



Does Experience of Being a National Athlete Support Woman Resilience? A Qualitative Study of Former Female Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Sport is believed to provide positive psychological benefits and support positive personal growth, including resilience, the ability to deal with stress. However, the research exploring positive benefits obtained by female athletes, especially after they retired as athletes, is scarce. This research aimed to comprehend whether the experience of being a national athlete supports the formation of resilience in women even after they retired as athletes. The research used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interview data collection methods. Participants were 7 former female athletes who had represented Indonesia at international events. All of them were retired and working as professionals. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. The results of this research showed that the experience of pursuing a career to achieve international achievements had profound impacts on their life, especially when facing daily challenges in the workplace and at home which contribute to their resilience. Three dominant themes were articulated from the analysis, including discipline and self-regulation (such as having a regular scheduled routine, keeping to the time for every activity, and preparing early to achieve better results, affecting their succession in their current profession), the ability to reflect on emotions and control negative emotions (such as when life challenges cause emotional turmoil, past experience in sports at the national-international level provides reference to be competent in recognizing self-weaknesses leading to manage emotions in retrospective way), and opportunities for career achievements brought by involvement in sports at the national level, including the 'dream career', and wider networking access for career advancement and social supports. Considering the positive highlights of this results, it is recommended that policymakers support female participation more in elite sports and provide supportive environments for female athletes.

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INTRODUCTION

Sport in women has long been widely studied, especially in relation to psychosocial pressure, stigma, health, perceptions of body, femininity, and masculinity (Blodgett et al., 2017; Kong & Harris, 2015a; Krane et al., 2004). Gender equality has become an important study in the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which states that woman involvement will support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals and increase woman leadership and potential. At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, 48% of female athletes were recorded as participants (International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2022). Recently, at the 2024 Paris Olympic, the number of male athletes and female athletes reached almost equal number. The involvement of women in sports in Indonesia is also considered significant, as evidenced by the participation of women in the national team, contributing to international achievements in various International event. However, in the grassroot and amateur level, there have been backlash and barriers for women to participate in sports. The number of male athletes and female athletes following national events, such as PON, were disproportionally unequal. Some sports have been dominated by male participation and interests, including in sports related professionals. A recent study showed the participation number of female coach remained low (albaihaqi et al., 2024).

Involvement in sports could provide various physiological and psychological benefits, including supporting the formation of positive characters. There is considerable scientific evidence showing that involvement in sports in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood could facilitate positive personality development (Holt et al., 2017). In Indonesia, sport is also perceived as a medium for forming positive characters (KONI, 2014). Psychological resilience, or the ability to face stress or challenges, is believed to be one of the positive effects arising from involvement in sports (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). However, in Indonesia, does woman involvement in sports also provide the same resilience benefits after they retire as athletes?

In Indonesia, there are various sociocultural challenges to women involved in sports, but the research on this topic is scarce. The research exploring positive benefits obtained by female athletes, especially after they retire as athletes, is still limited. Women who exercise often face negative stigma or stereotypes, for example related to body image. Vikki Krane criticized this in an article entitled “We can be muscular and feminine at the same time, but do we want that? Challenging the hegemony of femininity in women's sport” by discussing these two opposing poles (Krane, 2001). On the one hand, society idealizes athletic women who are feminine or athletic but still beautiful. In fact, to achieve superior performance in sports, women can have an athletic body that does not compromise on standards of femininity (Krane, 2001). For example, a female boxer may have an athletic body and close-cropped or very short hair, which may conflict with societal standards that they should keep a female style haircut. In a study on how women stop exercising, it was found that the reasons were related to conflicts in other social roles, especially those related to family such as being a mother that is also a real and growing social phenomenon today. The number of female athletes returning to elite sport postpartum is also increasing as reported by media and research. Allyson Felix, Serena Williams, and Paula Radlife are examples of elite athletes who also have a role as a mother, highlighting their experience as an example of dealing with motherhood life while competing as an athlete (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; McGannon et al., 2015). A woman who becomes a mother essentially experiences a change in status and a change in role, demanding adjustments and requiring supports from people around her. Hence, resilience among former elite woman athletes becomes the research question navigating this research. However, it is still unclear whether

the resilience gained from sports will persist even after they retire from sports, especially in Indonesia. In Indonesia, there is still limited number of research on gender and sports. Therefore, this research provides a novelty to fill the gaps of research on woman in sports in Indonesia setting.

Resilience is defined as an adaptive response to adversity, which is characterized by three key components including recovery, continuity of life (such as work), and growth (Bryan et al., 2019). In their conceptualization, resilience is evidenced by the speed and thoroughness of individual recovery from adverse events by their ability to maintain engagement value, new learning, growth, and progress as a consequence of adversity (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). Resilience in sports is not a new topic. It has become promising and proliferated research, especially in a special population such as elite athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012, 2013; Morgan et al., 2013).

Sport in women, especially in relation to psychosocial pressure, stigma, health, perceptions of bodies, femininity, and masculinity, has been widely studied for a long time (Anderson, 2008; Armstrong & Hutchison, 2022; Fink et al., 2014; Forsyth et al., 2019; Krane, 2001). There are various psychosocial barriers for women involved in sports, such as gender discrimination and unequal treatments in a sport environment (Weiss et al., 2009). According to research, mental health disorders are prone to occur in former athletes due to various reasons, for example unpreparedness for retirement (Brown et al., 2017; Gouttebauge & Kerkhoffs, 2017; Mannes et al., 2019). However, published studies are still limited to European countries, America, and England. If sport is believed to provide positive benefits, for example positive youth development, empirical evidence to support this statement is needed, particularly in relation to the context of culture. A qualitative study on how sport experiences support resilience in former female athletes is also necessary.

METHODS

This research used qualitative approach to explore a phenomenon in its original background (Sparkes & Smith, 2013) by collecting data using interviews. The interview transcriptions were then analyzed using content analysis to find patterns in qualitative data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Participants of this study were selected using four criteria, including female athletes aged minimum 25 years, had been enlisted in the Indonesian national team, had been underwent a national training for minimum of 3 months, and had been competed representing Indonesia. A snowball sampling was utilised to contact all potential participants. Some of them agreed to have an interview. This research involved 7 participants. All of them were former female national athletes and had made significant achievements for Indonesia at the international level.

Materials and Apparatus

This research used the interview method. The instrument employed semi-structured interviews equipped with an interview guide. Interview is an interaction process (between researchers and participants) to build understanding of a phenomenon and this research used a semi-structured interview approach for collecting data (Ginn, G. M., & Munn, S. L., 2019). The interview guide developed for this research is divided in to three parts. The first part was the opening part aimed to recognize the participant involvement in sports (such as can you tell me about the sport you had succeeded as an athlete?; how long have you been playing this sport?; what is your view about the sport you play?). The second part was related to sport careers and resilience experiences in the past (such as what achievements did you have while

you were still playing this sport?; what preparations or efforts did you make so that you were able to achieve these achievements?; have you ever encountered obstacles in achieving achievements?; how do you solve it?; currently after you retired as an athlete, have you ever experienced a situation where you felt at the bottom, making you very hopeless?; how did you overcome it?; how did you get back up?; did your experience as an athlete help you bounce back from depression/despair? how?; in your opinion, what things did you get from sports that helped you get better?). The third part was the closing part summarizing the interview and ultimate questions related to the next generation of female athletes (for example, if you could give advice to younger female athletes about the benefits of being athletes in their lives, what would you say?; is there anything you want to add?).

Procedures

The interviews were then transcribed by a professional translator. The transcripts were analyzed using content analysis to find patterns in qualitative data (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Content analysis is an analytical method that aims to systematize, reduce, and interrogate the content of data by calculating or by coding and identifying themes and consistency of categories at the clearly visible or hidden level (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Data Analysis

The analysis stage in this research included analysis of interview transcripts by using reflective thematic analysis approach. It involved 6 steps. The first stage was data immersion stage, where the researchers tried to listen to and read back the transcript to understand the substance of the participant answers. The second step was the coding stage, where the entire data collection was systematically coded qualitatively. The codes were identified, listed, and grouped into relevant groups according to each code or phenomenon under study. The third stage was the search and identification of themes. At this stage, different codes were sorted into possible themes related to the research questions. The fourth stage was the review of themes. This phase involved checking process of themes according to the codes carried out in the first stage. This step was carried out by reading all the extracts collected for each theme and by considering whether they formed a coherent pattern either with a single data extract or with the data as a whole. The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes. At this stage, researchers identified the 'essence' of each theme and determined the aspects of the data captured by each theme. To help this process, researchers identified and wrote down the 'story' told by each theme, whether it fit with the participant overall 'story' and the research question. The sixth stage included report writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The analysis focused on what had been said, written, or depicted and only focused on what was visible, but it could also go deeper into hidden meanings. For example, when MAP-01 mentioned about how rivalry had made her a stronger competitor, first author could give insights about the path top national athletes which usually consisted of tight selections and the athletes had to undergo multiple times of fight and competition.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis showed a clear conclusion that all participants recognized that intensive sport involvement at the national and international levels had positive impacts on women. The habits, experiences, and interactions when being national athletes contributed to their resilience in facing challenges even after they had retired. The results of analysis using content analysis showed interesting results. The research discovered 3 themes frequently mentioned in interviews. The themes include:

Discipline and Self-Regulation

Female former athletes had a scheduled routine, were punctual, and prepared everything in advance. These habits had been habituated during their involvement in sports and helped them shaped their success. All of them admitted that the discipline and punctuality helped them organize tasks, manage expectations, and complete working tasks. They led to better performance than others. Other habits related to discipline, such as preparing everything in advance, carrying out routine activities even if they were reluctant, being punctual in meetings, and arranging appointments, supported their success in their careers. The followings are the examples of the discipline and self-regulation reflected in interviews.

(My task is) as private assistant for the Mare. She (the Mare) worked in a packed every single day, Mon to Fri to Sat and even to Sunday... My colleagues fell sick but, Alhamdulillah, I'm fine. So, all those training regimes were conditioned us to be strong... not mention the travel. She (the Mare) travelled a lot ... Alhamdulillah, I was an athlete. It was very similar with those days. My job now requires discipline, punctuality, I get used to all of that..." (MAP-01, 43, civil servant)

When I was an athlete, the eager to learn was important, and the more professional I was, the more discipline I did. So, it was really a challenge (to be discipline), I think until now. For now, like I'm having a meeting at particular time with some (business) partner, I will tell them exactly the time, location, and the means, like through phone or so on, and I will do it. I will contact them at the exact time. I will come at the exact location... that makes me perceived as being more reliable by others. (MAP-02, 29, entrepreneur)

Ability to Reflect on Emotions and Control Emotions

The life challenges experienced by women often cause emotional turmoil. Involvement in sports at the national-international level provides experiences to be competent in recognizing weaknesses and capacity in managing emotions, including coping (adjustment) ability to overcome the issues. One of the participants, MAP-01, admitted that she had experienced chronic stress for quite a long period due to fatigue at work. She solved the problem by trying to be more reflective about what she felt and what she needed to help her control the stress. She said that:

I just have a baby ... and the workload was still on, so I was a little down. I sometimes (become) overthinking. When I worked, I think about being home. When I was at home, I think about work. There were times I cried a lot then my husband hugged me and assured me... now I have tried not to make my job as burdens, ikhlas (accepting) ... for instance, when I got a sudden call that tomorrow I have to travel, instead of panic I calmed myself. I walked outside, went to shopping centre and spent time together with my family. I make myself happy first, then I packed... I think, when we were competing, we could recognize stress and events potentially leading to stress... I could cope by making myself happy, comfortable first..." (MAP-01, 43, civil servant)

Opportunities for Career Achievements and the Realization of Dreams

Achievements in sports had been proven to help women achieve their dream careers, for example coaches, soldiers, lecturers, and civil servants, and open the access to connect with competence people for career advancement or those who could provide social supports for learning and self-development. The followings are the examples from the interviews.

At that time, the infantry opened a recruitment... there was only one, one position for a sport instructor. I was in doubt. But I realise I want that job. At first, they rejected me; they said 'we need sport and health certificates, yours is in sport coaching' then I argued 'but it's the same, sport major'. Then, I was thought to cancel my application, but I didn't do it and just went home. A few days then, they called me back, they said 'there were mistakes in the registry division' I

was accepted... my sport experience told me to 'never give up attitude'. I think I have tried my best at that time, and I am sure we have that confidence, even if that was failed, at least we have no regret for not trying. (MAP-06, military officer)

Brutally, honest, all (of what) my coach said are what I now apply to my team. All things mentioned by Coach M, Coach K, Coach E... how I approach athletes to communicate, when I have to use jokes, all those things they told were right. We were once athletes and sometimes we were stubborn, pissed when we got scolded. But right now, I think they were right. All (of what) they said were good for us, for our future... People said I coach similar to (like) coach K, Alhamdulillah. His discipline, his influence, his communication style... we know a lot of people through sport and we can learn all the good things from them. (MAP-07, 27)

Although three dominant themes had been identified through analysis, it seemed interesting to conduct a deeper study by adding more research subjects/participants. This was because, in this study, all subjects were women who worked, married, and did not experience challenging personal problems, such as a traumatic event, divorce, or losing a family member. It was only MAP-01 and MAP-02 who admitted that they had experienced a crisis event. MAP-01 admitted to having experienced stress crisis showing depressive symptoms, while MAP-02 felt a loss when one of their parents died. However, finding former female athletes with distinctive background, such as having been divorced or experiencing a traumatic event, was not easy and would be a challenge for future research. The results of this research suggest that the Ministry of Youth and Sports and KONI support female athletes so that their competitive sport experiences would become more supportive for them.

Table 1. List of Participants Interviewed in This Research

Participant Aliases	Age & Marriage Status	Sports	Age when Starting the Sport	Duration of Experience as National Athletes (in year)	Current Job
MAP-01	43, married	Pencak Silat	12	2	civil servant in local government regency
MAP-02	29, single	Swimming	15	10	self-employed, entrepreneur
MAP-03	34, single	Basketball	11	10	employee in a Finance company, coach in a national basketball team
MAP-04	40, married	Pencak Silat	13	5	lecturer in a state university
MAP-05	Not mentioned	Taekwondo	12	6	manager in a national team sport
MAP-06	Not mentioned	Athletics	13	6	military instructor at infantry
MAP-07	27, single	Pencak Silat	15	2	employee in a government company, manager in a small business run by family, assistant coach

DISCUSSION

Woman involvement in sports in Indonesia has been going on for a long time. Even though women have various physiological and morphological differences from men, it is proven that they can still perform excellent sport abilities. Women do show several anatomical and physiological characteristics that differentiate their responses to exercise. Women are smaller than men, have less muscle mass, and have more fat mass for a given body size (Charkoudian & Joyner, 2004). Still, the progress of female athletes can also be said to be significant in achieving international level achievements. It was started from the 1972 Olympics in Munich when Utami Dewi, an Indonesian female badminton player, won a silver medal, to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics when female lifter Windy Cantika Aisah won a bronze medal. The first gold medal for Indonesia was achieved by a woman, Susi Susanti. Greysia Polii-Apriyani Rahayu

had also won a gold medal in double badminton at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic. In the educational sport area, women are also involved as Physical Education teachers in elementary schools, junior high schools, Islamic boarding schools, and madrasah for women where sports are taught equally to all genders, including women (Dermawan et al., 2019; Kusumawati, Intan & Cahyati, Suci, 2022). In recreational sports, there are a lot of women and female health influencers who promote exercise as a part of healthy life (Davies et al., 2020, 2020). Women are also involved in other professions, such as instructors and activists of rhythmic exercise, aerobics, poco-poco, and health exercise for the elderly. Overall, woman involvement in sports in Indonesia cannot be underestimated, but the opportunity for them to choose the sport profession still have a distant gap with their male colleagues (Kusumawati, Intan & Cahyati, Suci, 2022).

Research on sports and femininity revolves around the interaction between the concept of sports and the ideal concept of women, where studies in Western literature generally revolve around woman objectification of certain standards (Davies et al., 2020). Research around women and sports is also divided into two groups, including those maintaining that being a female athlete is feminine (Krane, 2001; Krane et al., 2014) and those opposing the concept of femininity through sports because female athletes can freely display their abilities according to what they want to express, including when it comes to their muscular or tomboyish appearance (Braumüller et al., 2020). This research can also expand into clinical research regarding how female athletes try to meet the ideal body demands of their sports, thus experience eating disorders (Fewell et al., 2018; Kong & Harris, 2015; Toll & Norman, 2021).

On the other hand, there is also a lot of research on sports and the role of women, especially those related to the social role demands as mothers or wives with great responsibilities. The research questions of these studies revolve around the interaction between the concept of sport and the social role inherent in women, for example research on motherhood and the challenges of being a mother in female athletes (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Bialeschki & Michener, 1994; McGannon et al., 2015, 2018). These studies also examined how women faced challenges in male-dominated sport professions (Evans et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2022; Weiss et al., 2009).

The third type of literature on women and sports is publications of research that place women as a specific population subject, thus enabling a more in-depth analysis of the real challenges faced by women participated in sports. This type of research is dominated by quantitative research that only includes women as the main subject, such as research on how menstruation affects athletes (Julian et al., 2017), confidence in female athletes (Aliyyah et al., 2020), motivation (Weiss et al., 2009), and so on.

After studying more deeply, these research patterns were predicted by Jan Felshin (Felshin, 1974) who stated that future research on women would revolve around three patterns, including apologetic patterns which maintain sports and women femininity, forensic patterns which try to explore more deeply the role of women in sports, and dialectical patterns that study how woman involvement takes part in the process of shaping or changing in sports.

CONCLUSION

Sport is believed to provide positive psychological benefits and support positive personal growth, including resilience as the ability to deal with stress. However, there is still very limited research exploring the positive benefits obtained by female athletes, especially after they retired as athletes. This research tried to understand whether the experience of being a

national athlete could support the formation of resilience in women even after they retired as athletes. From the result of semi-structured interviews with 7 former female athletes who had represented Indonesia at international events and were currently working, three dominant themes were found. Experiences in achieving international achievements were useful for facing daily challenges. The themes included discipline and self-regulation (such as having a regular scheduled routine, sticking to the time for every activity, and preparing early to achieve better results), the ability to reflect on emotions and control emotions, and opportunities for career achievement or the realization of dreams. The results of the research will serve as recommendations for the Ministry of Youth and Sports and KONI to support female athletes so that the competitive sports will be more supportive for them.

AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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