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Para-Sport in Senegal: Supervision and Conditions of Participation of Women with Disabilities

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Abstract

This study examines the conditions under which women with disabilities engage in physical and sports activities (PSA) in Senegal. It employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews conducted with women who participate in these activities and with para-sport leaders. The semi-structured interview approach made it possible to collect rich and contextualized data, conducive to a detailed analysis of the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. The results reveal a general lack of awareness regarding the missions of this organization-identifying, organizing, and promoting para-sport—as well as the underrepresentation of women, linked to a dual discrimination based on gender and disability: sociocultural barriers (the sacralization of the female body), economic precariousness (begging), and the inaccessibility of sports facilities. Technical supervision appears generally competent, although a minority of volunteers wish to strengthen their skills. Finally, the study highlights a structural shortage of material and financial resources, with funding relying primarily on the Ministry of Sports, the CNOSS, and private sponsorship, revealing a gap between the legal framework and its implementation.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

In Senegal, as in many African societies, the roles and responsibilities of women have historically been framed by sociocultural norms. Women are traditionally regarded as primarily responsible for domestic tasks and child-rearing, while also contributing to local economic activities. Many women engage in market gardening and other income-generating activities while simultaneously assuming family responsibilities (Diouf, 2002). Despite their significant contribution to economic and social development, they face gender-based discrimination (Sarr, 2008). At the same time, disability represents a major issue both at the national and global levels. According to the United Nations (2007), approximately 10% of the world's population lives with a disability, that is, nearly 650 million people. Disability is defined as a limitation in activities or a restriction in social participation resulting from a long-term impairment, whether physical, mental, sensory, or cognitive. It results not only from individual limitations but also from social and environmental barriers that hinder the integration of the persons concerned. In Senegal, public policies on disability have been strengthened since the early 2000s, notably with the adoption of the Social Policy Framework Act (RDS, 2010), which recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to full and effective social participation on an equal basis. Data from the 2025

General Population and Housing Census (RGPH) indicate that 7.8% of Senegalese women and 6.7% of Senegalese men have a disability; these figures, however, poorly reflect the real difficulties they face on a daily basis (ANSD, 2025). The situation of women with disabilities in Senegal is particularly worrying. They experience a dual marginalization: on the one hand because of their sex, in a society marked by gender inequalities, and on the other because of their disability. This dual discrimination limits their access to education, employment, and economic and social activities, and even to physical and sports activities. Many of them live in precarious conditions, some resorting to begging to meet their needs.

In this context, physical and sports activities represent an important tool to improve the health, psychological well-being, and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. Adapted practices, grouped under the concept of Adapted Physical Activity (APA), enable individuals with functional limitations to take part in physical exercise suited to their abilities. Regular physical activity contributes to strengthening physical fitness, self-esteem, and social integration. However, women with disabilities in Senegal encounter numerous obstacles to accessing these activities, whether social, economic, or cultural (Dieng & Ndongo, 2024).

In Senegal, this commitment has been translated into the adoption of the Social Orientation Act on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RDS, 2010). The article 39 of this law recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to engage in sports and leisure activities, to access artistic training centers, and to benefit from the protection of their works. The effective implementation of these provisions, however, requires the government, in collaboration with local authorities and private organizations, to adapt sports, cultural, and leisure infrastructure to the specific needs of persons with disabilities. Despite these initiatives and policies, the participation of women with disabilities in physical and sports activities remains very limited in Senegal.

In reality, it must be acknowledged that these women are more often visible in public spaces, notably at roundabouts, where they beg, which attests to the difficulties of social integration they face. Nevertheless, for several decades, structures and organizations have been created to improve the living conditions of persons with disabilities and to promote their participation in physical and sports activities. Examples include the Verbo-Tonal Center of Dakar, established in 1979 for the education and rehabilitation of children with hearing impairments, and Senegalese para-sport, instituted by ministerial order in 1986. In addition, persons with disabilities have organized themselves within bodies such as the National Committee of Persons with Disabilities in order to defend their rights and promote their social integration. In this context, the practice of physical and sports activities appears as a potential means of combating the discrimination suffered by women with disabilities and as a factor of social integration. This study therefore aims to analyze the participation of women with disabilities in these activities and to identify the difficulties encountered in this sector. Specifically, it analyzes the missions of the para-sport structure, the representation of women relative to men, and the sources of funding. What is the role of para-sport? Are women adequately represented? What difficulties are encountered in organizing activities intended for women? The methodology adopted to address these questions is essentially qualitative. Before describing it, some elements to understand the situation of women with disabilities in Senegal are presented.

Women and Disability in Senegal

In traditional African societies, and notably in Senegal, women occupy a position historically defined by strict sociocultural norms. They are perceived as the guardians of the home and of family cohesion, responsible for raising children, managing the household, and maintaining social order. Before marriage, a woman is under the authority of her parents and, after marriage, to that of her husband and in-laws (Diop, 2012). This organization reinforces the idea that the ideal woman is submissive and respects male authority.

With the evolution of Senegalese society and its socioeconomic transformations, the role of women has gradually changed. In modern society, women now have better access to education and employment and can hold a variety of positions in teaching, health, public administration, trade, and government institutions (ANSD, 2025). These transformations occur within an international context marked by the promotion of gender equality and by public policies aimed at women's empowerment.

However, despite these advances, inequalities persist. The evaluation of the National Action Plan for Women (PANAF, 2003) shows that gender-based discrimination remains a matter of concern. In the field of education, the statistics are revealing: approximately 66% of men,

compared with 58.4% of women aged 6 years and older, are literate (ANSD, 2026). This situation helps to maintain women in a position of economic and social vulnerability, limiting their access to resources and opportunities.

Despite these obstacles, Senegalese women play a crucial role in economic development, particularly in agriculture, trade, and microfinance. According to Blackden (World Bank), they perform nearly 70% of agricultural tasks in Africa, thereby contributing to the continent's economic development and food security. However, their access to economic resources, land, and the income generated by their labor remains limited. To overcome these constraints, Senegalese women have developed strategies of economic solidarity, such as saving groups, (rotating savings associations) (tontines), and Economic Interest Groups (Groupements d'Intérêt Économique, GIE), which enable them to obtain credit and finance micro-projects. These initiatives strengthen their autonomy and their active participation in local development.

The concept of disability is complex and multidimensional, encompassing medical, social, and cultural aspects. According to Claude Hamonet (2004), the term *handicap* originates in the English expression "hand in the cap," which designated a game of exchange based on chance and compensation. It has gradually come to be used in the field of health to qualify situations of social disadvantage resulting from an impairment or a disability (WHO, 2001). The social perception of disability remains strongly influenced by cultural beliefs. In some communities, disability is interpreted as a curse, an act of witchcraft, or divine punishment, which contributes to the stigmatization and social exclusion of the persons concerned. According to Fougeyrollas (1998), this disadvantage may be linked to a process of social production.

Disability is a global phenomenon affecting approximately 10% of the population (WHO, 2011). In Senegal, the General Population and Housing Census (RGPH, 2013) indicates that 5.9% of persons aged one year and older live with a disability, that is, 5.9% of the total population, with a slight female predominance (6.2% versus 5.6%). The situation of women with disabilities is particularly complex: they experience a dual marginalization linked to their sex and to their disability. This dual discrimination limits their access to education, employment, marriage, and social life. According to the UNDP (1998), the literacy rate of women with disabilities worldwide does not exceed 1%, compared with 3% for all adults with disabilities. Such discrimination often engenders situations of severe precarity: begging, family isolation, or social exclusion.

Adapted physical and sports activities (APA) are recognized as an essential tool to improve the health, well-being, and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. They combine sports practice with health objectives in multidisciplinary programs adapted to the functional abilities of participants. INSERM (2008) emphasizes that regular moderate physical activity reduces the risk of premature mortality by 30% and improves coordination, physical fitness, and psychological well-being. Moreover, APA fosters self-esteem, social integration, and participation in community life. Alain Dejean (2012) notes that sport enables persons with disabilities to develop a social identity and to participate fully in the life of society. Senegalese legislation (1984, 2010, 2026) recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to engage in physical and leisure activities.

Methodology

This study was conducted within 'Handisport', a national structure attached to the Ministry of Sports of Senegal and dedicated to the social integration of persons with disabilities through physical and sports activities (PSA). Located at the Léopold Sédar Senghor Stadium in Dakar, it welcomes individuals with various types of disability. The research focused on the supervisors responsible for sports coaching and support, with the aim of gathering information on the participation of women with disabilities. The interview was chosen as the principal method of data collection, as it privileges relational quality and depth of response. The study population comprised nine (9) administrative and technical supervisors. The inclusion criteria were the position held, seniority, diversity of disciplines, and location in Dakar.

The discussions were conducted in a calm and confidential environment, mostly on the premises of the structure. The interviews, which were recorded and supplemented by field notes, lasted between twenty-five and thirty minutes. Data processing consisted of a full transcription followed by a thematic content analysis. This analysis highlighted the key issues relating to gender, disability, and the sports practice of women with disabilities.

Results and Discussion

The results aim to shed light on inclusion strategies and to improve the conditions of participation in PSA for this population. The study highlights the challenges related to mixed-gender practice, accessibility, and the adaptation of sports practices to the specific needs of women with disabilities in Senegal. It also provides recommendations to strengthen the training of supervisors and promote an equitable practice of PSA. The data collected contribute to a better understanding of the role of sport in the social integration and empowerment of women with disabilities.

The study underscores the importance of specialized structures such as Handisport/para-sport in fostering inclusion and reducing discrimination related to disability and gender. Finally, the methodological approach adopted ensures the reliability and relevance of the information collected for scientific analysis.

Missions of a Structure Known Only to Its Own Stakeholders

Analysis of the respondents' discourse reveals a lack of awareness of Handisport among individuals external to the structure, whose primary vocation is to identify persons with disabilities who have sporting potential. The structure is then responsible for organizing, supervising, and promoting the practice of sport for persons with disabilities throughout the national territory. Most interviewees mention the diversity of accounts of Handisport's missions. For some of them, the types of practice refer to mass sport and to elite competition for persons with disabilities. The following statements attest to this:

"It is a national center for persons with disabilities, an exceptional structure, which is a delegation of authority from the Ministry of Sports. However, most Senegalese do not know it, except for licensed members and the leaders." Another interviewee expresses a similar view: *"Handisport is a structure that deals with the practice of sport for persons with disabilities. Its administrative management is well structured. It is multidisciplinary and subject to administrative and technical management. Unfortunately, in society, people are unaware of its existence and its missions."*

Among its other missions, the structure caters to different forms of disability. All interviewees state that Handisport includes many forms of disability: physical, motor, mental, and psychological. This is corroborated by the remarks of respondent X7: *"At Handisport, there are persons with motor disabilities, physical disabilities, and mental disabilities, etc."*

It should nevertheless be emphasized that the majority of women with disabilities have a motor disability. Respondent X8 confirms this: *"In any case, all the girls at Handisport use crutches or move around in wheelchairs."* Respondent X1 corroborates: *"Well, there are women, but they are not numerous, and they all have motor disabilities."*

Women Underrepresented in This Sub-Sector

Regarding the representation of women in para-sport, all the interviews indicate that women with disabilities are fewer in number than men. The main reasons cited revolve around sociocultural barriers. Women experience a dual discrimination linked to their status as women and as persons with disabilities. Owing to the sacralization of the female body, the exposure of their bodies in the sports arena, which is a public space, is frowned upon. *"As I just said, there are women, but frankly, they are not numerous, because people think that women should not practice sport. Especially when it comes to women with disabilities."*

A second difficulty is added to these reasons, as far as their economic situation is concerned. Poverty and the high cost of living compel them to devote most of their time to begging. *"Senegalese society disapproves of women's participation in sport, and this is even more evident for women with disabilities. They do not have the means to practice properly because they beg to meet their needs."*

A third constraint mentioned concerns access to sports infrastructure. The remoteness of Handisport's premises poses a mobility problem. The same applies to the facilities, most of which are inaccessible. They are not taken into account in territorial planning or in the construction of sports infrastructure. In other words, they have no ramps, and access to them is difficult. *"A major problem faced by women with disabilities is access to sports fields. It is a real ordeal for them, because people do not think of them when these fields are being built."*

All these obstacles suggest that the gender-based discrimination suffered by Senegalese women is even

more pronounced among women with disabilities who engage in sports activities.

A Predominantly Adequate Training of Technical Supervisory Staff

We observe that most of the technical supervisors interviewed reported that they had all received training meeting the standards of supervision. The reason advanced by some of them is that they studied sport sciences and are physical education (PE) teachers. For others, it is because they received specific training in coaching persons with disabilities, enabling them to supervise effectively, as the following statement attests: *"Yes, I can say that my training meets the standards of supervision. I would also say so because I am first and foremost a PE teacher with six years of training, but I also received a training from the I.P.C., which stands for International Paralympic Committee, and it helped me a great deal."*

However, it should be emphasized that a minority of supervisors are volunteers who have not studied the sciences and techniques of physical and sports activities. These are individuals who manage by drawing on their experience as former athletes, combined with a few specific training courses. They themselves acknowledge the need to enrich their knowledge and improve their skills in the supervision of persons with disabilities. This is confirmed by the following statement: *"Yes, it meets the standards. I did a training course of a few days here at the Léopold Sédar Senghor Stadium, and another in Niger, because we went five days before the competitions. I did theory in the morning and practice in the evening. Nevertheless, we want to perfect our training."*

Activities with Limited Resources

All the statements received indicate the multiplicity and diversity of activities at Handisport. Each sport within this sector independently organizes its own season, with a preparation period and a competition period. Training takes place in the afternoons and depends on the availability of the athletes. *"Generally, training sessions take place from Monday to Friday; even on Saturday, we are there. It depends on the athletes' availability. Every day, we start our sessions at around 4:30 p.m., but they are to cope with reality because sometimes they compete alongside able-bodied athletes."* All these activities entail financial expenditure and material resources. However, analysis of the respondents' discourse shows that the crucial problem of supervision at Handisport is material and financial in nature. This sector of sports practice suffers above all from a lack of means, which prevents athletes from attending regularly and, above all, prevents women from participating in large numbers. The main cause is a failure to apply the Orientation Act in favor of persons with disabilities, which governs their practice of physical and sports activities in Senegal. In the interest of democratizing sport, the Sports Code strongly recommends better financial support for sport, regardless of the type of practice. Unfortunately, a wide gap exists between intentions and reality, as the following statement attests: *"In supervision, we encounter specific material, logistical, financial, and infrastructural difficulties that prevent us from doing our work properly."*

The main sources of funding for Handisport are the Ministry of Sports and the Senegalese National Olympic and Sports Committee (CNOSS). Only these two institutions allocate subsidies, which are insufficient, to the federation, which redistributes them to the clubs. Beyond these, other financial support comes from the president, who acts as a philantropist by investing his own money to ensure the smooth running of sports activities. The statements of two of the leaders surveyed point in this direction: *"Handisport has a single source of funding, which is the Ministry of Sports. Truly, it operates with its own personal resources and the support of a few benefactors such as the C.N.O.S.S." "We have no other source of funding apart from Santie AGNE, the president, who helps us. He fulfills our needs; we have no one else."*

In conclusion, this study aimed to analyze the participation of women with disabilities in physical and sports activities in Senegal by examining the missions of para-sport movement, the representation of women in relation to men, and the sources of funding.

Drawing on interviews with nine administrative and technical supervisors, it yields four main findings.

First, handisport/ para-sport remains largely unknown beyond its own members and leaders, which limits its capacity to identify and recruit persons with disabilities who have sporting potential.

Second, women are clearly underrepresented, and this underrepresentation stems from the intersection of gender and disability: the sacralization of the female body renders their exposure in the public sports arena socially disapproved; economic precariousness, and

begging in particular, absorbs the time and resources that sports practice requires; and the remoteness and inaccessibility of sports facilities compound these constraints.

Third, technical supervision is generally adequate, since most supervisors hold training in sport sciences or physical education, complemented by specific qualifications, although a minority of volunteers, who rely mainly on their experience as former athletes, express a need for further training.

Fourth, the sector is structurally under-resourced: funding depends almost entirely on the Ministry of Sports and the CNOSS, supplemented by the personal investment of the president, which reveals a marked gap between the legal framework, notably Law No. 2010-15 and its Article 39, and its implementation.

These findings suggest that the low participation of women with disabilities should be understood less as a matter of individual choice than as the outcome of social, economic, and infrastructural barriers that public policy has yet to remove. Several avenues for action follow: enhancing the visibility of para-sport through awareness-raising; making sports facilities accessible in accordance with existing legal obligations; diversifying and securing sources of funding; consolidating the training of volunteer supervisors; and developing measures specifically targeted at women, such as support for transport and for economic autonomy.

This study has limitations. Its qualitative design, small sample, and single-site focus in Dakar preclude generalization, and it reflects the perspective of supervisors rather than that of the women themselves. Future research should therefore give voice to women with disabilities, extend the investigation to other regions of Senegal, and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to measure participation more precisely. By documenting these barriers, this study contributes to a better understanding of how gender and disability intersect in access to sport, and it underscores that sport, as a means for social inclusion and empowerment, remains insufficiently mobilized for women with disabilities in Senegal.

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