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QUALITY, CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT OF WELLNESS RECREATIONAL SERVICES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

Introduction: Wellness recreational services for pregnant women represent a specialized segment of the wellness industry aimed at improving health, preventing complications, and facilitating adaptation to the physiological changes occurring during pregnancy. The present study aims to analyze the quality of the services provided, as well as the main challenges and development perspectives in Bulgaria. *Methodology:* The study examines the main service domains – recreational, preventive, therapeutic, and educational – by analyzing their implementation in practice. The data were collected through a marketing survey conducted among professionals and users of wellness services. *Results:* The results indicate a significant shortage of qualified specialists, as well as a limited integration of physical activity within specialized centers. A universal *("one-size-fits-all")* approach is frequently observed, which fails to account for the individual characteristics of pregnancy. *Conclusion:* In conclusion, the study highlights the need for the development of evidence-based and personalized programs, as well as for improving the professional qualifications of specialists. A positive trend is the establishment of the specialized "*Nesheva Program*" at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski", Sofia, aimed at training highly qualified professionals in this field.

Keywords: wellness, pregnancy, service quality, prevention, professional qualification

Introduction

Over the past decades, the wellness industry has established itself as a key determinant in promoting a healthy lifestyle and enhancing overall quality of life. Within this sector, wellness recreational services for pregnant women occupy a distinct niche, shaped by the physiological, psycho-emotional, and social characteristics specific to this period.

A growing body of scientific evidence demonstrates that moderate physical activity during pregnancy plays a crucial role in reducing the risk of complications, improving functional capacity, and maintaining psychological well-being (Davenport et al., 2018; Artal & O'Toole, 2003).

Recreation, implemented through motor practices, functions as an integrative factor that fosters tolerance and the acceptance of individual differences from an early age (Ignatova et al., 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO[1], 2020) and the European Commission recognize recreational physical activity and wellness practices as among the most health-promoting social activities contributing to sustainable development (Ignatova, 2023).

Beyond their medical relevance, wellness services also hold significant economic value, constituting a rapidly expanding market characterized by increasing demand (Global Wellness Institute[2], 2023). This trend necessitates the provision of high-quality, standardized, and evidence-based services.

In Bulgaria, interest in such services is steadily increasing; however, a number of challenges persist, particularly in relation to service quality, organizational structures, and workforce capacity. Studies by Dimitrova (2019, 2023) and Nesheva (2023) emphasize the lack of standardization and the insufficient specialization of professionals as major constraints.

Within this context, the present study examines the quality of wellness recreational services for pregnant women as a critical factor for their effectiveness and sustainable development.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a mixed-method approach, combining a questionnaire survey with structured interviews. The sample included 40 women (pregnant and in the postpartum period) and 23 specialists working in 20 wellness centers in Bulgaria.

The analysis was focused on:

- the structure of the services provided
- the frequency of participation
- the assessment of service quality

The collected data were processed using descriptive statistical analysis.

Results and Analysis

The analysis of the structure of the provided wellness services indicates that they encompass four main domains – recreational, preventive, therapeutic, and educational. However, an imbalance is observed in practice, with consultative and educational activities predominating at the expense of physical activity (Fig. 1).

[1] *https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/faa83413-d89e-4be9-bb01-b24671aef7ca/content?utm_source=chatgpt.com*

[2] *https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/GWI-WE-Monitor-2023_FINAL.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com*

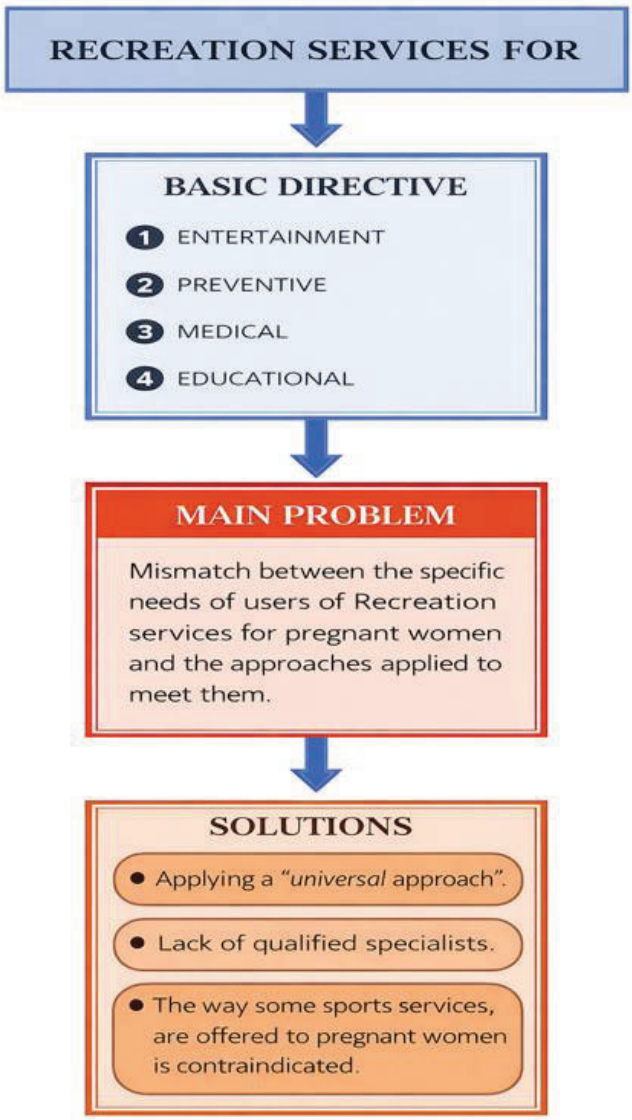


Figure 1. *Main guidelines, problems and solutions*

At the core of the analysis lies the primary issue – the mismatch between the specific needs of pregnant women and the approaches applied in practice. This results in the adoption of universal models that fail to account for individual conditions and the specific characteristics of pregnancy.

The first part of the questionnaire included questions related to the personal characteristics of the surveyed pregnant women aged 18–45 years (Fig. 2), as well as their educational status, marital status, and number of pregnancies, which are analyzed in a separate study.

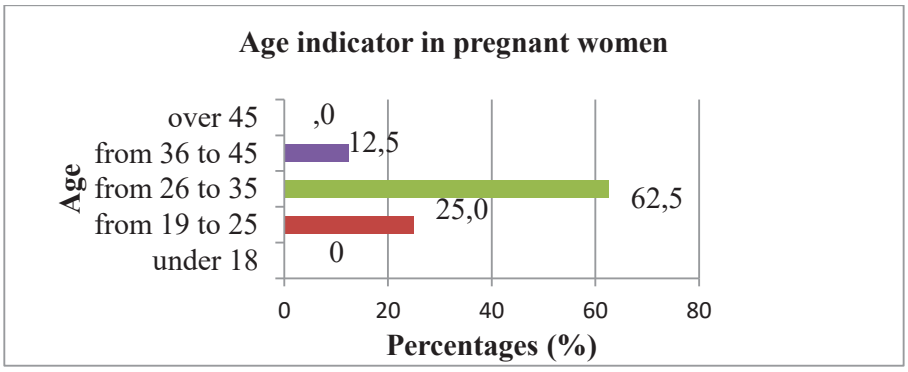


Figure 2. *Age distribution*

Figure 3 expresses the extent to which respondent women using Wellness services for pregnant women are satisfied and satisfied with their provision.

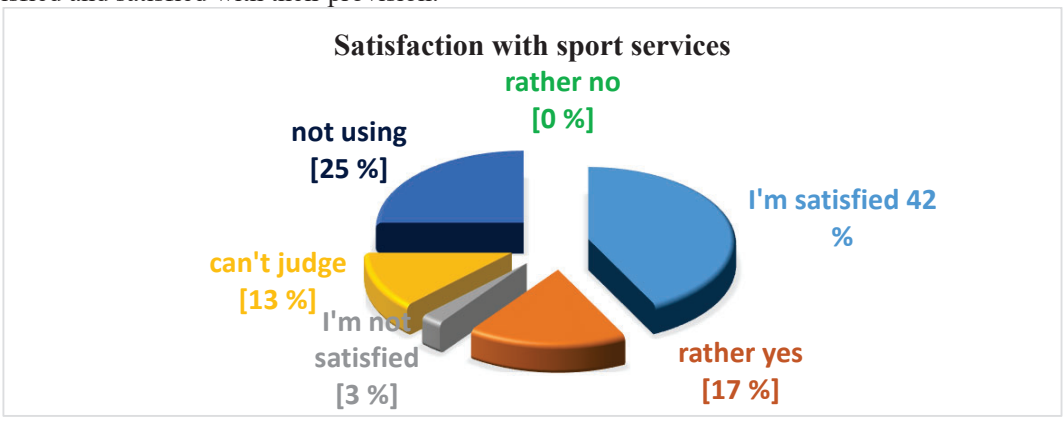


Figure 3. *Satisfaction with the Wellness services offered for pregnant women*

The proportion of women satisfied with the services they used was 42%, while 25% did not use recreational services for pregnant women. A further 17% were rather satisfied, 13% were unable to provide an assessment, and only 3% expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the selected wellness activities. Although the overall level of satisfaction is relatively high, the presence of dissatisfied and uncertain respondents indicates a need for improvement, optimization of the services offered, and the identification of effective approaches for their promotion, as well as for enhancing the qualifications of wellness instructors (Dimitrova, 2018).

Figure 4 also shows us the need to improve the attitude, and improve the qualifications of sports professionals working in wellness centres or clubs offering Wellness and Recreational services for pregnant women. Of these, 38% could not give an opinion, these are most likely to be women not using Recreational services. 37% of women were satisfied, 22% were rather satisfied and had minor remarks. Those dissatisfied with the qualifications and attitude of sports professionals were 3%.

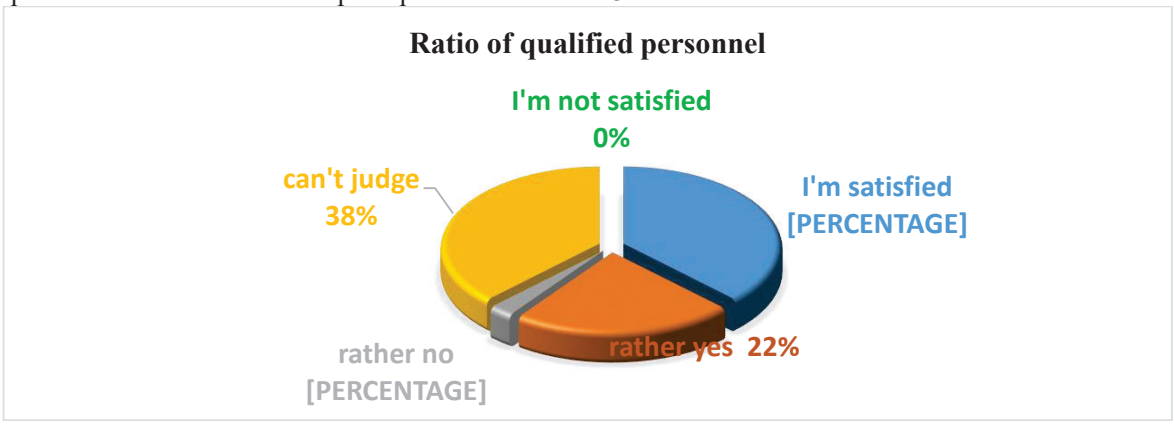


Figure 4. Satisfaction with the attitude and qualifications of staff

Discussion

The findings of the present study enable a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the quality of wellness services for pregnant women in Bulgaria.

First, a lack of standardization is identified, resulting in considerable variability in service quality. This finding corroborates Dimitrova (2019) conclusion that the absence of standardized frameworks constitutes a fundamental limitation within the wellness sector.

Second, the shortage of qualified professionals emerges as a critical limiting factor. Insufficient training and specialization lead to the implementation of inappropriate or suboptimal methods, potentially compromising both the safety and effectiveness of the services provided.

Third, the limited integration of physical activity represents a significant discrepancy with contemporary scientific recommendations. Despite the well-established benefits of physical activity during pregnancy, its practical implementation remains inadequate.

A particularly critical issue is the widespread application of a universal "*one-size-fits-all*" approach, which fails to account for the individual characteristics and dynamic nature of pregnancy. This stands in clear contradiction to modern concepts of personalized wellness services (Kumar et al., 2020).

In a broader context, these findings suggest that the sector is currently undergoing a transitional phase – from mass-oriented service provision toward a more specialized and evidence-based model of care.

Conclusion

Wellness recreational services for pregnant women in Bulgaria demonstrate considerable potential for development; however, they are currently characterized by a number of structural weaknesses.

The main challenges include:

- a shortage of qualified professionals
- lack of standardization
- limited implementation of physical activity
- insufficient personalization

Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and systematic approach, including:

- the development of evidence-based and personalized programs
- enhancement of professional qualifications
- introduction of quality standards

In this context, the development of specialized models such as the "Nesheva Program" is of particular importance, as it creates the necessary conditions for professionalization and sustainable development within the sector.

Note

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