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Young Women Athletes in Albania: Motivation, Sporting Experiences and Barriers to Athletic Participation

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Abstract

This study examines the motivation, sporting experiences, perceived benefits, social and institutional support, and barriers experienced by young women athletes in Albania, with particular attention to factors associated with their continued participation in competitive athletics. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 80 female athletes aged 18–25 with competitive experience in organized athletics in Albania, including athletes who have represented the Tirana Athletics Team/Club and/or the Albanian National Athletics Team. The questionnaire assessed motivation, perceived physical, psychological, and social benefits, support from family, peers and coaches, sporting conditions, barriers to continued participation, intentions to continue an athletic career, and experiences as women athletes. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the most prominent motivational factors, perceived benefits, sources of support, and barriers.

The strongest motivational factors were improving athletic performance, achieving personal sporting goals, participating in competitions, and personal and athletic development. Participants reported substantial benefits from athletics, particularly improved physical fitness, self-confidence, discipline, and psychological well-being. Family and coach support were identified as important sources of encouragement, while access to appropriate training facilities and competition opportunities received comparatively lower evaluations. The most frequently reported barriers were financial costs, limited competition opportunities, difficulties balancing athletics with education or employment, and insufficient institutional support. Approximately 78% reported being likely or very likely to continue participating in athletics during the following two years, while 46% had considered stopping their athletic involvement. Approximately 82% reported feeling respected as athletes, whereas 41% agreed that social expectations concerning women's roles could make participation more difficult.

The findings suggest that young women athletes in Albania are strongly motivated by athletic achievement, competition, and personal development. However, continued participation is influenced by access to support, sporting opportunities, and resources.

Keywords: Young women athletes, Women and sport, Athletics, Competitive sport, Motivation, Sporting barriers,

Arnavutluk'taki Genç Kadın Sporcular: Motivasyon, Sportif Deneyimler ve Atletizme Katılımın Önündeki Engeller

Özet

Bu çalışma, Arnavutluk'taki genç kadın sporcuların motivasyonlarını, sportif deneyimlerini, algıladıkları faydaları, sosyal ve kurumsal destek kaynaklarını ve karşılaştıkları engelleri incelemekte; özellikle rekabetçi atletizmde katılımın sürdürülmesiyle ilişkili faktörlere odaklanmaktadır. Araştırmada nicel ve kesitsel bir tasarım benimsenmiş, veriler Arnavutluk'ta organize atletizm faaliyetlerinde rekabetçi deneyime sahip, 18–25 yaşları arasındaki 80 kadın sporcuya uygulanan yapılandırılmış bir anket aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar arasında Tiran Atletizm Takımı/Kulübü ve/veya Arnavutluk Millî Atletizm Takımı adına yarışmış sporcular da yer almaktadır. Ankette motivasyon, algılanan fiziksel, psikolojik ve sosyal faydalar, aileden, akranlardan ve antrenörlerden alınan destek, sportif koşullar, spora devam etmenin önündeki engeller, atletizm kariyerini sürdürme niyeti ve kadın sporcu olarak edinilen deneyimler değerlendirilmiştir. En belirgin motivasyon faktörlerini, algılanan faydaları, destek kaynaklarını ve engelleri belirlemek amacıyla betimsel istatistiklerden yararlanılmıştır.

En güçlü motivasyon faktörleri arasında sportif performansı geliştirmek, kişisel sportif hedeflere ulaşmak, yarışmalara katılmak ve kişisel ve sportif gelişim sağlamak yer almıştır. Katılımcılar atletizmin özellikle fiziksel uygunluk, özgüven, disiplin ve psikolojik iyi oluş açısından önemli faydalar sağladığını belirtmişlerdir. Aile ve antrenör desteği önemli teşvik kaynakları olarak öne çıkarken, uygun antrenman tesislerine ve yarışma olanaklarına erişim görece daha düşük değerlendirilmiştir. En sık bildirilen engeller; maliyetler, sınırlı yarışma olanakları, atletizmi eğitim veya işle bağdaştırma güçlükleri ve yetersiz kurumsal destek. Katılımcıların yaklaşık %78'i önümüzdeki iki yıl boyunca atletizme devam etme olasılıklarının yüksek veya çok yüksek olduğunu belirtirken, %46'sı sportif faaliyetlerini bırakmayı düşündüğünü ifade etmiştir. Katılımcıların yaklaşık %82'si

sporcu olarak saygı gördüğünü belirtmiş, %41'i ise kadınların toplumsal rollerine ilişkin beklentilerin spor katılımını zorlaştırabileceği görüşüne katılmıştır.
Bulgular, Arnavutluk'taki genç kadın sporcuların sportif başarı, yarışma ve kişisel gelişim tarafından güçlü biçimde motive edildiğini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, spora devamlılık; destek kaynaklarına, sportif fırsatlara ve mevcut kaynaklara erişimden etkilenmektedir.
Anahtar kelimeler: Genç kadın sporcular, Kadınlar ve spor, Atletizm, Rekabetçi spor, Motivasyon, Sportif engeller

INTRODUCTION

Sport participation among women has become an important area of research within sport sciences, particularly in relation to motivation, psychological development, social support, and the conditions that influence sustained participation and athletic development. Participation in organized sport can contribute to physical fitness, self-confidence, discipline, psychological well-being, and social development. However, continued participation is influenced not only by individual motivation but also by the social, economic, and institutional environment in which athletes train and compete. Motivation represents a central factor in athletes' engagement and persistence in sport. Self-Determination Theory provides an established framework for understanding the motivational processes underlying participation and continued engagement, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Vlachopoulos et al., 2000). Research has further demonstrated that more self-determined forms of motivation and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs are associated with positive experiences and well-being among athletes (Kouali et al., 2022). Recent evidence focusing specifically on women's participation in sport likewise indicates that motivational processes and psychological need satisfaction are important factors associated with women's engagement in physical activity and sport (Zhang et al., 2024).

For women athletes, however, motivation and sporting development occur within a broader social and structural context. Research on women and girls in sport has identified the influence of gender norms, social expectations, access to resources, institutional structures, and development opportunities. An extensive review of research on gender and women's sport participation emphasizes that women's experiences in sport need to be understood through the interaction of individual, interpersonal, organizational, and broader social factors (Trussell et al., 2024). These factors are particularly relevant to competitive athletes, for whom sustained participation requires regular training, appropriate facilities, access to competitions, qualified coaching, financial resources, and institutional support.

The Albanian context provides an important setting for examining these issues. National-level evidence indicates that participation in physical activity in Albania is relatively low and that meaningful gender differences exist in both participation and time spent in physical activity. Using data from the 2017–2018 Albania Demographic and Health Survey, Çule and Guliani (2022) found that women's participation in physical activity was associated with socioeconomic and demographic characteristics including education, employment, family structure, age, and region. Their findings also demonstrated gender-specific patterns in participation and time spent in physical activity, highlighting the importance of considering women's circumstances when examining engagement in physical activity and sport.

Research conducted in Albania has also begun to address the experiences of women at higher levels of sport participation. Deda (2024), examining female athletes at the professional level, identified insufficient funding, limited institutional support, and societal stereotypes among the challenges affecting the development of women's sport in Albania. The study also emphasized the importance of appropriate support, positive representation, and improved opportunities for female athletes. These findings are particularly relevant because they shift attention from general participation in physical activity toward the conditions experienced by women who pursue sport more intensively and competitively. Other recent research from Albania has examined motivation and perceptions of sport among young people. Lleshi et al. (2024), in a study of 821 high-school students, examined motivation for participation in recreational sport according to gender and regional origin. The study provides useful evidence regarding young people's perceptions of sport in the Albanian context, although its focus on adolescents and recreational participation differs from the experience of competitive athletes examined in the present study.

Despite this emerging body of research, there remains limited empirical evidence specifically addressing the motivations, sporting experiences, perceived benefits, sources of support, and barriers

experienced by young women engaged in competitive athletics in Albania. Existing Albanian studies have largely focused either on physical activity in the general population, young people's recreational sport participation, or broader challenges affecting women's professional sport. Consequently, the experiences of young women with established competitive involvement in athletics remain insufficiently examined.

The importance of the present study lies in its focus on young women who are not merely physically active but have established experience in competitive athletics. Examining this population makes it possible to move beyond general measures of sport participation and to explore the specific factors that shape women's continued involvement and development within organized competitive sport. In the Albanian context, such evidence can contribute to a more detailed understanding of the relationship between individual motivation, perceived benefits, interpersonal support, sporting conditions, and structural barriers. The findings may also provide relevant evidence for coaches, sports organizations, and institutions concerned with creating conditions that support women's sustained participation and athletic development.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the main motivational factors influencing young women's participation in competitive athletics; identify the physical, psychological, and social benefits associated with their athletic experience; assess the role of family, peers, coaches, and sporting conditions in supporting their participation and development; identify the principal barriers and challenges affecting their continued involvement; and examine their intentions to continue an athletic career and their experiences as women athletes. This study explores four research questions, beginning with the following: (1) Which key factors encourage young female athletes in Albania to participate in competitive athletics and sustain their involvement over time? (2) What physical, psychological, and social benefits do young women athletes associate with their athletic experience? (3) What forms of social and institutional support, and what sporting conditions, influence their participation and athletic development? and (4) What barriers do young women athletes experience, and how do these barriers relate to their intentions to continue participating in competitive athletics and their experiences as women in sport?

The study examines 80 female athletes aged 18–25 with competitive experience in organized athletics in Albania, including athletes who have represented the Tirana Athletics Team/Club and/or the Albanian National Athletics Team. By bringing together motivational, psychosocial, organizational, and gender-related dimensions, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence on the factors that support or constrain the continued participation and athletic development of young women in competitive athletics in Albania.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Participants

A quantitative, cross-sectional observational design was used to examine motivation, perceived benefits, social and institutional support, sporting conditions, barriers to participation, and intentions to continue competitive athletics among young women in Albania. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to describe participants' perceptions, experiences, and circumstances within a defined study period, without experimental intervention or prospective follow-up. The study was reported in accordance with the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) recommendations for cross-sectional studies (von Elm et al., 2007; Vandenbroucke et al., 2007). Data were collected in Albania between March 2024 and September 2025. The study included 80 female athletes aged 18–25 years with current or previous experience in organized competitive athletics. Participants included athletes who had represented the Tirana Athletics Team/Club and/or the Albanian National Athletics Team and who represented different athletics disciplines. Eligibility criteria required participants to be female, aged 18–25 years, and to have experience in organized competitive athletics in Albania. A non-probability purposive sampling approach based on predefined eligibility criteria was used. This approach was considered appropriate because the study targeted a specific population with characteristics directly relevant to the research objectives. Criterion-based purposive sampling involves the deliberate inclusion of participants who meet predetermined characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Non-probability sampling may be appropriate when a complete sampling frame is unavailable or

probability-based recruitment is not feasible, although it limits the generalizability of findings to the wider population (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016).

The final sample consisted of 80 eligible participants who completed the questionnaire and provided usable responses. The sample size was not determined through a priori statistical power calculation and was not intended to provide population-level estimates for all female athletes in Albania. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as descriptive evidence concerning the participating athletes and their reported experiences.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed specifically for the present study. The questionnaire was constructed in accordance with the study objectives and informed by literature addressing sport motivation, women's participation in sport, social support, and barriers to athletic participation. The motivational component was conceptually informed by Self-Determination Theory, particularly its emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness as important dimensions of motivation and well-being in sport (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kouali et al., 2022). The questionnaire also incorporated social, organizational, and gender-related dimensions relevant to women's participation and continuation in sport (Trussell et al., 2024). The instrument was a study-specific, content-based questionnaire rather than a standardized, validated scale. Before administration, the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility, and minor wording adjustments were made as needed. The final questionnaire was administered in Albanian.

The questionnaire contained 60 numbered items organized into seven sections. Section A comprised eight items addressing demographic and sporting characteristics, including age, place of residence, educational and employment status, years of athletic involvement, competitive level, athletic discipline, and training frequency. Section B comprised 14 items assessing factors motivating participation in and continuation of athletics, rated on a five-point importance scale ranging from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (Very important). Section C included 10 items assessing perceived benefits of athletics using a five-point agreement scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Section D included seven items assessing social support and sporting conditions, including family, peer, and coach support, access to training facilities, competition opportunities, and perceived equality of opportunities for female and male athletes. Section E comprised 14 items assessing potential barriers and challenges to continued participation or athletic development. These items were rated on a five-point barrier scale ranging from 1 (Not a barrier at all) to 5 (Major barrier). The barriers included time constraints, education and employment commitments, financial and transportation difficulties, sporting facilities and equipment, competition opportunities, family responsibilities, gender-related social expectations, safety and training conditions, institutional support, and opportunities for further athletic development. Section F included five items addressing continuation of athletic participation, including intention to continue participating in athletics during the following two years, factors encouraging continuation, previous consideration of discontinuing athletics, reasons for considering discontinuation, and overall satisfaction with the athletic experience. Section G included six Likert-type items addressing women's experiences as athletes, followed by one open-ended question concerning possible measures to provide greater support for young women and facilitate continuation of their athletic careers.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and the academic use of the collected data before completing the questionnaire. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before taking part in the research. Participants could decline participation or withdraw without consequences. The questionnaire was completed individually and anonymously and required approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. No directly identifying personal information was collected, and responses were treated confidentially and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Categorical and demographic variables were summarized using frequencies and percentages. For Likert-type items, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were calculated as appropriate. The analysis focused on the distribution and pattern of responses across the motivation, perceived benefits, support and sporting conditions, barriers, continuation, and women's experience sections. Continuation intentions, previous consideration of

discontinuing athletics, reasons for discontinuation, and overall satisfaction were summarized using frequencies and percentages. The open-ended responses were reviewed and grouped according to recurring content categories using a descriptive thematic approach.

Missing responses were excluded from the relevant item-level analyses and were not imputed. Given the cross-sectional design, the use of non-probability sampling, and the descriptive objectives of the study, the analysis was primarily descriptive. No causal inferences or population-level estimates were intended.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic and Sporting Characteristics of Participants

The study included 80 female athletes aged 18–25 years with experience in organized competitive athletics in Albania. The distribution of participants according to age, residence, education, employment, years of athletic experience, competitive level, and training frequency is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and sporting characteristics of participants (N = 80)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18–20 years	29	36.3
	21–23 years	31	38.8
	24–25 years	20	25.0
Residence	Urban	61	76.3
	Rural	19	23.8
Education	Secondary education	18	22.5
	University student	42	52.5
	University graduate/postgraduate	20	25.0
Employment	Student	42	52.5
	Employed	27	33.8
	Not employed	11	13.8
Years in athletics	<5 years	21	26.3
	5–9 years	34	42.5
	≥10 years	25	31.3
Competitive level	Club/team	28	35.0
	National level	32	40.0
	Club/team and national level	20	25.0
Training frequency	2–3 sessions/week	18	22.5
	4–5 sessions/week	45	56.3
	≥6 sessions/week	17	21.3

The largest age group was 21–23 years (38.8%), followed by participants aged 18–20 years (36.3%). Most participants lived in urban areas (76.3%). More than half were university students (52.5%), while 33.8% were employed. Regarding athletic experience, 42.5% reported 5–9 years of participation and 31.3% reported at least 10 years. Forty percent had competed at national level, while 25.0% had experience at both club/team and national level. More than half of the participants (56.3%) reported training four to five times per week.

Motivation for Participation in Competitive Athletics

Participants generally reported high levels of motivation across the assessed dimensions. The strongest motivational factors were related to athletic performance, personal sporting goals, personal and athletic development, and competition (Table 2).

Table 2. Motivational factors influencing participation in competitive athletics

Motivational factor	M	SD	Important/Very important n (%)
Improving athletic performance	4.63	0.58	75 (93.8)
Personal sporting goals	4.58	0.61	74 (92.5)
Personal/athletic development	4.51	0.65	72 (90.0)
Competition	4.45	0.69	71 (88.8)
Passion for athletics	4.39	0.73	70 (87.5)
Enjoyment	4.34	0.72	69 (86.3)
Physical fitness	4.31	0.75	68 (85.0)
Self-confidence	4.18	0.79	66 (82.5)
Healthy lifestyle	4.14	0.81	65 (81.3)
Coach influence	3.86	0.91	58 (72.5)
Family influence	3.74	0.98	56 (70.0)
Friends/social relationships	3.42	1.02	49 (61.3)

As below, in Figure 1 are presented the overall pattern of motivational factors. The highest mean score was observed for improving athletic performance (M = 4.63, SD = 0.58), followed by personal sporting goals (M = 4.58, SD = 0.61) and personal/athletic development (M = 4.51, SD = 0.65). Competition, passion, enjoyment, and physical fitness also received high ratings. In comparison, friends/social relationships had the lowest mean score among the assessed motivational factors (M = 3.42, SD = 1.02).

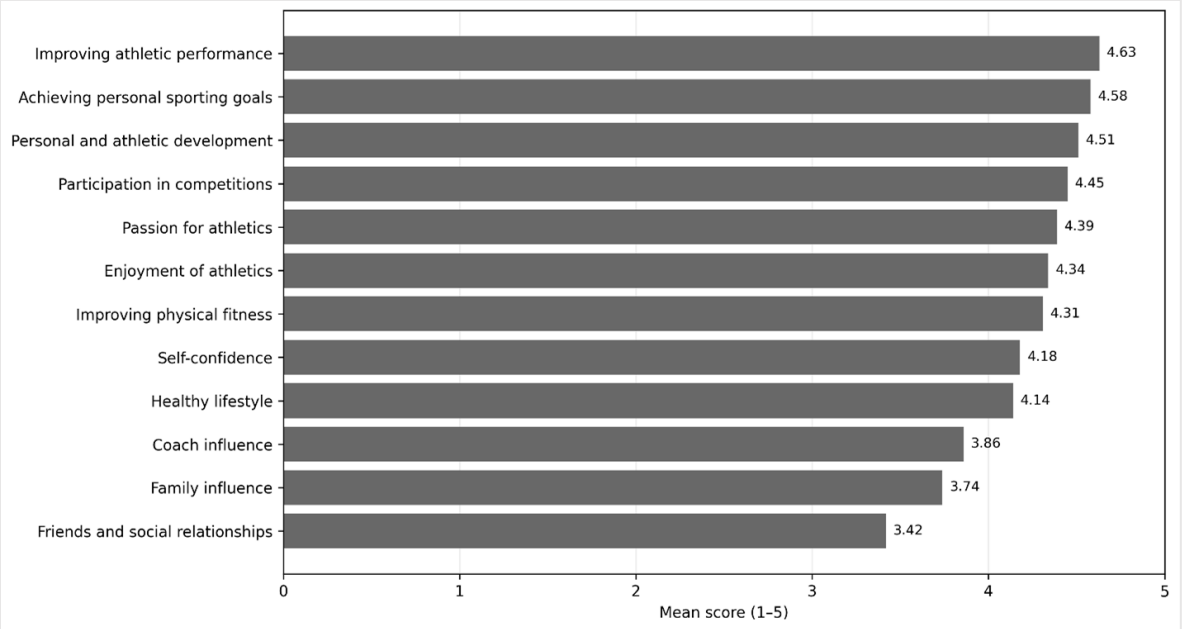

Figure 1. Mean Ratings of Motivational factors influencing participation in competitive athletics

The figure illustrates a predominantly performance- and development-oriented motivational pattern, with the highest scores concentrated on athletic improvement, personal goals, development, and competition, while interpersonal and social motives received comparatively lower ratings.

Perceived Benefits of Athletic Participation

Participants reported a range of physical, psychological, and personal benefits associated with their participation in competitive athletics (Table 3).

Table 3. Perceived benefits of athletic participation

Perceived benefit	M	SD	Agree/Strongly agree n (%)
Physical fitness	4.61	0.57	76 (95.0)
Self-confidence	4.48	0.66	72 (90.0)
Discipline	4.46	0.64	73 (91.3)
Strength/endurance	4.42	0.67	72 (90.0)
Psychological well-being	4.38	0.71	70 (87.5)
Persistence	4.35	0.69	70 (87.5)
Sense of accomplishment	4.29	0.75	68 (85.0)
Skills applicable outside sport	4.17	0.81	65 (81.3)
Quality of life	4.12	0.80	65 (81.3)
Social relationships	4.08	0.84	64 (80.0)

Figure 2 presents the distribution of perceived benefits according to their mean scores. Physical fitness received the highest rating (M = 4.61, SD = 0.57), with 95.0% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that athletics contributed to their physical fitness. High ratings were also reported for self-confidence, discipline, strength and endurance, psychological well-being, and persistence. Social relationships, although still positively evaluated, received the lowest mean score among the assessed benefits (M = 4.08, SD = 0.84).

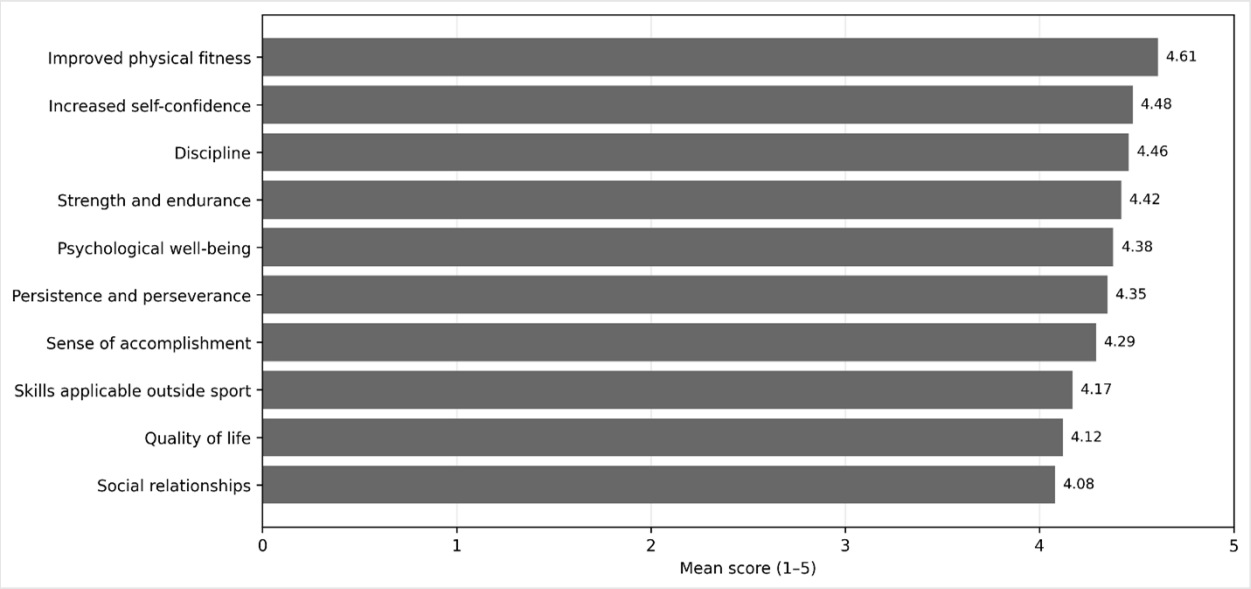

Figure 2. Mean Ratings of Perceived benefits of participation in competitive athletics

The pattern indicates that participants associated athletic participation particularly strongly with physical fitness and personal development, while psychological and social benefits were also consistently rated positively.

Social Support and Sporting Conditions

The findings indicate a difference between interpersonal support and broader sporting conditions. Support from coaches, family, and peers received comparatively higher ratings, whereas facilities, competition opportunities, and perceived comparability of opportunities for female and male athletes received lower ratings (Table 4).

Table 4. Social support and sporting conditions

Item	M	SD	Agree/Strongly agree n (%)
Coach support	4.38	0.73	71 (88.8)
Respect and support from coach	4.35	0.77	70 (87.5)
Family support	4.32	0.82	69 (86.3)
Friends/peer support	4.02	0.91	62 (77.5)
Adequacy of training facilities	3.21	1.04	43 (53.8)
Comparable opportunities for female and male athletes	3.17	1.12	42 (52.5)
Sufficiency of competition opportunities	3.05	1.09	39 (48.8)

Figure 3 illustrates the contrast between interpersonal support and broader sporting conditions. Coach support received the highest mean score (M = 4.38, SD = 0.73), followed by respect and support from coaches (M = 4.35, SD = 0.77) and family support (M = 4.32, SD = 0.82). In contrast, the lowest rating concerned the sufficiency of competition opportunities (M = 3.05, SD = 1.09), followed by comparable opportunities for female and male athletes and the adequacy of training facilities.

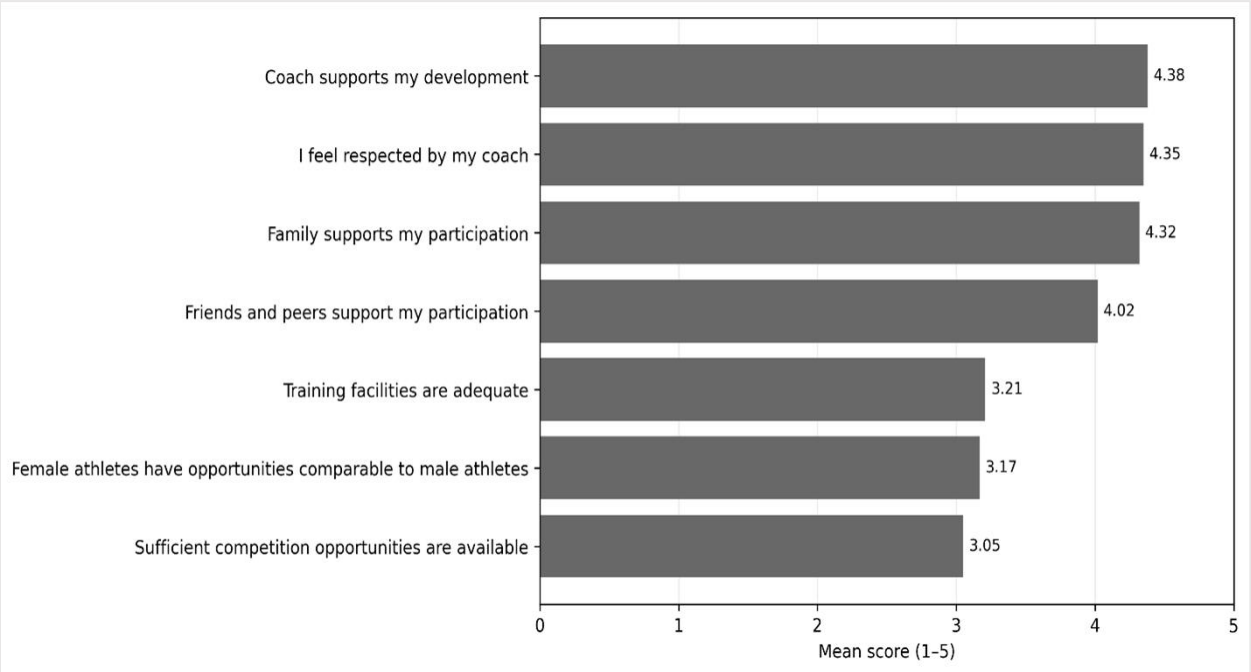

Figure 3. Mean Ratings of Social support and sporting conditions

The figure shows a clear descriptive pattern in which interpersonal sources of support received higher ratings than the structural and organizational conditions of participation.

Barriers to Continued Participation

Financial, competitive, educational/employment-related, and institutional factors were among the most frequently identified barriers to continued participation (Table 5).

Table 5. Perceived barriers to continued participation in competitive athletics

Barrier	M	SD	Moderate/Major barrier n (%)
Financial costs	3.76	1.08	62 (77.5)
Limited competition opportunities	3.71	1.04	60 (75.0)
Balancing athletics with education/employment	3.64	1.07	59 (73.8)
Insufficient institutional support	3.59	1.12	57 (71.3)
Equipment costs/availability	3.41	1.09	53 (66.3)
Limited recognition/development opportunities	3.38	1.10	52 (65.0)
Training facilities	3.34	1.13	51 (63.8)
Time constraints	3.28	1.06	49 (61.3)
Transportation	3.02	1.18	43 (53.8)
Social expectations concerning women's roles	2.96	1.21	41 (51.3)
Family responsibilities	2.61	1.18	34 (42.5)
Safety/training conditions	2.48	1.15	31 (38.8)

Figure 4 presents the relative magnitude of the assessed barriers. Financial costs represented the highest-rated barrier (M = 3.76, SD = 1.08), followed by limited competition opportunities (M = 3.71, SD = 1.04), balancing athletics with education or employment (M = 3.64, SD = 1.07), and insufficient institutional support (M = 3.59, SD = 1.12). Social expectations concerning women's roles were also identified as a barrier by a substantial proportion of participants, although their mean score was lower than those of the principal economic, competitive, and institutional barriers.

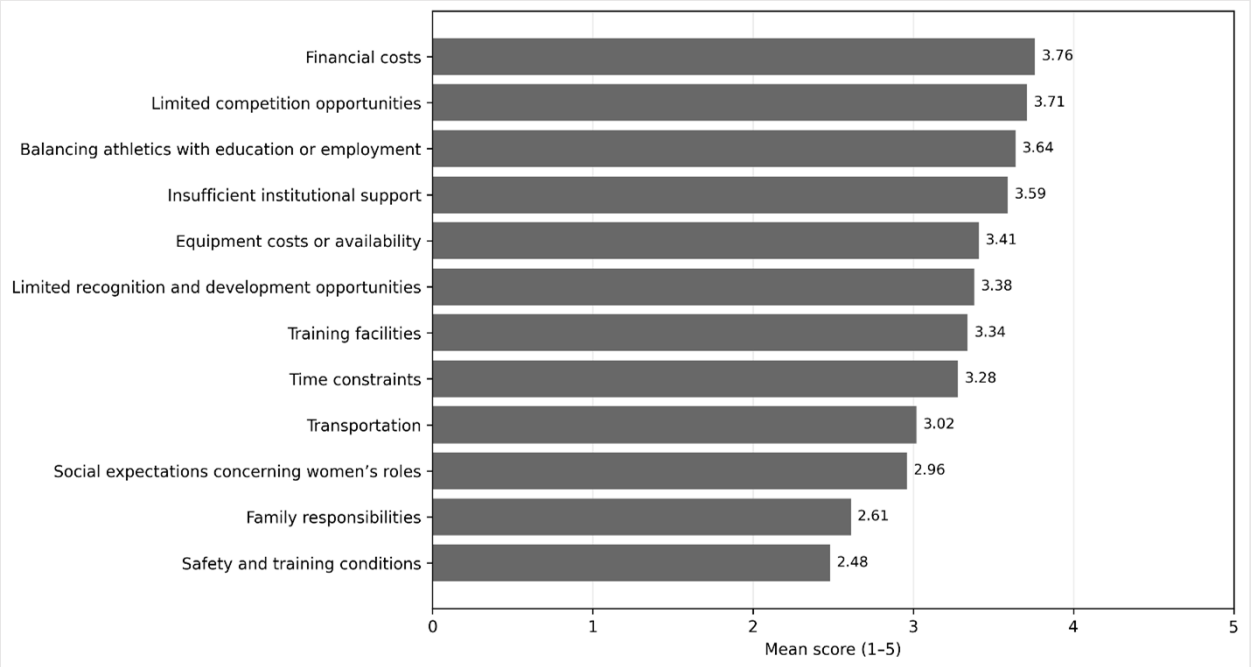

Figure 4. Mean severity of barriers to continued participation in competitive athletics

The pattern indicates that barriers associated with financial resources, access to competitions, education/employment demands, and institutional support were more prominent than barriers related to family responsibilities or safety/training conditions.

Intention to Continue and Consideration of Discontinuation

Participants were also asked about their intention to continue participating in athletics during the following two years and whether they had previously considered discontinuing their participation.

Table 6. Intention to continue participation and consideration of discontinuation

Indicator	Category	n	%
Likelihood of continuing during the next 2 years	Very likely	36	45.0
	Likely	27	33.8
	Uncertain	10	12.5
	Unlikely	5	6.3
	Very unlikely	2	2.5
Combined	Likely/Very likely	63	78.8
Considered stopping athletics	Yes	37	46.3
	No	43	53.8

Overall, 78.8% of participants reported that they were likely or very likely to continue participating in athletics during the following two years. At the same time, 46.3% reported that they had considered stopping their athletic participation. Among participants who had considered discontinuation, the reasons most frequently identified were financial difficulties, limited competition opportunities, difficulties balancing athletics with education or employment, and insufficient institutional support. These findings indicate that intention to continue participation coexisted with substantial exposure to factors that may make sustained participation difficult.

Women's Experiences in Competitive Athletics

The final section examined participants' experiences as young women athletes, including perceived personal development, self-perception, respect, recognition, institutional support, and the influence of gender-related social expectations.

Table 7. Women's experiences in competitive athletics

Item	M	SD	Agree/Strongly agree n (%)
Athletics contributes to personal development	4.47	0.64	73 (91.3)
Athletics positively influences self-perception as a young woman	4.24	0.76	69 (86.3)
I feel respected as a woman athlete	4.16	0.86	66 (82.5)
My achievements are sufficiently recognized	3.62	1.02	54 (67.5)
I receive sufficient institutional support	3.18	1.11	43 (53.8)
Social expectations concerning women's roles affect my participation	3.02	1.18	33 (41.3)

Participants reported particularly positive perceptions regarding personal development and self-perception. The majority also reported feeling respected as women athletes (82.5%). Ratings were comparatively lower for recognition of achievements and institutional support. In addition, 41.3% agreed or strongly agreed that social expectations concerning women's roles affected their participation in athletics.

Taken together, the findings show several consistent patterns in the experiences of the participating young women athletes. Motivation was primarily oriented toward improving athletic performance, achieving personal sporting goals, personal development, and competition. Participants also associated athletic participation with substantial physical, psychological, and personal benefits, particularly physical fitness, self-confidence, discipline, and psychological well-being. The findings regarding support indicate that interpersonal relationships, particularly support and respect from coaches and family support, were evaluated more positively than broader sporting conditions such as training facilities, competition opportunities, and comparable opportunities for female and male athletes. At the same time, the principal barriers were related to financial costs, limited competition opportunities, balancing athletics with education or employment, and insufficient institutional support. The intention to continue participation was relatively high, with 78.8% reporting that they were likely or very likely to continue during the following two years. Nevertheless, 46.3% reported having considered stopping athletics. From a gender perspective, most participants reported feeling respected as women athletes, while 41.3% indicated that social expectations concerning women's roles affected their participation.

Overall, the findings describe continued participation in competitive athletics as a multidimensional experience shaped by individual motivation and perceived benefits, interpersonal support, sporting conditions, economic and institutional barriers, and gender-related social experiences.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that young women athletes in Albania demonstrate a strong commitment to athletic participation, with motivation closely connected to personal development, competence, achievement, and the pursuit of sporting goals. At the same time, their experiences indicate that maintaining participation depends not only on individual motivation but also on the social, institutional, and material conditions surrounding athletic activity. The discussion therefore focuses on four interrelated dimensions: motivation and personal development, interpersonal support, structural and gender-related barriers, and the sustainability of participation.

Motivation and Personal Development

The findings suggest that young athletes are largely driven by the desire to improve their abilities, develop personally, and feel a sense of achievement. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, these motivations may help explain why athletes remain committed to their sport, particularly when they feel capable of making progress, have some control over their choices, and experience a sense of belonging and connection with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the present context, athletics appears to function not simply as a competitive activity but as a setting in which young women develop a sense of competence and achievement. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that autonomous motivation and positive physical self-perceptions can support girls' and young women's engagement in sport (Murray et al., 2022).

An important implication is that athletic participation may have significance beyond sporting performance itself. The experience of setting goals, managing demanding training, competing, and overcoming physical challenges can contribute to self-confidence, discipline, persistence, and a broader sense of personal capability. Thus, athletics can be understood as a developmental environment in which sporting and personal identities are interconnected. This is particularly relevant for young women, for whom participation in sport may provide opportunities to develop confidence and agency in contexts where gender expectations can otherwise shape perceptions of appropriate roles and behaviors.

Interpersonal Support and The Role of The Sporting Environment

The findings highlight the importance of the immediate social environment in sustaining women's participation. Coaches, family members, and peers represent more than sources of encouragement; they can shape athletes' perceptions of competence, belonging, recognition, and the value of continued participation. Recent research in sport motivation similarly emphasizes the importance of supportive, task-involving environments and the central role of coaches in fostering autonomous motivation and positive athlete outcomes (Viveiros et al., 2025).

For women athletes, the quality of these relationships may be particularly important because interpersonal support can partly compensate for weaknesses in the broader sporting environment. A supportive coach can provide technical guidance and recognition while also reinforcing an athlete's confidence and sense of legitimacy within competitive sport. Family and peer support can likewise reduce the social costs associated with sustained participation. The findings therefore suggest that interventions aimed at increasing women's participation should not focus exclusively on recruitment or motivation but should also strengthen the quality of the environments in which athletes train and compete.

Structural and Gender-Related Barriers

The most important tension emerging from the study concerns the relationship between individual commitment and structural conditions. The barriers experienced by participants point toward economic pressures, limited competitive opportunities, difficulties in combining sport with education or employment, and insufficient institutional support. These challenges suggest that women's participation cannot be understood solely in terms of individual choice or motivation. Rather, motivation operates within a sporting system that may provide unequal access to resources, opportunities, recognition, and progression.

This interpretation is consistent with the wider literature on women's sport, which has identified institutional structures, resource inequalities, sociocultural expectations, and gendered constraints as important factors shaping women's participation and progression (Fraser & Kochanek, 2023). A recent scoping review examining sport pedagogy from a feminist perspective similarly highlights the persistence of gender-stereotypical practices, differences in opportunities and expectations, and the tendency for women's sport to be treated as less valued or less capable than men's sport (Korsakas et al., 2026). These perspectives help contextualize the present findings within a broader understanding of how sporting environments can reproduce inequalities even when women themselves demonstrate strong motivation to participate.

The gender dimension is therefore important even though not all participants appear to experience gender-related expectations in the same way. Expectations concerning women's social and family roles may coexist with positive sporting identities and strong commitment to athletics. This suggests that gender inequality in sport does not necessarily operate through explicit exclusion. It may also emerge through the accumulation of practical disadvantages, including fewer opportunities, limited recognition, insufficient resources, and competing expectations outside sport. A recent systematic review of gender equality in physical education and sport likewise identifies gender stereotypes, institutional structures, resource limitations, and insufficient financial and organizational support as continuing challenges to women's participation and progression (Işıkgöz et al., 2025). The Albanian context identified in the present study can therefore be understood as part of a broader pattern in which individual commitment is not always matched by equally supportive sporting structures.

Sustainability of Participation and Implications for Women's Athletics

The coexistence of strong commitment to athletics and substantial exposure to barriers is perhaps the most significant finding for understanding the sustainability of women's participation. Continued participation should not be interpreted simply as evidence that existing conditions are adequate. Athletes may remain committed because of the personal value they attach to sport while simultaneously experiencing circumstances that make continuation financially, academically, or professionally difficult. In this sense, persistence may reflect both strong individual commitment and the effort required to maintain participation under constrained conditions.

The findings point to the need for a shift from policies that primarily seek to encourage women to participate toward measures that make participation sustainable. For Albanian athletics, this may include greater financial and institutional support, improved access to training and competition opportunities, clearer pathways for athletic development, and stronger recognition of women's achievements. Such measures are particularly important when athletes are simultaneously pursuing higher education or entering the labour market. The broader literature likewise indicates that improving gender equality in sport requires institutional and structural interventions rather than relying only on individual motivation or participation initiatives.

Overall, the study suggests that young women athletes in Albania are not characterized by a lack of motivation to participate in athletics. Rather, the central challenge lies in creating conditions in which this motivation can be maintained over time. Athletics already provides participants with important opportunities for competence, confidence, discipline, and personal development. Strengthening the institutional and social environment surrounding women athletes may therefore be critical for converting individual commitment into sustainable participation and longer-term sporting development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the motivation, sporting experiences, support systems, and barriers affecting young women athletes in Albania. Overall, the findings indicate that these athletes demonstrate strong personal commitment to athletics and perceive sport as an important context for achievement, physical and psychological development, confidence, discipline, and personal growth. Their engagement is therefore not primarily constrained by a lack of motivation. Rather, the sustainability of their participation is influenced by the conditions within which athletic activity takes place. A central conclusion is that individual motivation and structural support need to be considered together. Supportive relationships with coaches, families, and peers provide an important foundation for continued participation, while financial pressures, limited competition opportunities, difficulties in

combining athletics with education or employment, and insufficient institutional support may affect athletes' ability to remain engaged over time. The findings also indicate that gender remains relevant to sporting experiences, particularly through social expectations, recognition, and perceptions of institutional support.

The coexistence of strong commitment and substantial barriers is particularly important for understanding women's participation in athletics. It suggests that retaining women in sport requires more than encouraging participation at the individual level. Sustainable participation depends on sporting environments in which women have meaningful opportunities to train, compete, develop, and receive recognition for their achievements. In this respect, the study contributes empirical evidence on an underexplored aspect of women's athletics in Albania and highlights the importance of considering both individual experiences and institutional conditions.

From a practical perspective, the findings point to the need for sporting institutions and clubs to strengthen the conditions that support women's continued participation, particularly through improved access to competition opportunities, training resources, financial and institutional support, and recognition of women athletes' achievements. Greater attention to athlete-centred and gender-sensitive coaching environments, together with measures that facilitate the combination of sport with education and employment, may further contribute to sustainable participation. Although the study is based on a relatively small, non-probability sample and therefore does not permit population-level generalisation, it provides a useful basis for understanding the experiences of young women engaged in competitive athletics in Albania. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could further examine how these experiences vary across sports, competitive levels, geographical contexts, and stages of athletic development.

Declarations

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the author upon request.

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