

## FEMALE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MALE PARTICIPATION IN RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS

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**ABSTRACT.** *Introduction:* Rhythmic gymnastics has been recognized as an Olympic sport for women since 1984, distinguished by its emphasis on grace, flexibility, and the artistic integration of music and apparatus. Historically perceived as a female-exclusive discipline, this perception has been shaped by prevailing societal constructs of masculinity, which prioritize strength, competitiveness, and emotional restraint. However, an increasing number of countries are now promoting male participation in rhythmic gymnastics, thereby challenging traditional gender norms. Within a socially rigid framework, sport continues to play a pivotal role in constructing and reinforcing gender identities, often presenting masculinity and femininity as natural and complementary categories. *Aim:* The aim of this study is to identify the level of acceptance of male's rhythmic gymnastics by the younger generation through female students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, who are studying this sport in their first year. *Methods:* The study was conducted on 101 female students of Physical Education and Sport Faculty from Timisoara. The questionnaire survey method was used in this research. This was developed specifically for this study and distributed to female students for complete to all four specializations. *Results:* The questionnaire reveals growing acceptance of male rhythmic gymnastics. When asked "Do you practice any sport?", responses were nearly split: 49.5% said "Yes" and 50.5% "No." A majority (63.4%) believe the sport isn't exclusive to women and support male inclusion in training, education, and competition. If they were PE teachers, 76.2% of female students would teach rhythmic gymnastics to boys. Moreover, 79.2% think the Romanian Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation should officially introduce the discipline. Regarding boys performing in tights, 66.3% were unbothered, 18.8% were enthusiastic, 12.9% indifferent, while only 2% expressed discomfort. *Conclusion:* The results indicate a clear shift toward greater inclusivity and gender diversity in rhythmic gymnastics.

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The openness to formalizing male participation, integrating the discipline into boys' education, and embracing cultural change reflects evolving attitudes among the younger generation. The predominance of positive responses and minimal resistance suggest meaningful progress in challenging traditional gender norms. However, to strengthen the relevance and impact of these findings, further research is needed to explore broader perspectives and long-term implications.

**Keywords:** rhythmic gymnastics for male, female students, gender differences, inclusion through sport

## INTRODUCTION

Sports have traditionally been male dominated, with women gaining participation and representation gradually. Despite progress, women still face fewer opportunities, limited governance roles, and a gender pay gap, especially in sports like cricket and football. Female coaches remain underrepresented, and media coverage heavily favors male athletes (Katsarova, 2019). However, in two sports disciplines, synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics, boys are excluded from official competitions, because the traditional masculinity has been shaped by ideals such as strength, aggression, competitiveness, and heterosexuality (Piedra, 2020). Despite significant progress in promoting gender inclusiveness in sports, boys remain excluded from official competitions in two specific disciplines, synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics. This limitation highlights ongoing barriers to achieving full gender equity in all areas of sports.

According to International Federation of Gymnastics, Rhythmic Gymnastics, sister sport of Artistic Gymnastics, has its roots in antiquity and even outdate the Gymnastics of the Ancient Greeks. The institute Dalcroze founded in Geneva continues to teach rhythmic gymnasts using the eurhythmics methods he first pioneered. First dubbed "Modern Gymnastics", the sport of Rhythmic Gymnastics held its first World Championships in Budapest in 1963, the same year Rhythmic became a FIG discipline. Rhythmic gymnastics is a Olympic female sport since 1984.

Even though sports are often perceived as a predominantly male domain, there are two disciplines—rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming—where male participation remains underrepresented, challenging traditional gender norms and inviting broader inclusivity. Recently the tendency of changing on gender inequalities in sport, introduced athletes of both genders in sports characterized by only one gender (Di Cagno et al., 2009).

According to Colley & Comber, 2003, there is still evidence of continuing presence in gender differences, and this situation can only be attributed to a more enduring influence by societal gender roles and beliefs associated with them.

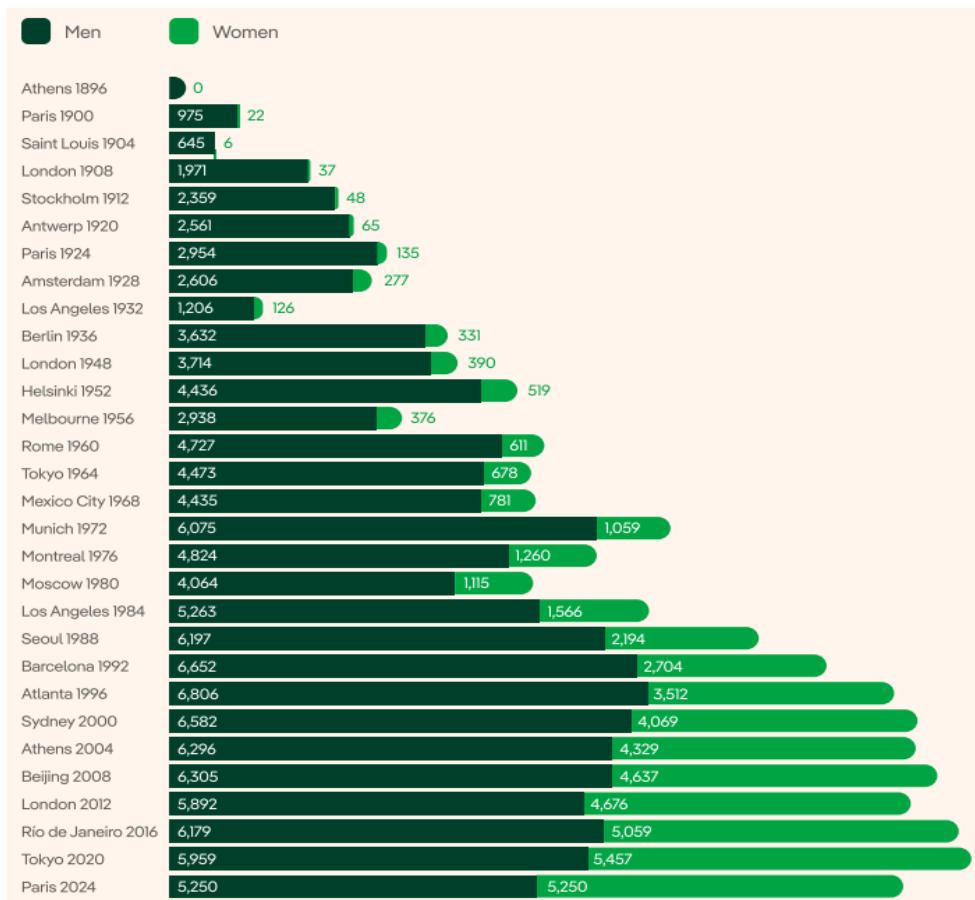
Because certain sports were categorized as sex-related due to social pressure, the entry of men into female sports was difficult. The selection of sports activities is frequently influenced by the performance's masculinity and femininity ratings. The persistence of gender preferences is influenced by gender stereotypes, especially in the case of younger individuals (Zinkhan et al., 2004).

In Japan, this sport is quite popular, with over 1,000 practitioners, and competitions include elements inspired by martial arts, such as wushu. Spain is the first European country to recognize men's rhythmic gymnastics, and gymnasts like Ruben Orihuela have been pioneers in this field. Although there are national championships and demonstrations, men's rhythmic gymnastics has not yet been included in the Olympic Games. However, there are discussions about adapting a specific scoring code for male movements so that they can be better represented in international competitions (Kamberidou et al., 2009).

Over the past two decades, men have been advocating for equal opportunities in competitive rhythmic gymnastics, urging International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) to act toward officially recognizing men's rhythmic gymnastics as a sport. Male rhythmic gymnastics teams are active in countries such as Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, Russia, Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, Greece, Spain, and Italy. An increasing number of male gymnasts are participating in various formats—solo, individual, team, and even mixed pair—although these events remain unofficial, as FIG currently acknowledges only women's rhythmic gymnastics (Kamberidou et al., 2009).

Progress towards gender equality in sports, promoted by UNESCO, the IOC, and other international organizations, remains slow and uneven. Despite initiatives such as the Brighton Declaration and Kazan Action Plan, further steps are needed to combat stereotypes, misogyny, and structural barriers affecting girls and women globally (de Soysa et al. 2019).

According to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the first women's Olympic Games were held in 1900. Over a century later, the London 2012 Olympics marked a significant milestone, being the first edition where every nation had at least one female athlete. In 2024, the Paris Olympics made history by achieving full gender parity, with an equal number of male and female athletes participating.



**Fig. 1. International Olympic Committee (IOC)**

One article published by TIME (Stern, 2024), at the 2024 Paris Olympics, although the International Olympic Committee allowed men to participate in artistic swimming for the first time, no male athletes will compete. This absence is explained by the difficulty of integrating men into a sport historically perceived as feminine, despite its mixed origins. The evolution and media representation of artistic swimming have emphasized its aesthetic and feminine aspects, leading to the exclusion of men for decades. Although the U.S. reinstated male participation in 1979 and mixed duet became an international competition in 2015, the full inclusion of male teams remains challenging due to differences in physique and swimming styles. According to journal TIME (Stern, 2024), Bill May, an advocate for male participation in this sport, did not qualify for the U.S. Olympic team, highlighting the need for experience and diversity in competition.

Also, the Euronews article discusses the exclusion of male athletes from artistic swimming at the Paris 2024 Olympics, despite the International Olympic Committee allowing their participation. It highlights concerns about gender equality in the Games, noting that no men were selected among the 96 athletes competing in the event. The article explores the historical perception of artistic swimming as a female-dominated sport and the challenges male athletes face in gaining recognition. It also mentions disappointment from World Aquatics, which had hoped to see male competitors in Paris. Additionally, the piece touches on the broader efforts to achieve gender balance in Olympic sports (Euronews, 2024).

Regarding the rhythmic gymnastics, Rubén Orihuela from Spain, started rhythmic gymnastics at the age of 10, in a sport traditionally considered feminine. In 2005, the Spanish Gymnastics Federation (RFEG) allowed men to participate in the Open category of the National Individual Championship, but this decision was overturned in 2009 by the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG), which stated that rhythmic gymnastics is exclusively for women. Following criticism, RFEG established a separate Men's National Championship, with the first edition taking place in 2009 in Gijón, where Orihuela won in the senior category. He won numerous national titles between 2007 and 2016, as well as a bronze medal in 2015 and a silver in 2017 (Orihuela, 2025).

- Has anyone critically examined the fact that male athletes do not have representation in all disciplines at the Olympic Games?
- Is gender equality also addressed for boys who wish to participate in female sports?
- Currently, there is no official global statistic on the number of boys practicing rhythmic gymnastics. However, it is estimated that several thousand athletes are involved in this field at the local level, either within sports clubs or by participating in unofficial competitions boys practicing rhythmic gymnastics, why does the International Gymnastics Federation not allow them to officially compete in recognized tournaments?
- How do girls perceive male gender equality in this context, and what are their opinions on the matter?

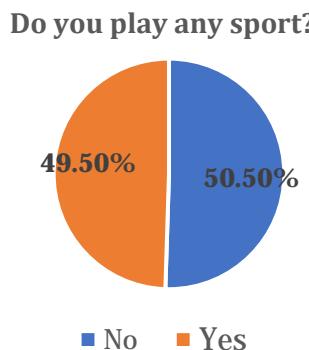
In the rigid social framework, physical activity and sport have served—and continue to serve—as influential arenas for shaping and reinforcing gender identities, portraying masculinity and femininity as natural and complementary roles (Piedra, 2017).

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

For the present study we used a questionnaire with 15 questions referring to the practice of rhythmic gymnastics by males. This questionnaire was applied on 101 female students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, students who had participated during their studies in the rhythmic gymnastics course, in conclusion they had knowledge related to this discipline. Students included in the study came from all specializations of the faculty in all 3 years of bachelor studies. We chose to interview only female students to understand the perception of the young female generation on gender equality or social inclusion through sport.

## RESULTS

The results of the survey reflect the perceptions and opinions of the young female generation on males' rhythmic gymnastics and gender issues. This data is key to understanding how social and cultural changes influence perceptions of gender inclusion and equality in sport. By examining these graphs, we can observe emerging trends and the level of acceptance of males in rhythmic gymnastics, both nationally and internationally.



**Fig. 2.** Graphical representation of female students who practice or do not practice any sport

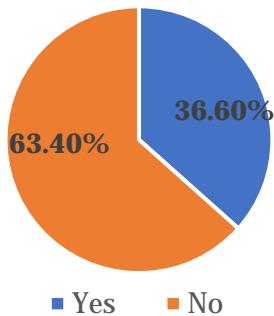
“Do you practice any sport?” and represents the responses of 101 individuals. It is divided into two sections:

“Yes” (DA), shown in orange, accounts for 49,50% of the responses.

“No” (NU), shown in blue, makes up 50,50% of the responses.

This indicates that slightly more than half of the surveyed individuals do not practice any sport, while just under half do. It offers an interesting insight into the balance of physical activity within this group.

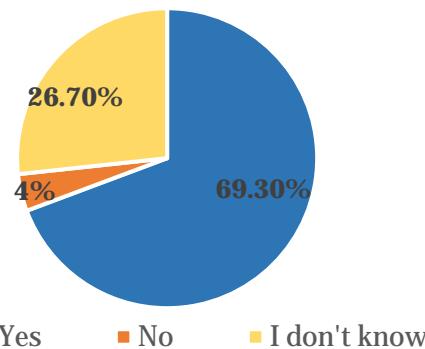
**Do you think rhythmic gymnastics is for women?**



**Fig. 3.** Graphical representation of female students' opinions on practicing rhythmic gymnastics

“Do you think rhythmic gymnastics is dedicated to women?”. As the data show, only 36.60% of respondents believe that this sport is exclusively for women (“Yes”), while a significant majority, 63.40%, believe the opposite (“No”). This may suggest a change in perspectives or a greater openness to the idea of inclusivity in this sport.

**Do you think this sport is practiced by boys in the world?**



**Fig. 4.** Graphical representation of students' perceptions regarding male participation in rhythmic gymnastics worldwide

The graph is a pie chart that answers the question: "Do you think this sport is practiced by males in the world?" and has 101 answers. The results are as follows:

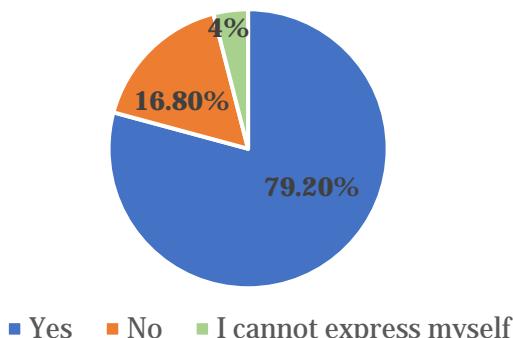
- "Yes" (blue): 69.30% of respondents believe that this sport is practiced by males globally.

- "No" (orange): 4% think it is not practiced.

- "I don't know" (yellow): 26.70 % a small percentage of respondents are not sure.

This shows a majority opinion that the sport is practiced by males worldwide. It may suggest a growing awareness or openness towards males' involvement in the sport.

**Do you think that the Romanian Gymnastics Federation should formalize men's rhythmic gymnastics competitions?".**



**Fig. 5.** Graphical representation of students' opinions on whether the Romanian Gymnastics Federation should formalize men's rhythmic gymnastics competitions

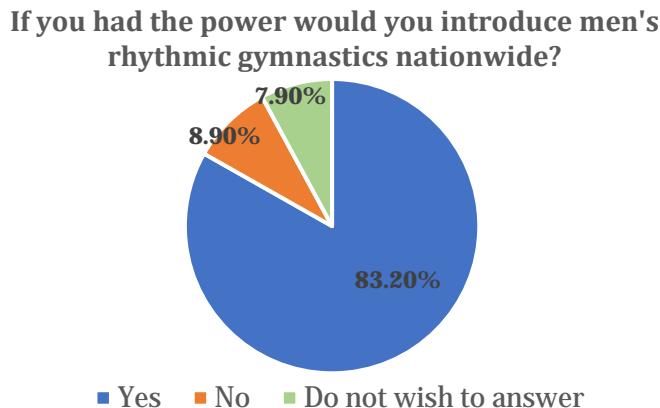
"Do you think that the Romanian Gymnastics Federation should formalize men's rhythmic gymnastics competitions?". The results of the poll are as follows:

- "Yes" (represented in blue): 79.20% of participants support the formalization of competitions for men's rhythmic gymnastics.

- "No" (represented in orange): 16.80% of respondents are against this initiative.

- "I cannot express myself" (represented in green): 4% of the respondents do not have a clear opinion.

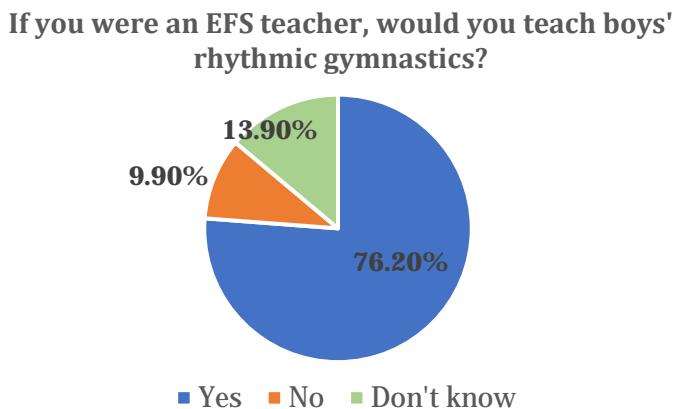
This graph shows a clear majority in favor of officialization, suggesting a desire for change and a greater openness towards the inclusion of men's rhythmic gymnastics in official competitions. It is a positive signal for diversity and evolution in sport.



**Fig. 6.** Graphical representation of students' support for introducing men's rhythmic gymnastics nationwide

"If you had the power, would you introduce men's rhythmic gymnastics nationwide?" The survey includes 101 responses, and the results are divided as follows:

- "Yes" (represented in blue): 83.20% of respondents would introduce men's rhythmic gymnastics nationally.
- "No" (represented in orange): 8.90% would refuse this initiative.
- "Do not wish to answer" (represented in green): 7.90% did not express an opinion.



**Fig. 7.** Graphical representation of students' willingness to teach boys rhythmic gymnastics as future EFS teachers

These data indicate strong support for the proposed initiative, with a clear majority in favor of the introduction of men's rhythmic gymnastics. The results suggest a desire for diversification and inclusion in national sport.

"If you were an EFS teacher, would you teach boys' rhythmic gymnastics?". The 101 answers are distributed as follows:

- "Yes" (represented in blue): 76.20% of the respondents consider that they would teach rhythmic gymnastics to boys.

- "NO" (represented in orange): 9.90% of the respondents would not.

- "Don't know" (represented in green): 13.90% of respondents are not sure.

These percentages reflect a majority support for teaching boys rhythmic gymnastics, which may suggest a positive change in perceptions of inclusion in PE.

How would you react if you saw a boy in tights performing elements of rhythmic gymnastics?

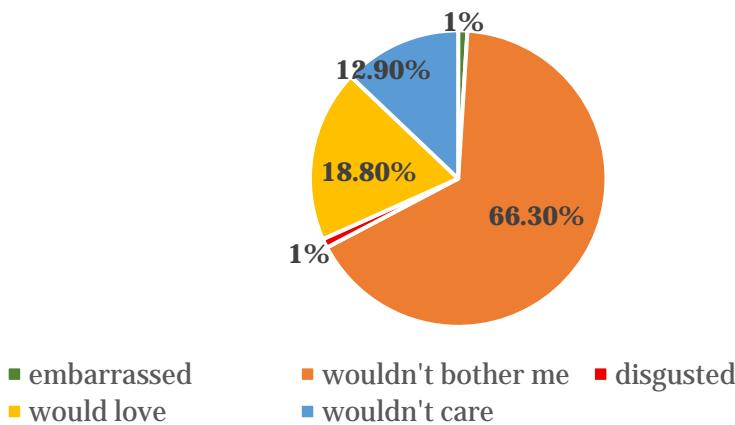


Fig. 8. Graphical representation of students' reactions to boys performing rhythmic gymnastics in tights

"How would you react if you saw a boy in tights performing elements of rhythmic gymnastics?". With 101 responses analyzed, the results are as follows:

- 66.30% (orange): most respondents said they "wouldn't bother me" seeing this.

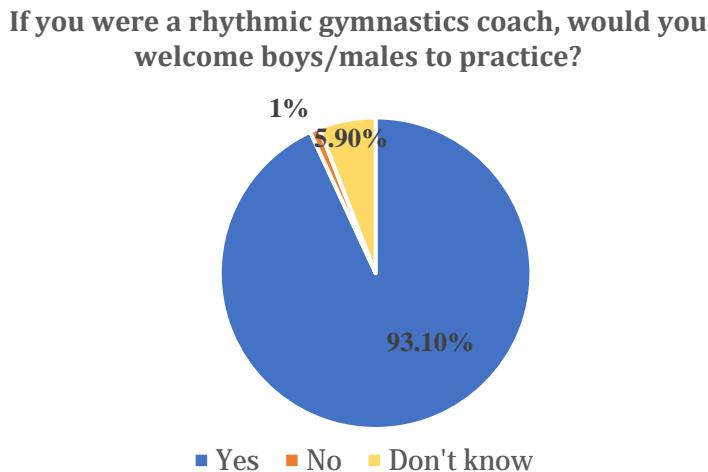
- 18.80% (yellow): Respondents said, "would love".

- 12.90% (blue): Respondents said, "wouldn't care".

- 1% (green): Few respondents answered "embarrassed".

- 1% (red): A similar percentage said they would be 'disgusted'.

This suggests a largely positive or neutral attitude towards men's rhythmic gymnastics, with a small minority having negative reactions.



**Fig. 9.** Graphical representation of students' openness to welcoming boys into rhythmic gymnastics as future coaches

"If you were a rhythmic gymnastics coach, would you welcome boys/males to practice?" and includes 101 responses. The results are split as follows:

- "Yes" (represented in blue): 93.10% of the respondents would accept boys in rhythmic gymnastics training.
- "No" (represented in orange): A very small percentage would not (1%).
- "Don't know" (represented with yellow): Another small percentage is not sure, 5.90%.

These data suggest overwhelming support for the inclusion of boys in rhythmic gymnastics training, indicating a broad openness to diversity in the sport.

## DISCUSSION

Dowling (2006) examines how Norwegian physical education teacher educators define their professional roles and approach gender equality. Dowling show that their focus is mostly technical—centered on teaching sports skills—while issues of gender are often ignored or seen as biological facts. Their professional development is individual and rooted in personal interests, with little collaboration or critical reflection. Their study suggests that deeper awareness and dialogue about gender could lead to more inclusive practices in PETE.

Organista, Mazur, Larsson and Lenartowicz (2024) state that **male PE teachers unintentionally reinforce heteronormative gender roles** through their communication with students—especially girls. Although the teachers “don’t have bad intentions,” their jokes and comments about appearance, dating, and femininity help **normalize traditional gender expectations** and heterosexuality as the default. The authors emphasize that teachers often **lack awareness of how their words shape gender dynamics**, and students—having internalized these norms—rarely question them. They argue that **gender-sensitive education for both teachers and students is essential** to challenge these ingrained patterns.

Biemmi (2015), argues that, contrary to popular belief, the Italian school system continues to mirror and reinforce societal gender inequalities. Biemmi highlights three main areas of concern: the gendered nature of educational choices, which limits girls’ access to lucrative careers; persistent sexist stereotypes in textbooks, where women are portrayed in domestic roles while men dominate public life; and the lack of teacher training in gender sensitivity, which contributes to the unintentional perpetuation of these biases. Although Italian research on gender and education has been substantial, it has only recently begun to influence policy, with promising legislative and academic efforts emerging since 2013.

Despite the literature reviewed above, there is limited evidence acknowledging that gender-related issues may also affect boys. Female physical education teachers may unintentionally enact gender-based discrimination during PE lessons. In the context of our article, which focuses on boys’ participation in rhythmic gymnastics, gender-related challenges frequently arise in the way teachers—both male and female—approach the subject. In conclusion, this topic requires more thorough investigation to understand the trajectory it is taking within a rapidly evolving society.

## CONCLUSION

A significant percentage of respondents do not participate in any sports, which could point to a broader disinterest or barriers to engagement in physical activities. Nevertheless, the majority perceive rhythmic gymnastics as a discipline that is not exclusively tailored for women, showcasing an evolving mindset toward gender inclusivity in sports. This shift is further reflected in the growing support for boys/males practicing rhythmic gymnastics worldwide, signaling an emergent trend that embraces diversity and challenges traditional stereotypes.

Young women support a future initiative to formalize men's rhythmic gymnastics competitions in Romania, thus highlighting a collective desire for institutional recognition and transformative change in the sports arena. This enthusiasm is reflected by a substantial proportion of respondents who are open to accepting the introduction of men's rhythmic gymnastics at the national level, revealing a strong desire for diversification and wider acceptance in the sporting community.

Moreover, the majority's willingness to teach rhythmic gymnastics to boys is emblematic of a cultural shift in educational practices, favoring inclusivity and representation in physical education. The predominantly positive or neutral reactions to boys wearing leotards and performing rhythmic gymnastics elements emphasize societal progress in breaking down barriers of conventional gender roles. The minimal negativity further underscores the changing attitudes and openness among communities.

In conclusion, the overwhelming support for the integration of boys/males in rhythmic gymnastics training serves as a testament to the progressive acceptance and celebration of diversity in sport, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future in sporting endeavors. Specialized rules could be developed for males rhythmic gymnasts to enhance their performance by tailoring aspects such as equipment, music, and movement, while ensuring adherence to the fundamental principles of the discipline.

To be able to conclude that rhythmic gymnastics is considered by Romanian people a sport for both women and men, further in-depth studies are needed.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. All authors approved the final version for publication.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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