

# No Latina Girls Allowed: Gender-Based Teasing Within School Sports and Physical Activity Contexts

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/yas](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/yas)**Vera Lopez<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

This study examined gender-based teasing as a barrier to Latina girls' participation in school-based sports and physical activity. Focus groups with 78 Latina teens, ages 12 to 15, indicated that they often felt self-conscious and insecure about participating in school-based sports and physical activity because they did not like being the center of attention, were self-conscious about their appearance, and were afraid to make mistakes. Gender-based teasing from male peers—and sometimes female peers—further heightened Latina girls' feelings of insecurity and made it even less likely they would try out for a sports team. Still, there was evidence of resistance. Latina girls, particularly student athletes, resisted traditional gender-based expectations by calling out the inequities they saw all around them. These young women along with their nonathlete counterparts provided concrete suggestions on how schools can increase the participation of Latina teens in sports and physical activity.

**Keywords**

gender, health, physical activity, race/ethnicity, Latino, focus groups

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Being physically active is associated with positive physical (i.e., aerobic capacity, strength, body composition), social (i.e., empathy, cooperation skills), and emotional health (i.e., self-esteem) outcomes for youth (Bailey, 2006; Bailey et al., 2009). Still, the majority of adolescent girls fail to engage in the recommended level of physical activity. According to the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, only 39% of girls compared with 57.8% of boys met the recommended guideline for physical activity, which is defined as 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on 5 or more days per week (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). Latina girls are less likely than other girls to meet this guideline: Only 33.1% of Latina girls compared with 43.5% of White girls engaged in the recommended level of physical activity in 2015. Research on Latina girls is urgently needed given that Latinas are at increased risk for a number of negative physical health outcomes (i.e., obesity, diabetes) that are associated with a sedentary lifestyle (Larsen, Pekmezi, Marquez, Benitez, & Marcus, 2013).

Schools provide important opportunities for adolescent girls to engage in physical activity via organized sports and physical education (P.E.) classes. Since 1972, when Title IX was passed, the participation of girls in high school sports has increased from 7.4% to 42% in 2015 (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2015). Yet, the increase in girls' participation in school-based organized sports is not the same for all girls. Proportionately fewer Latina girls are involved in school sports than White girls (Sabo & Veliz, 2008) and even fewer Latina girls are involved in community sports (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000). Furthermore, national data indicate that Latinos are more likely than White youth to attend secondary schools where P.E. is not required and to attend schools that have lower rates of varsity sports participation (Johnston, Delva, & O'Malley, 2007).

Although various factors across multiple levels influence adolescent girls' sports and physical activity participation, this article focuses specifically on Latina girls and the gender-related barriers they face, because these were the types of barriers most frequently mentioned by the study participants. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that girls' micro-level interactions with boys are embedded within a larger patriarchal landscape that continues to validate male athletes at the expense of female athletes (Duncan, 2007; Messner, 1988, 2009). Even though girls now have the legal right to participate in sports, they continue to meet with resistance on the track, in the field, and on the courts (Cooky, 2009; Messner, 2009).

A feminist post-structural framework is a useful lens for examining some of the issues surrounding Latina girls' gendered experiences and interactions within school sports and physical activity contexts. This framework recognizes that gender is structured, negotiated, and situated within relationships and

across contexts (Azzarito, Solmon, & Harrison, 2006). Adolescents receive messages about how they should perform gender from a variety of sources, including their peers, parents, significant others (i.e., coaches, teachers), and broader social institutions such as the media (Azzarito et al., 2006; Cooky, 2009; Messner, 1988, 2009). Given that men continue to hold most of the power in the United States, the messages that individuals receive about how gender should be performed often conform to traditional forms of feminine and masculine ideologies that “work in tandem to organize and regulate gender-appropriate emotional expressions, behaviors, bodies, and sexuality” (Tolman, Davis, & Bowman, 2016, p. 5) that reinforce men’s heterosexual privilege.

Messages that support a patriarchal gender order are prevalent within sports contexts where boys and men are expected to be aggressive, competitive, and physically strong and girls and women are expected to be compliant, physically attractive to the male gaze, and most importantly, weak (Duncan, 2007; Messner, 1988; Schmalz & Kerstetter, 2006). Within youth sports and physical activity contexts, such messages—that sports are primarily a man’s domain—continue to be reinforced via rules, policies, and practices that highlight boys’ sports accomplishments to a greater extent than girls’ sports accomplishments (Azzarito et al., 2006; Cooky, 2009; Messner, 1988, 2009). Furthermore, important people in youths’ lives such as parents, teachers, and coaches often reinforce such messages (Casey, Eime, Payne, & Harvey, 2009; Messner, 2009; Taylor et al., 1999).

Adolescent boys often act in accordance with patriarchal messages that suggest that boys are superior to girls when it comes to physical prowess (Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010; Vu, Murrie, Gonzalez, & Jobe, 2006). Such messages, often delivered in the form of gender-based teasing, represent a barrier that impedes girls’ participation in school-based sports and physical activity (Casey et al., 2009; Evans, 2006; Oliver & Hamzeh, 2010; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Taylor et al., 1999; Vu et al., 2006). In one focus group study, adolescent girls ranked boys as the number one reason for not participating in physical activity (Vu et al., 2006). More than half of the 100 girls in this study reported that boys made fun of them when they made a mistake or did not know the rules of a sport.

This article builds upon previous work on youth sports and gender by examining how Latina girls negotiate gender within school sports and physical activity contexts. Such research is urgently needed given that Latina girls are less likely than other girls to participate in school sports and physical activity (CDC, 2015; Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Research that considers Latina girls’ perspectives, in particular, has the potential to inform the development of culturally relevant and gender responsive interventions designed to promote sports and physical activity among this understudied group.

## Method

### *Participants*

This study sample was drawn from one middle school, one high school, and one community program targeting Latina girls and their mothers. Both schools and the community program were located in a large city in the south-western United States. Approximately 95% of the students attending the schools were eligible for free or reduced lunch. All participants were in Grades 7 to 9 and between the ages of 12 and 15.

Seventy-eight Latina girls participated in the study. Most of the girls were of Mexican descent. Although data on girls' generation status were not collected, approximately 70% of the girls requested parent consent forms in Spanish. Conversations with school staff indicated that many of the students at both schools were either first- or second-generation Latino students. Approximately one third of the girls were student athletes, as indicated by a show of hands at each focus group.

A total of 12 focus groups were conducted. At the schools, focus groups took place in empty classrooms and at a local library conference room for the girls from the community program. Focus groups lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour with an average of six girls in each group. Focus group participants were divided by grade level (seventh, eighth, ninth) and most of the girls already knew each other beforehand. The Principal Investigator (PI), Vera Lopez, conducted all focus groups.

### *Recruitment*

A variety of recruitment methods were used to recruit Latina girls. The PI presented the project several times to Latina girls and their mothers at the community program. She answered questions about the project and stayed afterward to collect parent consent and teen assent forms from young women interested in participating in the research project. At the schools, two staff members (a teacher at the middle school and the assistant principal at the high school) presented the study to Latina teens and were responsible for collecting parent consent and teen assent forms at each site. For their participation, girls received a US\$20 Target gift card.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus group questions were open-ended and focused on girls' perceptions and experiences related to exercise, P.E. classes, and organized school sports.

Questions focused on what girls liked and did not like about each of these activities as well as their beliefs about context-specific barriers and facilitators related to physical activity and sports. The PI took notes after each focus group and summarized her initial impressions of the tone, context, and non-verbal responses that were present.

The focus group methodology was an ideal choice for this study because focus groups minimize the power of the researcher vis-à-vis the study participants (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups also encourage frank conversations when participants know one another (Wilkinson, 1998) and can be particularly useful when working with adolescents (Peterson-Sweeney, 2005). Being able to observe interactions between group members is an additional advantage of focus groups (Wilkinson, 1998).

### ***Analysis***

All focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Each line of the transcript was individually coded and content analyzed by the PI using thematic analysis (TA) methodology (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013 for more information on the six-step TA methodology). To minimize bias, a trained research assistant independently coded a sample of transcripts and her codings were compared with the PI's until both were satisfied that coding was consistent.

### **Findings**

Although Latina girls reported a number of barriers associated with participation in school-based sports and physical activity, the vast majority of girls wanted to be more physically active for health reasons, to feel good about themselves, and to hang out with friends. Yet, despite their generally positive views about sports and physical activity, many of the girls did not feel welcome within school-based sports and physical activity contexts.

#### ***Not Wanting to Be the Center of Attention***

The most commonly reported reason for not joining a sports team was feeling self-conscious. Girls reported feeling self-conscious and insecure about their appearance and athletic competence within organized sports and P.E. contexts. They often reported feeling like everyone was watching them, and they were uncomfortable with being the “center of attention.” Many of the young women, particularly those who were nonathletes, believed their peers were negatively appraising them. This belief that others are always looking at and

judging you is consistent with research which indicates that adolescents often view themselves through the lens of others or what Cooley referred to as the “looking glass self” (Cooley, in Harter, 1990). Although girls generally felt self-conscious around both male and female peers, they spent more time talking about feeling self-conscious around boys and often viewed their bodies through a “male gaze” (Calogero, 2004; Evans, 2006).

*Appearance concerns.* Girls reported feeling self-conscious about their bodies and general appearance. Being physically developmentally advanced was mentioned as a reason for girls feeling self-conscious, as illustrated by the quote below:

Maybe, um, you feel uncomfortable? 'Cause, you know, some girls are a little bit more advanced in their features. Like, you know, the bigger ones, have the bigger butt and bigger boobs. So, like, you know, maybe if they jump or something, or trip, you know if everything moves, they feel uncomfortable with, you know, people staring. (FG 1)

These appearance concerns were directly related to how girls felt boys would view them, as indicated by a young woman in Focus Group 4: “And like [boys] look at us in certain places. It’s uncomfortable.” Although none of the girls reported personally feeling self-conscious about appearing less attractive to boys, they frequently mentioned that other girls felt this way. A typical comment was that girls do not play sports “because they don’t wanna look all sweaty and stuff in front of boys” (FG 7). The girls who were athletes were particularly vocal in their judgment of “girly girls” who they believed were overly concerned about how they appeared to boys. For example, one girl athlete said,

So, like, for other girls, I know, like this girl told me like, “Ugh, they look at my butt,” and I’m like, “Why don’t you wear the baggy shorts that I have?” She wears the tight yoga pants. In some ways, I understand them, but in some ways I don’t. Like you’re wearing the provocative clothes, and they wear the stuff like the tight yoga pants, you know, with the tight muscle shirt. And, like, you know, boys are gonna stare. They’re boys. So, it’s kind of like your fault. So you need to control what you wear, too. (FG 1)

As these quotes illustrate, young women frequently blamed other girls for dressing in such a way as to attract boys’ attention relying on the commonly touted belief that “boys will be boys.” Such a view, as illustrated by the above quote, places the onus on girls to avoid attracting boys and reinforces views

that girls must police boys who cannot help themselves when presented with the female body.

Not wanting to ruin makeup was mentioned as a reason for girls not engaging in sports and physical activity more generally. One young woman, who was an athlete, linked wearing makeup to feeling insecure. She said, “I feel like girls who like to put that stuff on their face, they do it because they feel insecure” (FG 5). The girl athletes, in particular, rejected the notion that girls need to wear makeup and emphasized the importance of self-acceptance as illustrated by the quote below.

Sometimes, my mom tells me, “You’re such a boy.” But, like I told her, girls don’t have to wear makeup. You’re nice, you’re good the way you are. Like, you’re not meant to put cake on your face. (FG 1)

Girls also reported that girls who are “bigger, like larger” sometimes “get made fun of” (FG 5). It was clear that many of the young women felt like their peers—both boys and girls—were evaluating their bodies. Pressure to conform to these appearance ideals, many of which focused on the male gaze, can influence girls’ decisions to avoid sports and physical activities that involve getting “sweaty” and “dirty” (Evans, 2006; Taylor et al., 1999). Nevertheless, it should be noted that a few of the young women, particularly those who played organized school sports, rejected such messages. Still, they blamed other girls for being overly concerned about their appearance while failing to see how such concerns are rooted within a larger patriarchal landscape that emphasizes the importance of traditional femininity and heterosexual desirability (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005; Azzarito et al., 2006; Messner, 1988).

*Not knowing the fundamentals.* Girls also mentioned feeling insecure about not knowing the fundamentals of sports. They were afraid of “making mistakes” and “not being good enough.” One girl in Focus Group 10 said,

I think some girls don’t have the confidence to [play sports] because a thing for me personally with trying out for sports, a big thing, is that I don’t really want to try out because what if I’m not good enough? I would just doubt myself.

Another young woman in Focus Group 7 echoed this sentiment, “I would like to do softball, but I’ve never played on any sort of team before, and I’ve only played baseball with my brother. So, I don’t really know what the fundamentals of the game are.” Other young women across the various focus groups agreed.

Despite being self-conscious and fearful of “making a mistake,” some young women tried out for sports anyway. For example, one young woman from Focus Group 10 described how she talked herself into trying out for a school sports team. She said,

I wanted to be running around and on a team like that. But I always thought, “No, I’m not going to try out because they’re trying out, and they’re so much better.” Like, I just wouldn’t make the team. I would embarrass myself, but now this year, I’m going to try out for soccer. I’m not great at it, but I’m not completely terrible. So, I figured I might as well give it a shot. There’s not really any harm in trying. (FG 10)

Although most of the girls in the focus groups said they liked “friendly” competition, their main reasons for wanting to engage in sports was for health benefits, to feel better about themselves, and to hang out with friends. Consequently, they often felt uncomfortable when boys were “too serious” about sports.

### *Gender-Based Teasing: You Do Not Know How to Do Anything*

Many girls, athlete and nonathletes alike, reported feeling pressure to perform well and being teased when they made a mistake on the playing field. As most of the girls were not athletes, they often shared stories about being teased during P.E. classes. Although girls reported being teased by other girls, this was only true for the athletes when referring to their interactions with opposing players. Girls, irrespective of whether they played on an organized sports team, reported being teased by boys who often attributed their mistakes on the field and playground to them being a girl. These taunts contributed to some of the girls feeling uncomfortable during P.E. classes when they had to participate in physical and sports activities with boys. Many also lamented that boys are “too rough” and take sports too seriously, as indicated by the quotes below.

- It’s not so good sometimes cause [boys in P.E.] take it, like, so serious. (FG 4)
- Like, if we’re playing a game in P.E., [boys] are too rough. (FG 4)
- Boys are “horrible” in P.E. They’re super competitive. They laugh if you make a mistake. (FG 9)

When I asked the girls why they believed boys acted this way while playing sports, one young woman said, “Boys are more competitive. That’s how they are . . . I don’t know, just, sports is their thing, and they think



they're always gonna win or something. They like to get all serious" (FG5). As indicated by this quote, some of the young woman—especially those who were not athletes—believed that sports were the domain of boys and men. Although they acknowledged that girls could and should play sports, they also believed that boys and men dominated the sports domain and were uncomfortable with how competitive and aggressive some boys were on the playing field.

When young women fail to perform well on the playing field, their "mistakes" are often attributed to their gender, as indicted by the following quote from a young woman in Focus Group 1, "If you mess up, the boys, like, say, 'Oh, yeah. The girls suck.'" Girls also felt like they were overly scrutinized and ridiculed when they made a mistake, as expressed by another young woman from Focus Group 8:

I guess the thing I hate the most has to do with girls and boys in P.E. mostly because when you don't do something right as a girl, it's more or less like, "You don't know how to do anything all." But, if a guy does it wrong, it's more like, "Oh, you made a simple mistake, it's okay." So, it's a lot more pressure trying to do something in P.E. compared to boys. If a girl messes up in P.E., they laugh at it.

When I asked this young woman what happened when boys laughed at girls in P.E., she said, "Uh, I mean, it makes you feel bad. You get embarrassed. You're, like, 'What did I do wrong?'" A young woman in Focus Group 6 discussed why some boys do not like playing sports with girls. She said, "They don't like playing with girls. They want to be themselves, and get all tough and stuff, and they think we're too weak." She then discussed how boys' attitudes directly impacted how girls feel about themselves. She said, "We don't feel that strong. We feel like we're more weaker [physically]. We feel weak if they tell us that, even though we're strong in the inside."

As these young women's narratives indicate, boys' actions on the field can sometimes leave girls feeling like they are not as strong as boys, an attitude that is often reinforced by parents, coaches, schools, and the media (Duncan, 2007; Messner, 1988). For example, a young woman from Focus Group 1 said that even though the girls' soccer team made it to the championships, the boys on the boys' soccer team still teased them. To make matters worse, the boys' soccer team still received more positive attention than the girls' soccer team from other students, parents, and coaches.

Even though we made it to the championship and they didn't, the boys, like still said, "Oh, yeah, the girls suck." And it doesn't matter that we made it to the

championship, because it's just like a history in our school . . . girls in our school, like, don't get as much attention as the boys in our school . . . (FG 1)

When I asked what would happen if girls beat boys in a sports activity, girls hinted at the pressure young men feel to live up to hegemonic masculine ideals within the sports context. Indeed, one young woman from Focus Group 9 summed up what many of the girls believed when she said, "It would hurt their ego. They would get mad." Another young woman, who was a school athlete, said that many boys were supportive in private, but not in public.

It depends on who they are with . . . [During the football games] the boys will complain the entire time about us [cheerleaders], and then I'll get a text from five of them that I'm friends with, and they'll say, "You guys did so well tonight! Good job." So, I guess it's who they're with that makes them act a certain way. (FG 8)

Another school athlete also said boys can be supportive, "I mean, most of the guys here at school, they're like pretty cool with girls. Like, you can go play soccer with them, and they won't say anything."

Although most girls across all the focus groups said that boys were generally not supportive and frequently put them down when they made mistakes, a few girl athletes said that boys were sometimes supportive, especially in private settings and when they were friends with the girls in question.

### *Treating Girls Like "A Delicate Flower"*

Although most of the girls believed that girls are generally physically weaker than boys, some of them resented being treated like a "delicate flower" during P.E. and on the playing field. These young women, though few in number, rejected the "frailty myth" which "relates to the construction of the masculine body as active and the feminine body as passive or weak" (Evans, 2006, p. 554), as illustrated by the following quote from a young athlete in Focus Group 10:

Something I've noticed, especially, like, when I'm playing sports . . . If [boys] like bump into me on accident, they'll be like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And they'll stop and, like, completely apologize, but if they do it to a guy, they don't, like, care. And I'm, like, "No, I'm like fine, you just bumped into me. It's really not a big deal." So, it's just kind of more of a . . . "Oh, you're a girl, you need to be cuddled more." You're fragile like a delicate flower.

Another young athlete in the same focus group shared a similar experience. She said,

Today, we were playing soccer and the ball hit me in the face, and, like, the guy who did it was, like, “Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean for that to happen.” But, like, I was fine after a minute. It didn’t really hurt. It was more of just a shock. But, if it happened to a guy, they would’ve laughed it off and just kept running around.

Girls reported that teachers and coaches sometimes reinforced the belief that girls are physically weaker and more delicate than boys. One young woman in Focus Group 7 said, “I mean, like, when the teachers, like, during P.E., they’ll have some of the guys come and help, like, bring stuff out. But, it’s, like, I can do the same thing they can.” Although these narratives were few in number, they illustrated that some of the girls—particularly the athletes—resisted being treated like they were weak within sports and P.E. contexts.

### *Girls’ Resistance Strategies: “You Put On Those Soccer Cleats and Go Make That Goal!”*

Even though most girls resented teasing from boys, only a few of them actively rejected the often implicit messages they received from peers, coaches, parents, and the media that girls are not as strong and athletically capable as boys. Not surprisingly, all of these resisters were athletes who generally endorsed a “you get out there and show them what you can do” attitude, as illustrated by the following quote from one young woman who said, “Like, you put on those soccer cleats and go make that goal!” (FG 7). Similarly, another young woman in Focus Group 9 said,

Don’t, don’t, don’t let a boy tell you what you can and can’t do when it comes to playing a sport. If you want to go play football, go play football. You put on that helmet and those shoulder pads and go tackle some guys.

Although less common, a few young women mentioned being teased by other girls who were not athletes. One young athlete, for example, shared how other girls sometimes called into question her femininity, but emphasized that she did not care what these “girly girls” thought about her. She said,

Well, I know some girly girls still say that girls that play sports a lot are kind of manly and kind of boyish, but I honestly don’t care. Like, it doesn’t bother me. Some of them say that about me, and some boys, too, but it doesn’t bother me. I think, just because, like, in my mind, I can do as well as anybody else. No

matter boy or girl. So, I think that it just doesn't bother me cause of that. 'Cause I know I can do as well as anybody else. (FG 2)

When I asked where her confidence came from, this young athlete said,

I think probably, my aunt, because she played competitive basketball so much. And, like, my uncles all played football, and they just all were really good at it, so they just, I don't know . . . I think I just got it from that.

Some of the other girl athletes in this study acknowledged that while they sometimes felt uncomfortable playing sports "in public" and "with boys," they forced themselves to do so anyway because they wanted to play. They also engaged in positive self-talk when competing in P.E. and on the playing field, as illustrated by the following quote from a young woman in Focus Group 7 who said, "Just do it. Just like certain things, like, I'm pretty sensitive, but I'm not gonna cry about everything." Other young athletes talked about how they handled making mistakes on the playing field. For example, one young athlete from Focus Group 8 discussed how she dealt with feeling embarrassed after making a mistake while cheering:

And, like, I felt a little embarrassed, but I just got back up, and I did the splits anyways, so, like, not many people really noticed. But . . . people who are paying attention did, so, like, I'm a little embarrassed about that. And, like, the other day, my friend, he was like, "Oh, are you gonna fall again today?" and I just didn't let it get to me, you know?

## Discussion

The Latina girls in this study most frequently cited gender-related barriers as the main reason for not feeling comfortable participating in school sports and physical activity. They did not specifically discuss how their ethnicity or culture shaped the gender-related barriers they faced in school sports and physical activity, even when they talked about gender expectations consistent with traditional Mexican culture. Like young women in other studies, they actively critiqued, resisted, or rejected traditional gender expectations and said they wanted to be more involved in sports and physical activity (Cooky, 2009). In doing so, they pushed back against prevailing stereotypes of Latinas as passive, subservient to men, and not interested in sports (Hall, 2001).

Although many of the young women in this study reported positive benefits associated with sports and physical activity, they often did not feel comfortable participating within school-based contexts that were structured in

such a way as to reinforce a patriarchal gender order grounded in heteronormativity (Shakib & Dunbar, 2002). These findings are consistent with other research on adolescent girls. Despite the legal access guaranteed by Title IX, many young women, including those who participated in this study, are still reluctant to participate in school sports and physical activity.

Girls reported feeling self-conscious as a reason for not liking and participating in sports and P.E. activities at school. Consistent with other research on adolescent girls (Evans, 2006; James, 2000), many of the girls viewed themselves and their bodies through a “male gaze” and were invested in the “production of their bodies as heterosexually desirable commodities” (Renold, 2000, p. 310). They assumed they would be shamed for not meeting current beauty ideals or sexualized and objectified if they did. Even the girls, who professed not to care about what others thought of them, reported having to defend themselves against comments from others (e.g., parents, peers) who referred to them as “manly” or “boyish.” These young women had to contend with messages that they were not “real women” because their bodies did not conform to current beauty ideals that emphasize women’s bodies as valuable only when heterosexually desirable to men (Roth & Basow, 2004). This finding is consistent with other research, which indicates that female athletes whose bodies appear “manly” risk having both their gender and sexuality questioned (Adams et al., 2005).

Girls also mentioned feeling self-conscious about their lack of sports-related skills, which made it less likely that they would try out for school sports teams. They were concerned that their peers—namely boys—would tease them for making mistakes, a finding that is consistent with other research on adolescent girls and sports (Casey et al., 2009; Evans, 2006; Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Taylor et al., 1999; Vu et al., 2006). Girls appeared to internalize these views of themselves as not being good athletes, especially when they believed that boys are naturally better athletes than girls. Girls’ beliefs about boys being “naturally stronger” and better at certain types of sports (e.g., football) are a reflection of larger societal messages that suggest girls and women are physically weaker than boys and men (Roth & Basow, 2004).

Although many girls in the focus groups reported gender-based teasing as a reason for not enjoying and/or participating in school sports and physical activity, it should be noted that not all girls felt this way. Some girls believed that boys were supportive, but these girls tended to be athletes who were more confident in their physical skills and felt less bound by traditional gender expectations than many of the nonathletes. Girl athletes in the present study were also more vocal about not wanting to be treated like “delicate flowers” in P.E. The views of these young athletes were reminiscent of what James (2000) found in her study of girls’ attitudes and behaviors at public swimming pools.

Although many of the girls in James's study felt self-conscious about their bodies, a few "achievers" expressed confidence in their bodies and perceived no barriers when it came to swimming in pools with boys. In contrast, other girls learned to cope with their feelings of insecurity by forcing themselves to swim even when they personally felt uncomfortable.

Although some girls actively resisted traditional gender role expectations, they did so in a way that denigrated other girls as "girly girls." In some instances, they admonished "girly girls" for being too focused on their appearance and for wearing "provocative clothes" like "tight yoga pants" and "tight muscle shirts" that would arouse boys' "natural" desires. They often viewed other girls' unwillingness to play sports as a personal weakness and believed these girls should "just put on those soccer cleats and go make that goal" without realizing how sociocultural views about femininity, masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality shape girls' views of themselves and their interactions with both male and female peers. Thus, these girls' individual acts of resistance did little to challenge the patriarchal gender order that continues to be expressed and reinforced within youth sports settings (Messner, 2009).

Although the results of this study provide important insight into why Latina girls do not like participating in school-based sports and physical activity, several limitations merit mention. First, the data were obtained from a convenience sample and may not adequately represent any population of Latina teens. Girls who declined to participate may have other opinions and experiences than the ones reported by the study's participants. A second limitation was that the study did not distinguish adolescent participants on the basis of acculturation or generation status. Doing so might have yielded additional insights. Finally, while all girls were asked the same qualitative questions, the participants differed with regard to how much they were willing to reveal. The focus group format might have made some participants less likely to challenge the dominant narrative of the group in favor of providing socially acceptable responses. This might have been particularly true around issues related to sexuality given the young ages of the participants. On the contrary, as indicated earlier, it is also possible that the focus group format capitalized on the group members' already established relationships, which may have increased their comfort level and willingness to share in a research setting (Kitzinger, 1994). Finally, it should be noted that girls mentioned many barriers related to participation in school-based sports and physical activity, but this study focused exclusively on gender-related barriers, as these were the most frequently mentioned barriers.

The good news is that the young women in this study reported positive benefits associated with sports and physical activity and expressed a

willingness to participate at a higher level if schools addressed gender-related barriers. Thus, it is imperative that schools capitalize on this desire by providing “gender-accessible” opportunities and multilevel interventions that encourage young Latina women to become more active, confident, and involved in sports and physical activity. The emphasis of such programming should be on physical skills development within a fun and supportive environment while also teaching girls and boys “to think critically about the gendered social processes that reproduce female subordination” (Shakib & Dunbar, 2002, p. 374). Such efforts would go a long way toward making school sports and physical activity contexts more welcoming spaces for all while also ensuring that Latina girls benefit from the varied emotional, social, and physical advantages associated with sports and physical activity more generally.

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