Furthermore, engaging participants in feedback mechanisms and participatory research methods allows a deeper understanding of their experiences. By incorporating their perspectives, more effective interventions can be developed that resonate with their needs and aspirations (Greenwood et al., 2016). This participant-centred approach can also empower women and girls, involving them in shaping the projects designed to serve them. Therefore, to fully understand the long-term impact of SDP projects, extended follow-up or ethnographic studies are essential. In current research, qualitative methods are widely used, which can be seen as a reflection of the project's priorities, especially during the exploratory phase (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, integrating quantitative methods can also help capture broader societal perspectives and gather a wider range of viewpoints (Bamberger, 2000), providing researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between SDP and gender inclusion through multi-angle analysis frameworks and data support.

4.4. Expand the Positive Social Bubble

The current research highlights the positive impact of a wide range of SDP projects on gender inclusion, offering women and SGM engaging in sport-related activities valuable experiences. For young women in particular, these studies illustrate how SDP programmes genuinely empower them (Burnett, 2022), enhance their self-efficacy (Smits & Knoppers, 2022), and help them confront societal norms that often restrict their roles and opportunities (Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). As previously mentioned, gender issues are complex and multifaceted, and the inherent value of sport is not universally positive. Therefore, researchers must maintain a critical perspective, objectively evaluating the implementation of current sports programmes in promoting gender inclusion, identifying potential issues and challenges, and exploring more effective methods to leverage sports programmes in advancing gender equality (Coakley, 2002). Future research should focus more on the specific implementation strategies and impact mechanisms of these programmes to ensure that diverse groups with different backgrounds and needs truly benefit from them (Giulianotti et al., 2019).

Moreover, understanding the actual circumstances and needs of the participants, and carefully designing programmes to avoid potential negative impacts, is a crucial part of the research process. Currently, much of the research concentrates on how sport promotes physical development and social integration. However, the value orientation of SDP projects encompasses broader social values, and the challenges of gender participation stem from various structural factors, including historical, economic, social and cultural dimensions. An essential aspect of this discussion revolves around the potential of social development projects to create equitable, inclusive, and welcoming environments for all genders. Only through systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of these projects and strategic adjustments based on the needs of the communities they serve can this transformative potential be realised (Hussey & Flannery, 2007). By investigating the specific factors that contribute to the success of social development projects, researchers can distil best practices that can be applied in different contexts. Therefore, future research should adopt a broader social perspective, integrating the value of sport into the social environment, addressing complex gender and wider social issues, and fully harnessing the value of sport (Coalter, 2010), thus expanding our imagination of the value of sport (Darnell, 2010).

5. Conclusion

Through a scoping review method, this article systematically analyses the effectiveness and challenges of gender-related SDP programmes in promoting gender inclusion. It reveals the current research's insufficient attention to gender inclusion, particularly the gap concerning SGM. Additionally, the study emphasises the complex structural challenges, calling for more attention and in-depth exploration. Furthermore, this study also finds that empirical research remains very limited, especially with a lack of voices and stories from the Global South. Therefore, we hope that more scholars will be able to apply gender inclusion perspectives to evaluate SDP programmes and call for greater attention to the Global South, particularly through empirical methods to explore gender inclusion issues.

This scoping review analyses 18 studies on how SDP programmes that focus on gender inclusion can impact gender inclusion. Utilising the thematic analysis method, the research provides a comprehensive assessment and draws on a wealth of literature that covers both successful outcomes and the challenges faced. Consequently, the review highlights the potential of SDP programmes to challenge gender norms, empower women and sexual minorities and promote social inclusion while offering critical reflections on the research design and implications.

Firstly, although many SDP programmes aim to promote gender equality through sport, their effectiveness is often influenced by the complexity of gender norms and social structures. Additionally, most of these studies employ qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, and visual and video studies, with a few using quantitative analysis. While qualitative research captures participants' subjective experiences deeply, the relative lack of long-term longitudinal studies and large-scale quantitative research limits a comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of SDP programmes. Therefore, it suggests the necessity to gain a more holistic understanding of the long-term impact of SDP programmes on gender inclusion. In terms of results, the research finds that SDP programmes have certain positive effects in raising gender awareness, boosting confidence, and challenging traditional gender roles. However, due to the complexity and deep-rooted nature of gender issues, SDP programmes face multiple challenges in achieving gender inclusion goals, including insufficient exploration of broader structural societal issues, lack of sensitivity to local cultures, insufficient attention to the sexual minority groups, and limited discussion on the intrinsic value of sport in promoting gender inclusion. Finally, to achieve broader and more profound impacts, researchers need to pay more attention to the structural gender issues in society, consider the diverse needs of participants and local cultures, adopt more inclusive and sensitive strategies, critically evaluate the value of sport, and integrate long-term tracking and assessment.

6. Reflexive Limitations

Based on the current research, several limitations need consideration. Firstly, the data primarily comes from three databases—Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest—focusing on English journal articles while excluding conferences, books, and grey literature. As an international initiative, SDP projects also generate substantial output through non-academic channels like news articles and reports, which researchers may have overlooked, leading to incomplete data. This highlights the importance of expanding data sources for a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable development projects and their impacts. Additionally, some SDP-related practices in China have yielded significant results, such as the Yao Foundation, which aims

to promote basketball participation among rural children, Project Hope, which builds sports facilities for rural primary schools, and Nike China's "Play for Fun" programme, which promotes sports participation among girls in marginalised areas. However, these initiatives have yet to receive sufficient attention in the academic field, and the effectiveness of their social value through sport remains unclear. Therefore, including these findings in future research would enhance discussions by integrating Eastern and Western perspectives, improving the generalisability of the research, and deepening our understanding of SDP's global impact and application. To address these limitations, future research should diversify data sources to include news reports, reports, and social media posts. Collaborating with SDP practitioners from China and other Global South regions could also provide diverse data from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. These strategies would offer a more comprehensive, inclusive, and globally representative understanding of SDP's role in promoting gender inclusion and other development goals.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

All data generated or analysed in this study are included in the Supplementary File.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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