



Running Toward Empowerment: A Feminist Study with Adolescent Girls

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Background: Despite the numerous physical and psychological benefits associated with regular physical activity (PA) (Ortega et al., 2008), only 35% of adolescent girls in Quebec meet the World Health Organization's recommendation of at least 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous PA (World Health Organization, 2020), compared to 46% of boys (Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2020). These inequalities are partly rooted in systemic gender barriers, which influence girls' participation and perceptions of safety in outdoor spaces (Cowley et al., 2021). Indeed, outdoor PA has historically been framed within a patriarchal logic that values traits associated with masculinity (e.g., strength, courage, leadership), thereby limiting the presence of girls in these environments (Bryce et al., 2024). In this context, fostering empowerment appears to be an essential strategy for promoting gender equity and strengthening adolescent girls' connection to nature. This study explores how participation in school-based trail running clubs can support adolescent girls' empowerment and connectedness to nature, with two main objectives: 1) to co-construct an understanding of how trail running clubs can foster empowerment and connectedness to nature among adolescent girls, and 2) to identify conditions that facilitate actions promoting these outcomes within the school environment.

Methodology: Guided by a feminist participatory action research design, seven adolescent girls aged 14 to 17 participated in a nine-week action research cycle. Data collection included walking interviews and photovoice activities, followed by a collaborative analysis session and a final reflective assessment. This methodology aims to co-produce knowledge between the researcher and participants to effect change and improve women's living conditions (Maguire et al., 2004). Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the Université de Sherbrooke.

Results & Conclusion: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified three interconnected themes: running clubs as spaces of negotiated inclusion, nature as a vector for connection to the self and others, and becoming capable. The findings suggest that running clubs can foster empowerment through a sense of belonging, peer support, bodily engagement with nature, and opportunities for skill development and personal growth. This study provides concrete pathways for developing school environments that promote empowerment and connectedness to nature. Ultimately, it supports adolescent girls in reclaiming outdoor spaces that have been historically masculinized.

Keywords: adolescent girls; trail running; empowerment; connectedness to nature; feminist participatory action research



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