



Interventions in Sport Social Work: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Background: This research aims to gain insight into applied theories in sport social work, service objectives, sport social workers' interventions, intervention barriers and the professional competencies required to overcome them.

Methods: Using the scoping review method, the concept of sport social work was searched on August 19, 2024, across international (*e.g.*, Scopus, WOS) and national (*e.g.*, Noormags, SID, Magiran, ISC) databases as well as the Sport Social Work Journal, search engines and relevant websites, without time restrictions. Ultimately, 73 scientific records were identified. Documents that addressed both social work and sport/athletes, were included. Non-athlete interventions, non-English records, and studies without accessible full texts were excluded.

Results: Finally 73 records of 668 ones were included and the results showed that ecological theory is the most commonly applied framework in sport social work, and a methodical alignment is observed between service objectives, sport social work theories, and intervention types across three levels: micro (individual athletes and casework social work interventions); mezzo (groups and support systems such as families, coaches, sports teams, and group social work interventions); and macro (sociocultural and economic institutions, and community-based social work interventions). Also, three categories of barriers: profession-related, socio-cultural, and sports system barriers were identified within the context of sports, and to address them, acquiring professional competencies is essential for sport social workers.

Conclusion: This study introduces sport social work in Iran as a novel entry point for advancing education, research, and practical interventions in the sports sector. By addressing psychosocial harms, reducing inequalities, promoting social change, and supporting athlete well-being and performance, sport social work can make a significant contribution to both individual and social development.

Keywords: Athletes, Iran, Social change, Search engine, Social work, Social workers

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Introduction

Sports create unforgettable achievements for athletes, yet behind these moments lie many hidden challenges. Throughout their career, athletes face physical, psychological, and emotional pressures that often require professional support. In recent years, a new specialization- sport social work- has emerged to these needs (1). In the United States, sport social work has been influenced by the works of Jane Addams, Clark, and colleagues (2). It represents a growing domain within the profession, focusing on athletes' social issues, and providing interventions to support their well-being, mental health, and family relationships, thereby helping them maintain balance for optimal performance on and off the field.

The results of Reynolds' study highlight the influence of parents, the family system, the interactions among family members, and the parent-referee communication on athletes' sports performance (3). Athletes have unique and complex needs, and due to the pressure to perform effectively in competitive sports, they mostly avoid expressing physical pain, injuries, substance abuse issues and eating disorders. They are at high risk of psychological and social problems due to occupational burnout. Their sole life goal is often to become professional athletes and they have no other purpose, and social workers should focus on identifying the barriers that prevent athletes from becoming professionals, enhancing the psychosocial well-being of the approximately 98% who do not reach the professional level, and the athletes' adaptability to new living conditions (4).

Social workers in the field of sports emphasize models and strategies of social development and empowerment to combat the histories, solidarities, causes, and consequences of widespread poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and intergroup conflict and hostility. They pursue three main goals: 1) improving the health and well-being of athletes; 2) enhancing the living conditions of athletes to achieve sustainable social and economic development; and 3) playing an advocacy role and continuously improving policies related to social, economic, political, and environmental justice (5). Sports injuries also turn athletes into potential clients for social workers; however, a real gap in theoretical and practical knowledge in social work poses a

challenge for interventions by sport social workers (6). Theories play a significant role in social work and guide the activities and interventions of social workers by helping them determine the core focus for assessment or interventions and directing them in responding to clients, evaluating, improving, and strengthening service delivery. The theoretical perspectives of sport social work interventions cover three levels of intervention. At the micro level, the target group is athletes, and social workers influenced by a conservative viewpoint provide individual-level social work interventions aimed at modifying individual, physical, and personality barriers in the sports field and empowering athletes. At the mezzo level, the environment in which athletes compete, such as teammates, coaches, managers, and other members of the sports team is considered. Interventions at this level focus on adjusting obstacles and challenges within community institutions such as family, friends, school, the sports competition environment, and the role of NGOs in the sports area. Also, macro-level interventions focus on the values and norms governing society and macro-social structures (7), and issues are sought in factors such as social, economic, and political environments and focus on the structural social work, critical approaches to create changes in social factors and important policies of formal organizations, redistribute power and resources in favor of oppressed groups, and demand law enforcement through social action (as one of the methods of social work) (8). The critical social work perspective of Freire, the structural social work model of Mullaly, and the critical social work model of Fook at the level of structural interventions focus on the oppression and deprivation that are created through social groupings, and each emphasizes different methods to create change and eliminate deprivation (9), reduce issues related to discrimination and bias, and promote ethical action and equality in sports (10). Although sport social work is gaining recognition internationally, this field remains unexplored in Iran, with no scientific studies conducted to date. This study therefore reviews the existing literature to analyze the theoretical foundations, goals, interventions, barriers, and professional competencies of sport social work. Specifically, it addresses the following questions:

1- What is sport social work?

- 2- Which theories have been applied in the field?
- 3- What types of interventions are provided by sport social workers?
- 4- What barriers limit these interventions, and which professional skills are needed to overcome them?

Materials and Methods

A scoping review provides an overview of the current state of research in a given subject area. This method is commonly used to identify research gaps and to determine whether a comprehensive review has previously been conducted in the field (11). According to Arksey and O'Malley, a scoping review involves a systematic yet rapid examination of key concepts related to a research topic. This approach is particularly useful when the topic is novel and comprehensive information is not yet available. Conducting such a review helps clarify and refine the research focus (12). Given the novelty of the field and the lack of comprehensive reviews in sport social work, this study employs a scoping review to gain a deeper understanding of its key concepts and prior research.

Study design

This study was conducted as a scoping review, following the framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (12). A scoping review is particularly useful for examining emerging topics where comprehensive information is not yet available. It provides an overview of the existing body of knowledge, identifies research gaps, and helps refine the research focus. Regarding the novelty of sport social work and the absence of comprehensive reviews in this field, a scoping review was considered the most appropriate approach.

Search strategy

On August 19, 2024, a comprehensive search was conducted to investigate the concept of sport social work. The search encompassed international and national databases (Scopus, Web of Science [WoS], Noormags, SID, Magiran, and ISC), academic search engines (Google Scholar and Google), the Sport Social Work Journal, the official website of the Association for Sport Social Work (ASWIS), international conferences and symposiums on sport

social work, as well as other relevant online sources. Given the novelty of this topic, the literature search was conducted without any restrictions on publication date. Both English- and Persian-language publications were included. The search strategy was based on four predefined keywords:

- 1- "sport social work" OR "social work sports" OR "social work in sport".
- 2- "sport social workers" OR "social workers in sports".
- 3- (("sports" OR "athlete" OR "athletic") AND ("social work" OR social workers)).
- ۴- "مددکاری اجتماعی ورزش"، "مددکاری اجتماعی در ورزش"، "مددکاری اجتماعی یا مددکاران اجتماعی و ورزش یا ورزشکاران".

Search strategy in Web of Science (WOS)

1. ("sport social work" OR "social work sports" OR "social work in sport") OR ("sport social workers" OR "social workers in sports") OR (("sports" OR "athlete" OR "athletic") AND ("social work" OR social AND workers)).
2. Select Topic: title, abstract, author keywords, Keywords Plus.

Search strategy in Scopus

1. ("sport social work" OR "social work sports" OR "social work in sport") OR ("sport social workers" OR "social workers in sports") OR (("sports" OR "athlete" OR "athletic") AND ("social work" OR social AND workers)).
2. Select Subject area: (Social Sciences, Psychology, Health Professions, Arts and Humanities)
3. Select Article title, abstract, keywords

Eligibility criteria

Only records with full-text availability were reviewed. The inclusion criteria were:

- A- Simultaneous presence of the concepts of social work and sports or athletes in the title or abstract.
- B- No restriction on publication date.
- C- All studies in the field of sport social work, regardless of quality, were eligible if accessible through scientific databases, academic journals, Google, or reputable international websites.
- D- Findings explicitly addressed theories, principles, values, roles, interventions, or practices relevant to sport social work.

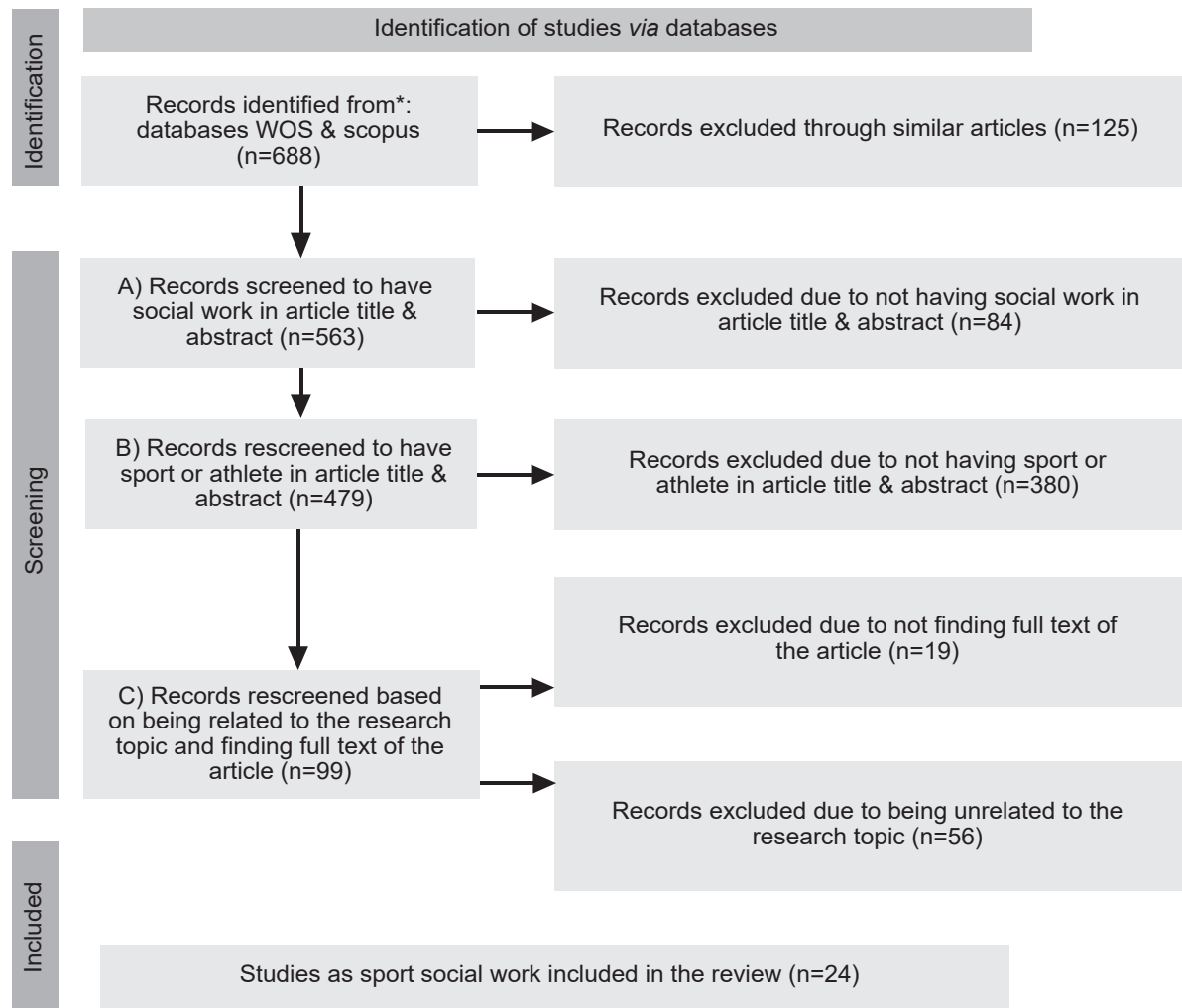


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart (28) for the review of studies on Sport Social Work.

The exclusion criteria were:

- A- Absence of both “social work” and “sport or athlete” in the title, abstract, or keywords.
- B- Studies applying sport-based interventions for non-athlete populations (*e.g.*, socially vulnerable groups).
- C- Non-English publications, except for Persian.
- D- Publications with abstracts only and without accessible full texts.

Screening process

A total of 688 records-317 from WOS and 371 from Scopus-were retrieved and included in the PRISMA screening process (Figure 1).

Two reviewers independently conducted the initial screening of titles, abstracts, and full texts. In cases of disagreement, a third reviewer acted as adjudicator. Conflicts were resolved through team discussions and consensus to ensure adherence to the inclusion

criteria. Ultimately, 73 academic records were identified for inclusion (Table 1).

Data extraction and analysis

Data analysis was conducted based on the framework defined by Arksey and O'Malley and followed five stages: identifying research questions; identifying relevant studies; selecting studies; extracting and charting data; summarizing, synthesizing, and reporting results (12).

A total of 688 records -317 from WOS and 371 from Scopus- were included in the PRISMA screening process, as depicted in figure 1. Two reviewers independently conducted a dual-review assessment of the retrieved studies. In cases of discrepancies, a third reviewer served as the adjudicator. All the conflicts were resolved through team discussion and consensus to ensure alignment with the inclusion criteria. The search and assessment workflow was illustrated

Table 1. Number of scientific records identified for inclusion in the study

Source of scientific records	Number identified
Number of scientific records in scopus and web of science (after PRISMA process)	24
Number of articles in the sport social work journal	23
Number of articles in noormags	0
Number of articles in SID	0
Number of articles in magiran	0
Number of articles in ISC	0
Number of articles in google scholar	8
Number of articles in google search	3
Number of articles identified through reference lists	7
Articles and content published on the ASWIS website and sport social work web pages	8
Total	73

in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure 1). Based on searches conducted using four predefined keywords to identify scholarly materials related to 'sport social work' across various sources and databases, a total of 73 academic records were included in this study (Table 1). These records were subjected to conceptual analysis using qualitative content analysis.

In the first phase, an Excel form was developed to systematically extract relevant information from the scientific studies. The extracted data included authors' names, article titles, journal names, year of publication, study methodology, population and sample, article keywords, country under study, applied models and theories, professional principles and values, roles of sport social workers, interventions and practices in sport social work, and other related findings. Following the data extraction, initial coding

was performed, themes were categorized, and the findings were synthesized to present the study results.

Results

In response to the first research question, scientific studies on sport social work were reviewed, and the descriptive results indicate the current status of the field.

A) Descriptive results of scientific publications

1- Types of documents.

According to the results of chart 1, of the 73 scientific records reviewed in the field of sport social work, 76.92% were journal articles, 3.30% were books, 1.10% were conference papers, 9.89% were theses, and 8.79% were web-based publications.

2- Year of publication.

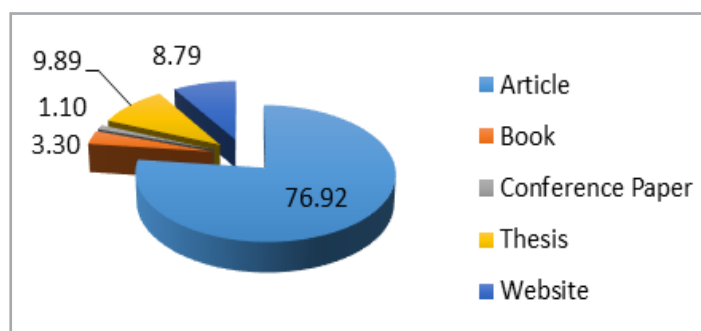


Chart 1. Status of scientific publication by type of documentation.

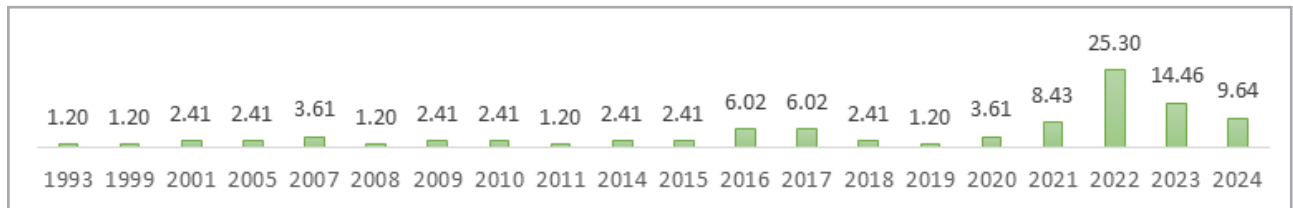


Chart 2. Status of scientific documents by year of publication.

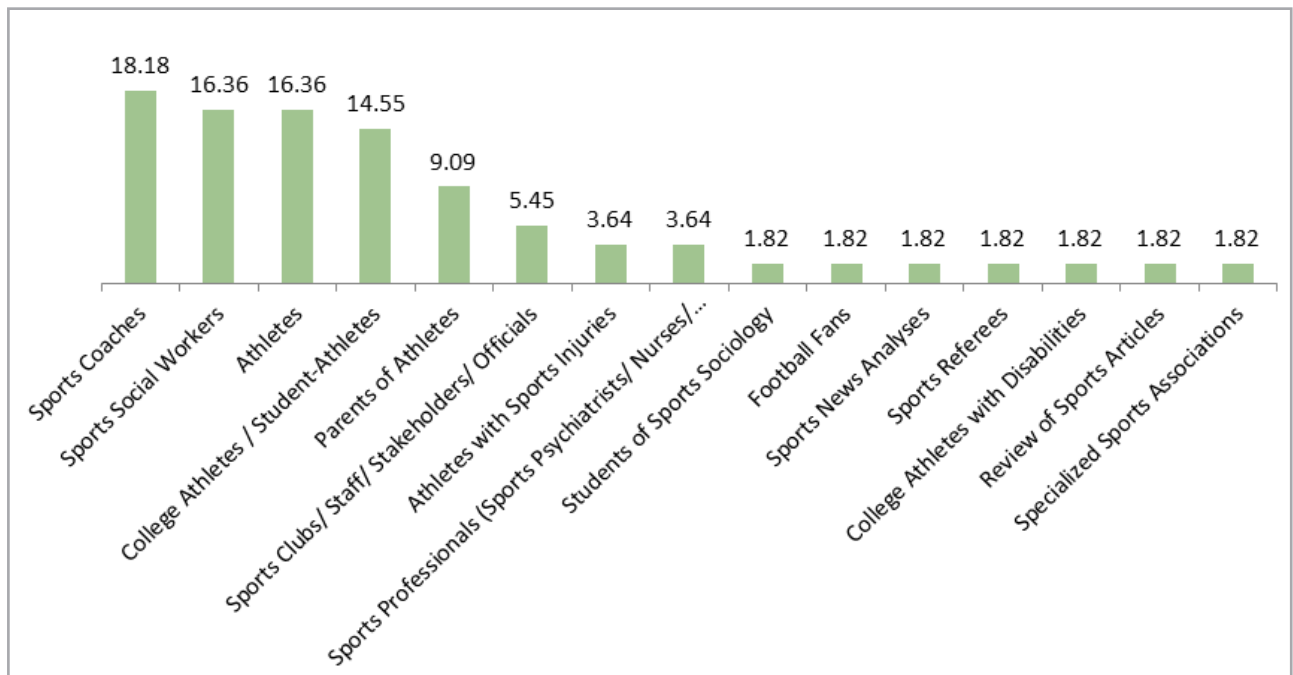


Chart 3. Target groups of the study in the scientific documents.

The first article in the field of sport social work was published in 1993, titled “The psychodynamically-oriented clinical social worker as sports consultant: a preliminary report”. As illustrated in chart 2, the number of scientific publications in this field has increased steadily since 2016, reaching its peak in 2022, which accounted for 25.30% of the total output.

3- Target groups of the study.

As depicted in chart 3, sports coaches were the most frequently examined target group, appearing in 18.18% of the reviewed sources. This was followed by sport social workers and athletes, each accounting for 16.36% of the reviewed studies. Other target groups, including students of sports sociology, football fans, sports news analyses, referees, college athletes with disabilities, reviews of sports articles, and professional sports associations, were each represented in 1.82% of the scholarly records.

4- Descriptive overview of sport social work

publications by title.

Figure 2 visualizes the titles of 73 scientific records in the field of sport social work. With single-occurrence terms included, the analysis generated 213 distinct concepts using the latest version of VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) and the Linglong algorithm. This figure illustrates the conceptual distribution of publication titles in this domain. The concept of sport social work emerged as the central theme, showing direct and unmediated connections with sports concepts, target groups, and specific fields such as football. The analysis also identified children, adolescents, youth, athletes, coaches, student-athletes, peers, teammates, and sports administrators as the primary target groups for sport social workers. In addition, specialized concepts related to the social work profession, such as maltreatment, advocacy, athlete welfare, case management, clinical sport social work, social participation, community development,

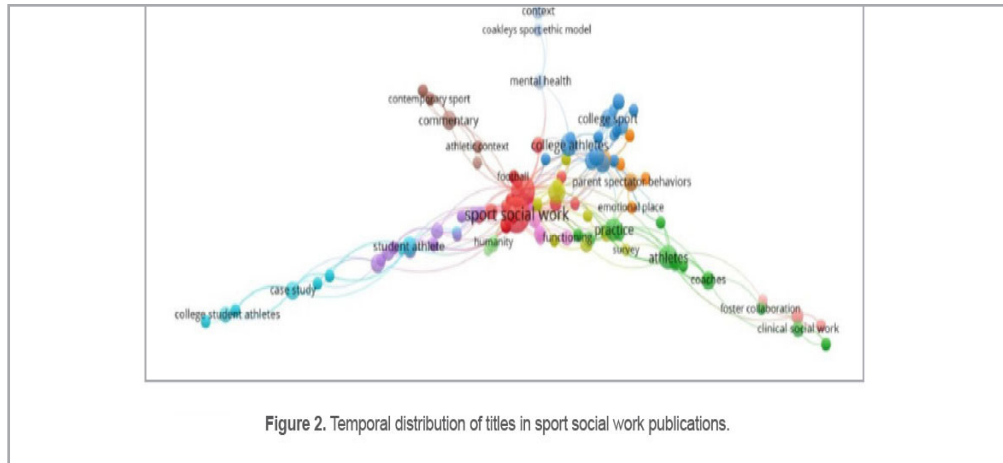


Figure 2. Temporal distribution of titles in sport social work publications.

crime, disability, ecological systems theory, resilience perspective, athlete empowerment, group social work approach, interprofessional collaboration, mental health, social communication, and social justice, were found within the thematic scope of sport social work.

B) Results of scientific publications

1- Theoretical frameworks applied in sport social work

In response to the second research question, sixteen social work theories were identified as being applied in sport social work interventions. As shown in table 2 which presents the frequency of these theories cited in the scientific records along with a brief description of each theory's core approach in the context of

sports, the ecological systems theory was most frequently cited (32 studies), whereas the structural family theory appeared only once.

2- Analysis of the status of sport social work interventions

In response to the third research question, the findings indicate that sport social workers implement interventions for target groups, at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. These interventions are aligned with the objectives of service provision and supported by relevant theoretical frameworks, as summarized in table 3.

At the micro level, the objectives of sport social work services focus on individuals, are grounded in individual-level theories, and emphasize casework

Table 2. Theoretical frameworks utilized in sport social work publications

Theory	Frequency of use in scientific publications	Core theoretical perspective
Ecological theory	32	Focusing on the five systems of microsystem, mezzosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem in the context of sport, emphasizing person-in-environment perspective and enhancing the biopsychosocial well-being of athletes.
Empowerment theory	29	Emphasizing athletes' strengths and their capacities for learning and growth
Systems theory	17	Framing the team as family, fostering system relationships, and mobilizing support from system members
Social learning theory	12	Athletes' modeling of the behaviors of significant individuals within the sports system, such as coaches, teammates, family members, and sports heroes
Critical perspective	10	Addressing racism, promoting social justice, and fostering social change within the field of sport

Contd. table 2.

Cognitive-behavioral theory	8	Reducing impulsive behaviors and anxiety, enhancing athletes' mental health and athletic performance
Person-centered theory	6	Emphasizing the coach-athlete relationship, characterized by trust, empathy, respect, sensitivity, and care
Psychodynamic theory	6	Utilized in clinical social work interventions in sport settings
Identity theory	5	Obtaining insight into athletes' non-sport identities and fostering integration between their athletic and non-athletic identities
Social support theory	5	The influence of supportive networks, including family, teammates, and coaches, on athletes' values, attitudes, commitment, athletic development, and talent growth
Crisis intervention	4	Athletes' recognition of signs of abusive behavior and strengthening self-efficacy and self-esteem among those affected by trauma
Motivational interviewing	3	Inspiring athletes to embrace change and reflect on its benefits
Case management	3	Providing mental health services, assessing psychosocial needs, coordinating appropriate care for athletes, and guiding the sports team toward the most suitable support resources
Resilience perspective	2	Managing risks and enhancing protective factors in athletes
Solution-focused approach	2	Promoting athletes' self-esteem and addressing family conflicts to support competitive performance
Structural family theory	1	The effects of athletic pressures and successes on family dynamics, school experiences, and broader familial relationships

Table 3. Service objectives, theories, and interventions in sport social work

Level of intervention	Objectives of sport social work services	Theoretical frame works in sport social work	Sport social work interventions
Micro level	Promoting athletes' individual and social well-being (29) Addressing athletes' economic needs (4) Promoting athletic performance levels (10) Empowering athletes psychosocially (30) Fostering ethics in sport (31) Overcoming athletes' developmental crises (32) Identifying risk and protective factors influencing athletic performance across individual, family, school, peers, and community (33) Strengthening the athletic identity of athletes (34) Improving athletes' health literacy (35) Supporting vulnerable athletes (36)	Ecological theory (13,18,25) Empowerment theory (17,20,37) Social learning theory (38) Cognitive-behavioral theory (18) Person-centered theory (20,34) Psychodynamic theory (21,34) Identity theory (21,34) Crisis intervention (18) Motivational interviewing (26) Case management (5,21,36) Resilience perspective (39) Solution-focused approach (18,40)	CBT and mindfulness-based therapy (18) Provision of clinical social work interventions (5) Implementation of preventive interventions (22) Motivational interviewing (17) Crisis intervention model (41) Application of the sports ethics model (42)

Contd. table 3.

Mezzo level	Enhancing the quality of athletes' relationships with other system members (29) Improving access to sport social work services (43) Conducting educational workshops and programs (26) Preventing maltreatment in sport settings (18) Advancing the knowledge base of sport social work (44) Strengthening interprofessional collaboration among helping professions (17) Utilizing sport for prevention, intervention and research (10) Preserving the well-being and enhancing the functioning of athletes' families, teammates, and coaches (18) Developing life skills and support resources (10)	Ecological theory (13,18,25) Empowerment theory (17,20,37) Systems theory (17,25) Social support theory (22) Social learning theory (38) Structural family theory (45)	Developing social supports (22) Implementing educational programs for coaches (46) Expanding professional collaboration with other sports specialists (17) Providing group-based life skills training (47) Applying the CPYD approach for sports coaches (27) Interventions aimed at enhancing Family system functioning (25)
	Reducing social inequalities (38) Improving the quality of support systems and enhancing public awareness (30) Promoting social justice in sport and empowering athletes to contribute to social change (48) Reducing the social stigma associated with athletes seeking social workers (46) Fostering social change and social support (36) Advancing social development and achieving sustainable social and economic progress (46) Developing injury prevention strategies and psychosocial rehabilitation interventions (22) Improving community health and strengthening social cohesion (49)	Ecological theory (13,18,25) Empowerment theory (17,20,37) Systems theory (17,25) Social support theory (22) Critical perspective (17,27)	Implementing community organizing programs (18) Developing social support (22) Designing and developing social welfare and support policies (46) Promoting social participation (36) Interventions based on the ecological systems approach (13) Implementing community-based sports intervention (50) Implementing sport-based positive youth development (PYD) interventions (48)
Macro level			

social work interventions. At the mezzo level, the objectives focus on groups, such as families, coaches, sports teams, and other components of the sports system, drawing on group-level theories and highlighting group interventions. At the macro level, service objectives address broader target groups, including communities, organizations, and socio-cultural institutions, supported by societal-level

theories and emphasizing community-based interventions.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates a systematic alignment between service objectives, sport social work theories, and types of interventions across all three levels.

3) Barriers to sport social work interventions and professional skills to address them

In response to the fourth research question, sport social workers face various challenges in delivering specialized interventions. These challenges were identified, analyzed, and categorized into three main groups: profession-related barriers, socio-cultural barriers, and sports system barriers. To address these challenges effectively, sport social workers should acquire specific professional competencies. Accordingly, the professional skills cited in the scientific literature were extracted, analyzed, and classified according to each barrier category. As shown in table 4, developing these skills is crucial for overcoming the identified obstacles. Overall, enhancing the professional competencies of sport social workers is essential for ensuring the

effectiveness of interventions within the complex and dynamic context of sports.

Discussion

This scoping review systematically mapped the existing body of knowledge on sport social work, an emerging yet underexplored field. A total of 73 studies were identified through a comprehensive search strategy, covering diverse contexts, populations, and methodological approaches. Qualitative content analysis of the included studies yielded six overarching themes: (1) theoretical foundations of sport social work, (2) professional principles and values, (3) roles of sport social workers, (4) interventions and practices, (5) populations and contexts, and (6) challenges and

Table 4. Barriers to sport social work interventions and professional skills to address them

Barriers to sport social work interventions		Professional skills to overcome the identified obstacles
The absence of field internships in sport settings for social workers (6) A significant gap in both theoretical and practical knowledge in sport social work, along with a lack of extensive research in this field (6) Insufficient academic training in sport social work during university education (39) A lack of proper understanding among social work professionals regarding the integration of social work into the field of sports (39) Lack of institutional support of sport social work (39) Limited professional support from the social work profession for the community of sport social workers (39) Inadequate recognition of athletes as a vulnerable population within the social work profession (39)	Profession-related barriers	Insight into micro, mezzo, and macro mechanisms within the practice of sport social work (35) Developing skills in risk-taking, social interaction, problem-solving, creative and strategic thinking for the effective design and implementation of interventions; emotional regulation, and leadership (39) Strengthening empathic skills to enhance effective engagement with athletes, adaptability and advocacy, interpersonal competence, and constructive communication abilities (39) The need for sport social workers to participate in professional development workshops, academic conferences, and knowledge-sharing networks (39) Recognizing the non-sport identity of athletes as a foundation for building therapeutic relationships (21) Supporting therapeutic processes and enhancing their effectiveness (21) Familiarity with issues such as substance misuse, eating disorders, bipolar disorders, and basic concepts in psychiatry (51) Enhancing professional collaboration between social workers, sports organizations, and athletes (39)
Social stigma surrounding athletes' expression of psychosocial vulnerability (46) Neglect of non-physical injuries within the dominant sports culture (46) Low mental health literacy among athletes (35) Athletes' mistrust of mental health professionals and concerns about confidentiality and privacy (35)	Socio-cultural barriers	Developing competencies in intercultural engagement, leadership, and community-building (52) Improving the quality of social support to promote athletes' mental well-being (4) Enhancing sport social workers' awareness of sports culture (26) Utilizing appropriate models to address the unique needs and challenges of athletes (53) Familiarity with athletes' cultural backgrounds (34)

Contd. table 4.

Athletes' neglect of their physical, psychological, and social well-being due to the intense competitiveness of the sports environment (34) Systemic inequalities in the field of sports (39) Limited public understanding of sport social workers' interventions within sports culture (39) Resistance of sports sector including staff, coaches, and athletes from receiving social work services (54) The complexity of working in sports field and athletes' limited time (53) Insufficient funding and resources to support sport social work programs (49)	Sports system barriers	Familiarity with sports-related norms and values (44) Understanding of national and international laws in the field of sports (35) Familiarity with athletes' rights (35) Ongoing study of sport-related issues (25) Focus on the coach-athlete relationship and the impact of coaching styles within teams and sports departments (14)
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research gaps. Together, these findings provide the first structured overview of how sport social work has been conceptualized in the literature, while also identifying opportunities for further theoretical and empirical development.

In this research, 73 scientific documents on sport social work were reviewed and evaluated to analyze the theories of sport social work, service objectives, interventions, barriers to interventions, and professional skills required to reduce these barriers. The findings demonstrated that most publications in this field were articles (76.92%), with the earliest dating back to 1993. The highest number of publications appeared in 2022, accounting for 25.30% of all sources. Sports coaches (18.18%) were the most frequently studied populations.

The analysis of key concepts revealed that specialized themes in the social work profession such as abuse, advocacy role, athlete welfare, case management, clinical sport social work, social participation, community development, crime, disability, ecological theory, resilience, empowerment, group social work approach, inter-professional collaboration, mental health, social communication, and social justice, have been recognized as theoretical and practical foundations in sport social work. The results of this study were synthesized across three levels: micro, mezzo, and macro. To date, no comprehensive review has been conducted on sport social work, making this study the first attempt to systematically map the field.

Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn with related areas that were attempted to be provided.

Micro level

This level of intervention by sport social workers is grounded in the concept of the microsystem in ecological theory (13), encompassing the athlete's immediate environment including daily interactions with coaches, teammates, and physical spaces, to promote their bio-psycho-social well-being. Drawing from cognitive-behavioral theory, sport social workers provide CBT interventions to reduce anxiety, teach coping skills, and offer preventative strategies (14). Some evidence-based studies highlight the effectiveness of these interventions on athletes in reducing impulsive behaviors, preventing negative cognitions, reducing anxiety, improving mental health, and enhancing athletic performance (15).

Using a resilience perspective, at-risk athletes are supported by strengthening protective factors, thereby enhancing their ability to adapt adverse conditions (16). Given the importance of time efficiency in athletes' lives, motivational interviewing model is a practical model for promoting basic needs, fostering motivation for change, and empowering athletes (17). Solution-focused approaches are used to build self-confidence for competitions and manage family-related challenges affecting performance (18). Crisis intervention models focus on trauma-informed care and addressing developmental crises in athletes

(18). Identity theory interventions aim to enhance sports identity, socio-mental health, and athletic performance (19).

Empowerment theory addresses the gap between current situation and desired situation enabling athletes to achieve goals through building strengths, developing resources, overcoming barriers, and engaging in systemic change, ultimately promoting individual and social well-being (20). Humanistic and strengths-based approaches guide work with athletes and coaches, while psychodynamic theory informs interventions for injured, vulnerable, and marginalized populations, providing clinical social work services in sports (21).

Mezzo level

At mezzo level, sport social workers apply concepts from ecological theory to implement training programs for coaches, providing unique educational experiences and vital learning opportunities based on the CPYD approach. These interventions foster professional collaboration with other sports professionals, thereby promoting inter-professional collaboration among helping professions. Utilizing the social support model helps maintain the health and enhance the functioning of athletes' families, teammates, and sports coaches (22).

Drawing on social learning theory, modeling coaches' behaviors has a strong influence on athletes' development of views and behaviors regarding substance use and other antisocial behaviors (23). Theoretical perspectives at this level support the prevention of misconduct in sports settings, development of life skills, and facilitation support-seeking behaviors. Workshops and training programs conducted by sport social workers provide a platform to expand knowledge of the profession among target groups at the mezzo level.

Applying family systems theory increases athletes' awareness of risk factors associated with sports participation, including the impact of injuries on themselves and their families, the prevalence of eating disorders, and exercise-related physical illnesses (24). Interventions aimed at enhancing family system functioning improve team relationships, bolster athletes' self-confidence, and foster a positive collective team environment (25). Additionally,

empowerment theory informs group-based life skills training conducted by sport social workers, supporting athletes' personal and social development (26).

Macro level

At the macro level, interventions are guided by the concept of the macrosystem in ecological theory, which posits that cultural patterns and societal belief systems, although not in direct interaction with the athlete, significantly influence them (13). Drawing on the critical perspective, sport social workers implement community organizing models, community sports programs, and sport-based positive youth development (PYD) interventions address social inequalities, reduce stigma, promote social justice in sports, and enhance athletes' capacity to contribute to social change and participation, thereby supporting sustainable social and economic progress (27).

Empowerment theory is central to macro-level interventions, helping identify strengths, develop resources, overcome barriers, engage athletes in systemic change across multiple levels, with the ultimate aim of improving community health and strengthening social cohesion (20). Systems theory emphasizes promoting active participation to positively shape athletes' development as global citizens (17). Social support theory highlights the influence of family networks, teammates, and coaches on athletes' values, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, commitment to sports, career advancement, transitions, and athletic talent development (22).

Based on this framework, sport social workers implement interventions to develop social support systems, advance social and welfare policies, and enhance social participation.

Based on the current study, sport social workers face various barriers in providing specialized interventions, which can be categorized into three groups: profession-related barriers, socio-cultural barriers, and sports system barriers. Overcoming these barriers requires sport social workers to acquire the necessary professional skills. As a nascent field, sport social work studies emphasize its development and recommend several actions to advance the discipline, including: creating a policy platform to align with organizational and governmental regulations;

establishing a professional identity for sport social work; promoting research and education; providing targeted training in the sports contexts; enhancing knowledge of sports and athletes' specialized needs in social work curricula; building scientific networks in the field; ensuring athletes' access to sport social work services; and strengthening the role of social work in international sports to strengthen sports to support peace and social justice.

Implications for practice

The findings of this review offer practical insights for professionals and organizations. The identified roles-facilitator, counselor, advocate, and policy influencer-highlight the potential for sport social workers to contribute across multiple levels, from individual athlete support to community engagement and policy development. Principles and values such as advocacy for marginalized groups, equity, and holistic well-being should guide practice. Furthermore, documented interventions, including counseling services, team-based programs, and community initiatives, demonstrate the applicability of sport social work in diverse contexts. Integrating social workers into multidisciplinary teams within sports organizations, schools, and community programs could enhance the psychosocial support provided to athletes and broaden the social impact of sport.

Policy relevance

This review also underscores the importance of policy-level recognition of sport social work. Despite the growing acknowledgment of psychosocial issues in sport, few policies explicitly incorporate social work perspectives. Developing training and certification programs, embedding social work in sports governance structures, and allocating funding to interdisciplinary initiatives could strengthen the professional identity and practice of sport social work. Policymakers and sporting bodies should consider these measures to ensure that sport becomes a more inclusive, supportive, and socially responsible domain.

Research gaps and future directions

The analysis revealed several research gaps. First, empirical studies remain limited, with many

publications focusing on conceptual discussions rather than systematic investigations. Second, most studies were concentrated in specific geographic or cultural contexts, limiting the generalizability of findings. Future research should include cross-cultural comparisons and multi-country collaborations to capture the global relevance of sport social work. In addition, rigorous evaluations of interventions are needed to establish evidence-based practices. Finally, theoretical advancements are required to provide a coherent framework that integrates social work principles with the unique demands of the sporting environment.

Strengths and limitations

This review has several strengths, including a comprehensive search strategy covering both international and national databases, the inclusion of English- and Persian-language publications, and adherence to the PRISMA framework for study selection and reporting. Data extraction and synthesis were performed systematically using dual-review procedures to enhance reliability. However, limitations should also be acknowledged. Despite efforts to capture grey literature, some non-indexed or unpublished materials may have been missed. The restriction to English and Persian may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages. Moreover, while qualitative content analysis enabled the identification of key themes, subjectivity in interpretation cannot be entirely eliminated.

Conclusion

Given the importance of enhancing individual and social well-being, preventing harm, improving athletes' performance, addressing social inequalities, and fostering social change in sports, sport social work has emerged as a growing area of employment for social workers. By applying scientific theories at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, sport social workers provide specialized interventions tailored to the diverse needs of sports populations. This review highlights that sport social work has expanded over the past decade in education, research, and professional practice. Notably, no sources containing the keyword '*sport social work*' were identified in national academic databases, suggesting a lack of systematic

research or engagement with this field in Iran, offering a framework for universities, sports organizations, professional associations, policymakers, and administrators to recognize the field's potential and develop specialized roles for social workers within the sports context. This scoping review provided the first systematic overview of sport social work, mapping its theoretical foundations, professional principles, roles, interventions, and challenges. The findings demonstrated that sport social work holds significant potential for advancing athlete well-being, promoting social justice, and fostering community development through sport. However, the field remains in its early stages, with notable gaps in empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and policy recognition. Advancing sport social work will require sustained scholarly attention, interdisciplinary collaboration, and policy support to establish it as a recognized and impactful professional domain.

Implications

For Research: Future studies should focus on developing theoretical frameworks and conducting

empirical evaluations of sport social work interventions across diverse cultural contexts.

For Practice: Sport social workers should be integrated into multidisciplinary teams to enhance athlete well-being and promote inclusion within sport organizations and communities.

For Policy: Policymakers should recognize sport social work as a distinct professional field, allocate resources for training and certification, and embed social work principles in sport governance and development programs.

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Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest in this manuscript.

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