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Active but still disabled: Sport and Community Participation among People with Physical Disabilities in Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Full participation in all domains of life is a human right, yet people with disabilities continue to encounter social and structural barriers to community participation. These barriers may be particularly pronounced in the Global South, where infrastructure and support systems are limited. This study examined the association between sport participation and community participation among people with physical disabilities in Laos. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 106 individuals with physical disabilities. The Temple University Community Participation Measure was used to assess the amount of participation as well as its personal importance, commitment, and satisfaction. The results showed that individuals who participated in sport demonstrated greater commitment to activities they considered personally meaningful. This association remained significant after controlling for employment and education. However, no differences were found between those who played sport and those who did not in the amount and sufficiency of community participation, suggesting social and structural barriers obstruct their participation in the community. These findings suggest that, while sport participation may support engagement in personally meaningful activities, broader social and structural barriers continue to constrain opportunities for meaningful community participation. Thus, future investment in key areas such as education is warranted.

Keywords: Community inclusion; physical disabilities; Global South; Parasport

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Introduction

The disability rights movement has been a leading civil rights movement, active globally. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006), a cornerstone of the disability rights movement, stated that people with disabilities should enjoy all human rights for full participation in all community activities including education, employment, and sport. Community participation is defined as engagement in domains of community life that are valued, and it is closely associated with self-determination among people with disabilities (Nagata et al., 2020). Greater community participation has also been associated with reduced depression (Nagata, McCormick et al., 2022), improved cognitive functioning (McCormick et al., 2022), and enhanced quality of life (Burns-Lynch et al., 2016; Kaplan et al., 2012). Despite the ratification of the CRPD by 193 countries (UN, n.d.), many people with disabilities continue to encounter environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that limit opportunities for meaningful community participation (e.g., Bezyak et al., 2020; McKinney et al., 2021). Although numerous studies have documented barriers to participation, less is known about factors that may facilitate meaningful community participation among people with physical disabilities.

Employment is one social determinant that may influence community participation by providing financial resources for accessing community activities of interest (Akyurek et al., 2020). However, access to employment remains unequally distributed because of persistent structural barriers, particularly in the resource-constrained Global South (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the need to identify additional community contexts that may foster participation. One such context is sport.

Sport, where people with physical disabilities can challenge disabling social barriers, potentially leads to broader community participation. Not only functioning as a means of improving individual functioning, but also sport can provide spaces in which participants develop valued identities, experience competence beyond dominant able-bodied expectations, and build supportive peer relationships. Previous studies have reported associations between sport and greater engagement in social and occupational activities (Devine et al., 2017; Hanson et al., 2002; McVeigh et al., 2009). Research further suggests that sport offers opportunities for some to develop confidence through skill acquisition and achievement while fostering social connections with peers who share similar lived experiences (Goodwin et al., 2009; Hardin, 2007; Pensgaard et al., 2002). However, from a Critical Disability Studies perspective (Nguyen, 2018), these benefits should not be understood as universal evidence that sport itself resolves disability-related disadvantages globally. Rather, evidence is context-specific, and the benefits of sport must be critically examined because broader social contexts determine opportunities for participation.

Previous studies examining the relationship between sport and community participation among people with physical disabilities have primarily been conducted in the Global North, where economies are generally more advanced (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2009; Lorenzo et al., 2019). Consequently, it remains unclear whether these findings are transferrable to the Global South context, where social, economic, and environmental conditions shaping disability and participation may differ substantially. For example, a study conducted in a Global South country found that mobility – a factor associated with higher community participation in the Global North – was not a strong predictor of community participation among people with physical disabilities with low socioeconomic status (Figueiredo et al., 2023). These findings suggest that opportunities for community participation are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by broader structural conditions. Accordingly, the extent to which sport facilitates community participation may depend on the social and environmental contexts in which participation occurs.

Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is a Global South country in Southeast Asia where people with disabilities continue to experience stigma and barriers to participate in community life, including sport (Nagata et al., 2025; Phanthalangsy, 2023). Historically, sport has been closely associated with masculinity, which privilege the ideal of physical strength, competitiveness, and national representation (Creak, 2015). These gendered norms may shape who is encouraged to participate in sport and whose achievements are valued, potentially creating additional barriers for women with disabilities. Although elite parasport has expanded for some athletes with disabilities, investment has largely been justified through international sporting success rather than the everyday sporting participation of people with disabilities, partly because Lao para-athletes have greater success in international competition than their non-disabled counterparts (Nagata et al., 2023). Although the nationalism has been a prominent driver of sport policy, national policy has also increasingly emphasized equitable access to all Lao citizens, including people with disabilities (Ministry of Education and Sports of Lao PDR, 2020). Regarding sport development in Lao PDR, local Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) as well as an international NGO have played a significant role in promoting parasport in Lao PDR (Endo et al., 2020; Sánchez Rodríguez et al., 2021). This illustrates how sport for people with disabilities in Lao PDR is influenced by multiple actors with differing priorities and resources.

Consequently, little is known about whether participation in sport is associated with greater community participation among people with physical disabilities in the sociocultural context of Lao PDR. This study addresses this gap by examining the association between sport participation and community participation. Our research question is: Is participation in sport associated with greater community participation among people with physical disabilities in Lao

PDR?

Method

Research Design and Study Context

We utilized a cross-sectional survey design. We chose this design because it allowed us to examine correlational relationships between variables and to identify their strength. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the last author's institution.

As authors, we were involved in an inter-governmental collaboration between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Japan. In particular, for this paper we worked with Lao's Ministry of Education and Sport to develop sport for people with disabilities. One of the authors was the director of the Asian Development with the Disabled Persons (ADDP,) which is the long-standing NGO assisting the Ministry of Education and Sport. The ADDP has a strong working relationship with key personnel in government, the National Paralympic Committee of Lao, and people with disabilities in Lao more widely. As authors, we collaborated with the ADDP on this ASEAN-Japan project and with their help, we provided co-learning workshops and conducted research studies. One of the co-authors has extensive experience working with Laos and other ASEAN nations, particularly Cambodia and Myanmar, to develop physical education teacher education systems over the last three decades. In addition, the lead author has developed close relationships with ASEAN parasport coaches over the last 15 years and was appointed as an investigator for the ASEAN-Japan collaboration project in 2021.

Procedure

This survey was conducted in January 2025. We recruited our participants through the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) of Lao PDR, the Vientiane Deaf and Blind school, Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA), as well as a vocational training center for women with disabilities in Vientiane. In Lao PDR, the grassroots sport participation is quite limited (Nagata et al., 2025). As such, it was decided that the network of the NPC Lao as well as the Deaf and Blind school had potential to cover most people with disabilities who play sport in Lao PDR. The NPC Lao informed and invited all registered athletes to participate in the survey. At the Vientiane Deaf and Blind school, teachers invited students to participate in the survey. Additionally, the LDPA and the vocational training center helped us to send invitations to participate in the survey to its members. Inclusion criteria were (a) those who were 18 years or older, and (b) self-identified as having a disability.

The survey was conducted in-person using a printed copy of a survey questionnaire written in Lao. Lao-speaking facilitators guided the participants through the questionnaire and answered participants' questions as needed. Prior to conducting the survey, the facilitators received training from the researchers. First, the researchers explained the purpose of the survey and each instrument. Then, the facilitators were asked to read each question in the questionnaire and discuss items they did not feel clear about. After individuals agreed to participate in the study and provided informed consent, the facilitators provided instructions for the survey and offered assistance as needed. For example, the facilitators read each question for those who had visual impairment and those who were illiterate. Also, facilitators used sign language for participants who had a hearing impairment. In Lao PDR, incentives for survey participants are typically expected. As approved in our ethics application, we provided 150,000 Lao Kip (approximately $8), an amount commensurate with the daily minimum wage and transportation to the venue, to each participant.

Measures

All the original instruments were written in English and authors hired a professional translator to translate the questions into the Lao language. After that, two Lao-native speakers – one who was a government worker and another who was a school principal – reviewed the translation and made revisions for readability and cultural appropriateness.

Community Participation

The Temple University Community Participation Measure (TUCP; Salzer et al., 2014) was selected as a measure of community participation. TUCP includes questions about community participation over the previous 30 days by indicating the number of days they engaged in each activity, identifying which activities they consider personally important, and reporting whether they participated in these activities to the extent they desired. By capturing both the personal importance of community activities and whether individuals were able to participate in those activities to the extent they desired, the TUCP reflects a rights-based understanding of participation that emphasizes personally meaningful participation and individual choice rather than participation frequency alone. The list includes 27 activities such as shopping, going to a restaurant and/or coffee shop, attending a place of worship, working for pay, volunteering, and getting together with family or friends (the full list is shown in Table 1). During the translation review by the Lao native speakers, some original example activities or events were replaced with more culturally familiar activities. Some examples included a block party replaced with a traditional festival, a book club replaced with a sewing club, going to a synagogue replaced with a Buddhist temple, and a bar mitzvah replaced with children's coming-of-age celebrations. Based on the participant responses, the following indices were generated and used in the

analyses:

- Participation amount: This measure provides an objective amount of community participation. It is calculated by summing the participation days across the 27 community activities. The score ranges from 0 to 810. The greater number indicates a higher amount of community participation.
- Interests in participation: This is a measure of interest and motivation toward wider community participation. It is expressed as the total number of activities a participant indicated as important. The score ranges from 0 to 27. The higher scores indicate wider interest in community participation.
- Commitment to participation: Breadth indicates commitment to follow interests. It is the total number of activities a participant indicated as important and has done at least once in the past 30 days. Thus, this index expresses their determination to fulfil their desire for community participation. The score ranges from 0 to 27.
- Sufficiency of participation: This is a proximal measure of satisfaction with the desire for community participation. It is the ratio of the number of important activities done and the total number of important activities. The score ranges from 0 to 1.00. The higher score indicates greater satisfaction with their desire for community participation.

While TUCP was developed in the United States with people with psychiatric disabilities, it has been used for research with people with physical disabilities (e.g., Figueiredo et al., 2023; Morrison et al., 2024) and has been used in different cultures (Chang et al., 2016; Nagata, Yaeda et al., 2022).

Table 1: Comparisons of item-level breadth between sport and non-sport groups.

	Sport		Non-Sport		χ^2	*df*	*p*
	n imp.	% done	n imp	% done			
Shopping	60	96.7%	38	92.1%	1.000	1	.317
Gym	57	56.1%	32	31.3%	5.095	1	.024
Work for Pay	55	90.9%	41	95.1%	.617	1	.432
Class for Leisure/Life Skills	54	40.7%	30	40.0%	.004	1	.947
School for Degree	52	36.5%	29	34.5%	.034	1	.853
Volunteer	52	48.1%	34	64.7%	2.294	1	.130
Entertain Family or Visit Them	52	88.5%	37	89.2%	.011	1	.915
Place of Worship	52	78.8%	30	83.3%	.244	1	.621
Use Public Transit	51	72.5%	33	57.6%	2.021	1	.155
Social Group in the Community	51	70.6%	37	64.9%	.324	1	.569
Barbershop	50	84.0%	30	85.7%	.047	1	.829

Get together/Attend Event with Family	50	80.0%	37	78.4%	.034	1	.854
Organized Sport	49	67.3%	29	27.6%	11.551	1	<.001
Hangout or Socialize with People	47	91.5%	32	84.4%	.955	1	.329
Watch a Sports Event	46	71.7%	26	38.5%	7.647	1	.006
Civic/Political Activities	46	58.7%	29	48.3%	.779	1	.377
Park/Recreation Center	45	80.0%	23	52.2%	5.677	1	.017
Get together/Attend Event with Friends	45	97.8%	31	71.0%	11.546	1	<.001
Library/Museum	44	43.2%	23	26.1%	1.877	1	.170
Community Fair, Event or Activity	44	79.5%	30	63.3%	2.377	1	.123
Entertain Friends or Visit Them	42	88.1%	32	87.5%	.006	1	.938
Restaurant/Coffee Shop	41	78.0%	20	90.0%	1.299	1	.254
Zoo/Botanical Garden	30	33.3%	12	33.3%	.000	1	1.000
Theater/Cultural Event	24	58.3%	13	30.8%	2.565	1	.109
Play Games Outside of Home	14	92.9%	8	75.0%	1.378	1	.240
Play Games at Home with Others	13	92.3%	7	28.6%	8.802	1	.003
Movie	8	25.0%	8	62.5%	2.286	1	.131

Note: n imp.= the number of participants who identified the activity as important. % done= the percentage of individuals who had done the activity at least one day in the past 30 days.

Demographic Variables (Independent Variables)

Sport participation was measured by several items. The respondents were first provided with the definition of sport as an organized physical activity that has rules for competition. This includes wheelchair basketball, sitting volleyball, or any other sport that you play with other people with and without disabilities. Then, respondents were asked whether they currently play sport and the data was used to define the main independent variable (i.e., sport and non-sport groups). Additionally, participants were asked what sport they play and for how long they have played it. Furthermore, we asked about their attitudes toward sport, whether they lean toward enjoyment (i.e., 'I play sport for fun') or competition (i.e., 'I play sport to win') on a seven-point scale. We also asked age, gender, education, and employment status. A self-report question 'are you currently employed' was asked to identify employed individuals, which was used to create groups (i.e., employed and unemployed groups) and used as the independent variable in the analysis.

Data Analysis

First, we examined the descriptive statistics of demographic variables and examined whether

differences exist between sport and non-sport groups. Independent sample *t*-tests were performed to examine differences in participation indices between sport and non-sport groups. Additionally, the same independent sample t-tests were used for the employed versus the unemployed independent variable. After identifying the participation indices associated with sport participation, multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether the observed differences were confounded by demographic variables. Finally, we conducted TUCP's item-level analysis to examine which community participation activity participants committed more.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Demographic information about the participants is summarized in Table 2. A total of 106 individuals with disabilities participated in the study. Self-reported disability/disease diagnoses included unspecified physical disability (e.g., arm/hand disability, leg disability, 'physical disability') (n=70, 66.0%), visual impairment (n=17, 16.1%), deaf (n=9, 8.5%), polio (n=6, 5.7%), hemiplegia (n=2, 1.9%), dwarfism (n=1, 0.9%), and cerebral palsy (n=1, 0.9%). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in participation indices across the disability/disease diagnoses. As no significant differences were found, all subsequent analyses were conducted using the combined sample. Among those with an unspecified physical disability, 52 reported that they had disability in their legs, suggesting that they have problems with mobility. The average age was 35.33 years old (SD = 11.54). There were 55 males (51.9%) and 51 females (48.1%). There were 36 individuals (34.0%) who had no more than a middle school education. Ninety-four (88.7%) of the sample reported being employed.

Table 2: Comparisons of the participant characteristics between sport and non-sport groups (N=106)

	Total		Sport (n=61)		Non-Sport (n=45)		Statistics		
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	χ^2	*df*	*p*
Gender							16.567	1	<.001
Women	51	48.1	19	37.3	32	62.7			
Men	55	51.9	42	76.4	13	23.6			
Disability							9.935	6	.127
Unspecified physical disability	70	66.0	37	52.9	33	47.1			

Visual impairment	17	16.0	14	82.4	3	17.6			
Deaf	9	8.4	5	55.6	4	44.4			
Polio	6	5.7	4	66.7	2	33.3			
Hemiplegia	2	1.9	0	0.0	2	100.0			
Cerebral Palsy	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	100.0			
Dwarfism	1	0.9	1	100.0	0	0.0			
Education							4.500	3	.212
Middle School or Less	36	34.0	19	52.8	17	47.2			
High School	24	22.6	12	50.0	12	50.0			
Junior college/technical school	27	25.5	15	55.6	12	44.4			
College or more	19	17.9	15	78.9	4	21.1			
Employment							1.397	1	.237
Employed	94	88.7	56	59.6	38	42.5			
Unemployed	12	11.3	5	41.7	7	58.3			

	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Age	35.33	11.54	33.10	9.65	38.36	13.22	-2.261	76.738	.027

Regarding sport, sixty-one (57.5%) indicated that they were currently playing sport, and forty-five (42.5%) indicated they were not playing sport. The kind of sports participants reported were wheelchair basketball (n=16, 26.2%), goalball (n=11, 18.0%), weightlifting (n=7, 11.5%), badminton (n=7, 11.5%), swimming (n=6, 9.8%), pétanque/boccia (n=5, 8.2%), blind football (n=4, 6.6%), athletics (n=4 6.6%), and cycling (n=1, 1.6%). The average length of time participants had been involved in sport was 10.13 years (SD=8.44). The mean score of the attitude was 4.77 (SD=1.89), suggesting that the participants were on average taking a stance between playing sport for fun and winning.

We examined whether there were differences in the demographic characteristics between those who played sport and those who did not play sport. The results showed that those who played sport were significantly younger than those who did not (t = -2.261, df = 76.738, p = .027). Also, fewer females played sport compared to males (χ^2 = 16.567, df = 1, p <.001). There were

no differences in education attainment (χ^2 = 4.500, *df* = 3, *p* =.212) and employment (χ^2 = 1.397, *df* = 1, *p* = .237).

Participation Indices

The results of *t*-tests are summarized in Tables 3 and 4. On average, those who played sport had more community activities they deemed important, compared to those who did not play sport (*t* = 2.821, *df* = 104, *p* = .006, *d* = .554), which suggest that those who play sport had greater interests in community participation. Also, those who played sport engaged in more activities they deemed important (*t* = 3.130, *df* = 104, *p* = .002, *d* = .615). There were no differences in the amount and sufficiency of participation. Additionally, there was no significant difference in any participation indices between the employed and the unemployed.

Table 3: Comparison of participation indices between sport and non-sport groups (N=106)

	Sport (n=61)		Non-Sport (n=45)		t-test			
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*
Participation Amount	74.23	36.92	67.44	31.31	.996	104	.321	.196
Number of Important Activities	19.23	4.99	16.24	5.88	2.821	104	.006	.554
Breadth of Participation	13.69	5.62	10.42	4.86	3.130	104	.002	.615
Participation Sufficiency	51.34	24.75	52.26	30.49	-.165	82.828	.869	-.033

Table 4: Comparison of participation indices between employed and unemployed (N=106)

	Employed (n=94)		Unemployed (n=12)		t-test			
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*	*d*
Participation amount	70.86	34.73	75.17	35.34	-.404	104	.687	-.124
Number of Important Activities	18.28	5.33	15.50	6.92	1.642	104	.104	.503
Breadth of Participation	12.32	5.48	12.17	6.18	.090	104	.929	.027
Participation Sufficiency	51.00	26.16	57.44	35.18	-.771	104	.443	-.236

Regression analyses

To examine whether demographic variables confound the results on the measure of importance (i.e., the number of important activities) and breadth of participation, regression analyses were performed. The results are summarized in Table 5. Neither age nor gender emerged as significant predictors of the importance or breadth dimensions of participation. Regarding importance, playing sport was not a significant predictor ($\beta = .158$, $p = .111$). Instead, education was a significant predictor of importance. Compared to the participants who did not complete high school, those who completed high school ($\beta = .270$, $p = .008$), junior college/technical school ($\beta = .421$, $p < .001$), and some college or more ($\beta = .256$, $p = .014$) all predicted a higher number of important activities. Regarding the breadth of participation, education was found to be a significant predictor, showing high school graduates ($\beta = .204$, $p = .049$) and junior college/technical school graduates ($\beta = .343$, $p = .001$) had higher breadth of participation. However, playing sport remained a significant predictor of breadth of participation ($\beta = .203$, $p = .048$).

Table 5: Summary of multiple regression results with community participation importance and breadth as an outcome variable.

	Importance				Breadth			
Variable	*B*	*SE(B)*	*β*	*p*	*B*	*SE(B)*	*β*	*p*
Demographic Covariates								
Age	-.053	.044	-.110	.236	-.022	.046	-.045	.638
Gender	-1.352	1.138	-.122	.238	-1.921	1.169	-.174	.103
Education[†]								
High school	3.566	1.310	.270	.008	2.686	1.345	.204	.049
Junior college/technical school	5.342	1.266	.421	<.001	4.335	1.300	.343	.001
Some college or more	3.697	1.474	.256	.014	2.458	1.514	.171	.108
Unemployment	2.364	1.662	.135	.158	.200	1.707	.012	.907
Independent Variable								
Play Sport	1.772	1.102	.158	.111	2.263	1.132	.203	.048

R^2	.262	.212

Note: Gender (0=male, 1=female). †Dummy variable: criterion - less than high school.

Item-Level Comparisons on Participation in Important Activities

Chi-square analyses were performed to examine whether there were item-level differences in breadth of participation between participants who play sport and who did not (see Table 5). Significant item-level differences were found in six out of 27 participation areas. Those who play sport were more likely to go to a gym, health or exercise club ($\chi^2 = 5.095$, $df = 1$, $p = .024$), engage in an organized sport ($\chi^2 = 11.551$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), go to watch a sport event ($\chi^2 = 7.647$, $df = 1$, $p = .006$), go to a park and recreation center ($\chi^2 = 5.677$, $df = 1$, $p = .017$), get together in the community with friends ($\chi^2 = 11.546$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and play games at home with others ($\chi^2 = 8.802$, $df = 1$, $p = .003$) if they identify these activities as important.

Discussion

We examined whether sport participation is associated with greater community participation in the sociocultural context of Lao PDR, in the Global South. One major finding was that sport participation did not affect the amount or sufficiency of community participation. Notably, sport participation was unrelated to participation sufficiency, an indicator that reflects the extent to which individuals were able to participate in ways they considered adequate or meaningful from a rights-based perspective. This is an important finding because it demonstrates that even among those more likely to be active, something still obstructs their participation in the wider community. Mobility has been consistently identified as a facilitator of community participation in Global North contexts (Devine et al., 2017; Hanson et al., 2002; McVeigh et al., 2009). However, the present findings suggest that this relationship may not readily translate to the context of Lao PDR. Even if sport participation contributes to improved mobility, pervasive structural barriers – including inaccessible physical environments and limited transportation infrastructure (Appelhans, 2017) – may continue to restrict opportunity for community participation. In addition, the persistent stigma of disability in Lao PDR (Phanthalangsy, 2023) may lead to discrimination and exclusion from community activities, further limiting participation, regardless of individuals' functional abilities.

Individuals who participated in sport were more likely to engage in activities they considered personally important than those who did not participate in sport. Rather than simply participating in a greater number of activities, they appeared to be more selective, prioritizing activities that held personal meaning. This finding could not be explained by demographic differences in age or gender, based on the regression results. This finding is noteworthy because

it suggests that sport participation may be associated with the pursuit of personally valued activities, an important aspect of exercising the right to participate in society as articulated in the CRPD (UN, 2006), despite the social and structural barriers that people with physical disabilities may encounter, including stigma and discrimination (Nagata et al., 2020; Phanthalangsy, 2023). Previous research has similarly suggested that sport participation can enhance individuals' capacity to manage stigma of disability (Taub et al., 1999), which may help explain this association. Although these findings should be interpreted cautiously, they suggest that, for some, sport participation may be associated with more self-determined forms of community participation in a Global South context. From a practical perspective, this evidence is valuable because it indicates that sport may represent one locally feasible avenue for supporting the realization of the rights of people with disabilities, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

The results of item-level comparisons on participation in important activities demonstrated that those who played sport had identified not only sport and physical activity, but also other social activities as important and done at least once. It is consistent with the literature that those who play sport tend to have a broad interest in other physical activities (Reifsteck et al., 2016), which may be the reason why all items related to physical activity were deemed important. However, our findings regarding playing games and getting together with friends suggest that they have increased participation beyond physical activity. This might be additional evidence that participation in sport is associated with greater community participation.

Another notable finding was the significance of education regarding community participation. Our data clearly showed that the association between education and the importance and breadth of dimensions of participation, is even greater than sport participation. Notably, education was the only predictor of a broader range of interests in community activities. Relationships between education and curiosity/interests have been reported in existing literature, albeit this research was not specifically with people with disabilities (Hidi et al., 2020). Through education, people typically meet others with different values and interests. Perhaps, such exposure to a variety of new ideas can contribute to individuals having broader interests and increased motivation toward community participation. Education for people with disabilities is a fundamental issue in the Global South (Nguyen, 2019). Although we are not advocating the application of the Global North model of inclusive education, the present findings suggest that improving access to education is also relevant to promoting community participation among people with disabilities.

In our data, employment was not a significant predictor of community participation. While some argue that employment increases engagement in leisure activities by providing financial means for individuals with disabilities (Akyurek et al., 2020), our participants in a Global South

nation did not appear to support this theory. This is an important finding, especially in the context of rehabilitation of people with physical disabilities, where overemphasis is often placed on vocational activation, neglecting other forms of community participation. Regarding the potential reason why employment did not predict community participation, inequity in transportation in Lao PDR (Vongpraseuth et al., 2022) may be relevant, and many people with disabilities who are typically in the lowest income group may not have their own transportation (e.g., motor-bike), which might prevent them from participating more in the community. Considering the null-effect of employment on community participation, it is notable that sport was associated with greater community participation in this context.

Although we found a positive association between sport and community participation, the benefits of sport may not be equally accessible to all people with physical disabilities. Our analysis of demographic variables indicated that women were substantially less likely than men to participate in sport. Within the sociocultural context of Lao PDR, this disparity may reflect the longstanding association of sport with masculinity, with women often discouraged from participating (Creak, 2017). This issue is not unique to Lao PDR as gender inequities in parasport have also been well-documented in Global North contexts (Culver et al., 2022). Looking globally, the number of elite female para-athletes and visible role models has increased in recent years. Yet, women remain underrepresented in parasport in Lao PDR, suggesting that gendered barriers continue to limit access to the potential benefits of sport.

Implications

The finding that sport was associated with greater community participation may not appear so novel in the Global North context, because sport has been used widely in physical medicine and rehabilitation as well as community development. However, the effectiveness of any intervention is different based on the local context, and our data suggest that Lao PDR may be a particular context where sport can be an effective tool for increasing community participation. In such a context, those who work with individuals with physical disabilities should discuss with them about their desires for sport. Potentially, collaborating with national and regional parasport organizations (e.g., National Paralympic Committee) may be fruitful. Professionals might also help identify barriers to community participation and problem-solving as it emerges. In addition, policy makers can consider adopting sport as a facilitator for realizing the rights of people with disabilities, as mandated by the CRPD (UN, 2006). For such a successful development program, local contexts must be understood, and related stakeholders should be included, as the related disability issues such as stigma and discrimination are worked on simultaneously (Nagata et al., 2025).

Limitations

While the findings of the current study were enlightening, we acknowledge that there are some limitations. First, the sample size is small and non-random. Participant recruitment was limited to a small number of organizations, which may have resulted in a sample that overrepresents individuals with access to institutional support networks and underrepresents those experiencing the greatest levels of social isolation and exclusion, particularly in rural areas. Regionally, the data collection took place only in the capital city, Vientiane, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the entire population with disabilities in Lao PDR, particularly those who live in rural areas where they might experience greater challenges due to limited opportunities for sport and other community activities. In addition, the recruitment strategy was subject to self-selection bias, as individuals who were more engaged or interested in the study topic may have been more likely to participate. Consequently, the findings may not be fully representative of the broader population of people with physical disabilities in Lao PDR. Second, our analysis combined disability categories as one, while participation challenges are likely to differ across diagnostic categories of physical disability. Although ANOVA detected no significant differences in participation indices, statistical power is low due to the small sample sizes in several diagnostic groups, resulting that true, between-group differences may have gone undetected. Third, due to the nature of the data being cross-sectional, causal relationships should not be assumed. We could not rule out the possibility that individuals who are already socially engaged are more likely to participate in sport. Therefore, the direction of relationship remains unclear. Future research should employ longitudinal cohort designs to examine changes over time. Fourth, the employment context, such as formal work, precarious labor, or sheltered workshop, might also be important among people with disabilities in the Global South context. This might have influenced the results of the study; however, the current study included only one question about employment status, which limited further analyses. Although these limitations exist, it should be emphasized that our study concerns a difficult-to-reach community operating in conditions of limited social and rehabilitation infrastructure. Future studies should use in-depth qualitative interviews, which could better reveal the individual significance of sports in the lives of people with disabilities in Lao PDR.

Conclusion

With the CRPD, the international community is trying to promote full participation of people with disabilities in all community activities, including sport. Yet, particularly in the context of the Global South, structural barriers hinder community participation. Consistent with this perspective, our study found no differences between Lao people with disabilities who

participated in sport and those who did not in either the amount or sufficiency of community participation. These findings suggest that sport participation alone may not be sufficient to overcome the broader barriers that restrict opportunities to participate in community life. However, we did find that those who participate in sport tend to engage in a greater number of activities that they consider personally important than those who do not participate in sport. This association remained significant after controlling for employment and education, suggesting that sport is linked with engagement in meaningful activities, even if it does not translate into sufficient community participation. Rather than viewing sport as a standalone solution, it may be better understood as one of several social spaces through which opportunities, relationships, and agency can be fostered within otherwise restrictive environments. Future research should investigate the mechanisms underlying these associations and identify the social, environmental, and policy conditions under which sport can contribute to advancing the participation rights of people with disabilities in Global South contexts.

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