



Article

Breaking boundaries: a systematic review of career barriers for b-girls

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Abstract: Breaking offers a revealing context for examining women's careers in male-dominated, informal, and project-based work. This systematic review synthesized 17 English-language studies to identify career barriers affecting b-girls and to assess their implications for human resource management (HRM). Searches of Web of Science and Scopus were supplemented by Google Scholar, followed by eligibility screening, data extraction, hybrid thematic coding, and quality appraisal. Four interacting barrier domains emerged: cultural barriers involving male-centred narratives and gender stereotypes; institutional barriers involving unclear pathways, weak protection, and unequal gatekeeping; physical and health barriers involving injury exposure and body surveillance; and social and relational barriers involving family expectations, harassment, and restricted networks. The synthesis links these barriers to sustainable-career outcomes through access, recognition, safety, and support. It also distinguishes empirically supported interventions, practices reported in prior studies, and author-derived proposals. The resulting framework extends HRM research by showing how career development and organizational support are distributed across crews, studios, event organizers, federations, and digital platforms rather than located within a single employer.

Keywords: career barriers; b-girls; breaking; human resource management; sustainable careers

1. Introduction

Breaking emerged within hip-hop culture in New York during the late 1970s and received renewed global attention at the Paris 2024 olympic games (Foley, 2016; IOC, 2024). Women have participated throughout its history, yet the labels b-boying and b-boy have often been treated as generic, making b-girls' contributions less visible (Aprahamian, 2020; Gunn, 2022). This history matters for careers because cultural recognition shapes who is recruited, trained, judged, promoted, and remembered.

B-girls work across heterogeneous roles. They may compete as athletes, perform for audiences, teach, organize events, judge battles, join crews, manage studios, or combine these activities as independent professionals. Accordingly, this review defines a career as the evolving sequence of work-related roles, learning opportunities, income-generating activities, and professional identities through which a b-girl sustains participation over time (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The term does not imply a single employment contract or a uniform workplace.

Existing studies document gender stereotyping, gatekeeping, family pressure, harassment, body-related scrutiny, and injury. However, this evidence remains dispersed across cultural studies, dance education, gender research, and sports medicine. Consequently, the literature does not yet explain how these barriers

interact or how they affect access to career development, occupational well-being, organizational support, and sustainable participation.

This review therefore synthesizes the evidence on b-girls' career barriers, explains how the barriers reinforce one another, and evaluates possible responses through an human resource management (HRM) lens. Its contribution is not only to document inequality in breaking, but also to examine how career support can be organized when work is distributed across informal networks, temporary projects, competitions, and multiple governing bodies.

The review addresses two research questions:

RQ1. What career barriers are commonly reported for b-girls?

RQ2. What evidence and practices can inform responses to these barriers?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Search strategy

The review was reported with reference to PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). The PICO framework defined the population as b-girls or female street dancers, the phenomenon of interest as career barriers and related support, and the context as breaking or street-dance work and participation (Lockwood et al., 2015). Search terms combined population terms, barrier terms, and terms identifying women.

Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched on 9 August 2025. Web of Science was searched in the ALL field and Scopus in TITLE-ABS-KEY. Google Scholar used the same three Boolean concept groups and served as a manual supplementary discovery source for potentially eligible studies not retrieved from the indexed databases. Complete strategies, dates, fields, counts, and screening procedures are reported in **Table 1** and **Supplementary Material A**.

The review covered publications from 1984 to 2025. Google Scholar results were screened manually using the same eligibility criteria as the indexed-database records. Screening depth was determined by manual eligibility review rather than a fixed page-depth cutoff. This supplementary step yielded nine additional eligible studies, producing a final sample of 17.

Table 1. Search strategies and results for Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar.

Database	Step	Terms	Results
Web of Science Search date: 9 August 2025	Search Terms 1	ALL = ("urban dancer" OR "popular dancer" OR "Piliwu dancer" OR "breakdancers" OR "street dancer" OR "hip-hop dancer" OR "hip hop dancer" OR "hip-hoper" OR "hiphoper" OR "dancer" OR "breakdance educator" OR "breakdance teacher" OR "B-girls" OR "B-girl" OR "B girl" OR "B girls")	5,255
	Search Terms 2	ALL = ("barriers" OR "career barriers" OR "gender inequality" OR "glass ceiling" OR "sexual harassment" OR "assault" OR "machismo" OR "Discrimination" OR "objectification of women")	853,453
	Search Terms 3 1 AND 2 AND 3	ALL = ("woman" OR "female" OR "women")	3,058,376 13
Scopus Search date: 9 August 2025	Search Terms 1	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("urban dancer" OR "popular dancer" OR "Piliwu dancer" OR "breakdancers" OR "street dancer" OR "hip-hop dancer" OR "hip hop dancer" OR "hip-hoper" OR "hiphoper" OR "dancer" OR "breakdance educator" OR "breakdance teacher" OR "B-girls" OR "B-girl" OR "B girl" OR "B girls")	11,242

Continued table:

Database	Step	Terms	Results
Google Scholar Search date: 9 August 2025	Search Terms 2	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“barriers” OR “career barriers” OR “gender inequality” OR “glass ceiling” OR “sexual harassment” OR “assault” OR “machismo” OR “Discrimination” OR “objectification of women”)	1,694,990
	Search Terms 3	TITLE-ABS-KEY(“woman” OR “female” OR “women”)	13,667,302
	1 AND 2 AND 3		71
	Search Terms 1	(“urban dancer” OR “popular dancer” OR “Piliwu dancer” OR breakdancers OR “street dancer” OR “hip-hop dancer” OR “hip hop dancer” OR hip-hoper OR hiphoper OR dancer OR “breakdance educator” OR “breakdance teacher” OR B-girls OR B-girl OR “B girl” OR “B girls”)	
	Search Terms 2	(barriers OR “career barriers” OR “gender inequality” OR “glass ceiling” OR “sexual harassment” OR assault OR machismo OR discrimination OR “objectification of women”)	
	Search Terms 3	(woman OR female OR women)	
	1 AND 2 AND 3 Manual supplementary screening	The same three Boolean concept groups used for Web of Science and Scopus were applied. Results were screened manually against the eligibility criteria; no fixed page-depth cutoff was imposed.	9 eligible studies added

2.2. Eligibility criteria and screening

Studies were eligible when they were peer-reviewed journal articles written in English, included b-girls or female street dancers, and reported evidence relevant to career barriers or career support. Eligible evidence included qualitative accounts, observational studies, surveys, and practice-based studies addressing recruitment, training, recognition, discrimination, harassment, family expectations, health, injury, or professional development. Books, book chapters, theses, conference proceedings, non-English publications, duplicate records, purely theoretical papers, and studies without relevant evidence were excluded.

Both authors manually screened titles and abstracts and assessed full texts. Eligibility decisions were finalized through discussion. Xi Ling conducted the searches, deduplication, data extraction, coding, and quality appraisal; Hang Yin participated in screening and contributed to the methodology and interpretation. No agreement statistic was calculated because eligibility decisions were resolved collaboratively rather than through an independent duplicate-screening exercise.

The indexed databases yielded 84 records, comprising 13 from Web of Science and 71 from Scopus. Seven duplicate records were removed, leaving 77 records for screening. Seven books were removed at the record-screening stage. Of 70 full-text reports assessed, 24 were outside the review scope and 38 did not report career barriers, leaving eight database studies. The supplementary Google Scholar step contributed nine additional eligible studies, producing a final sample of 17. **Figure 1** reports the complete flow.

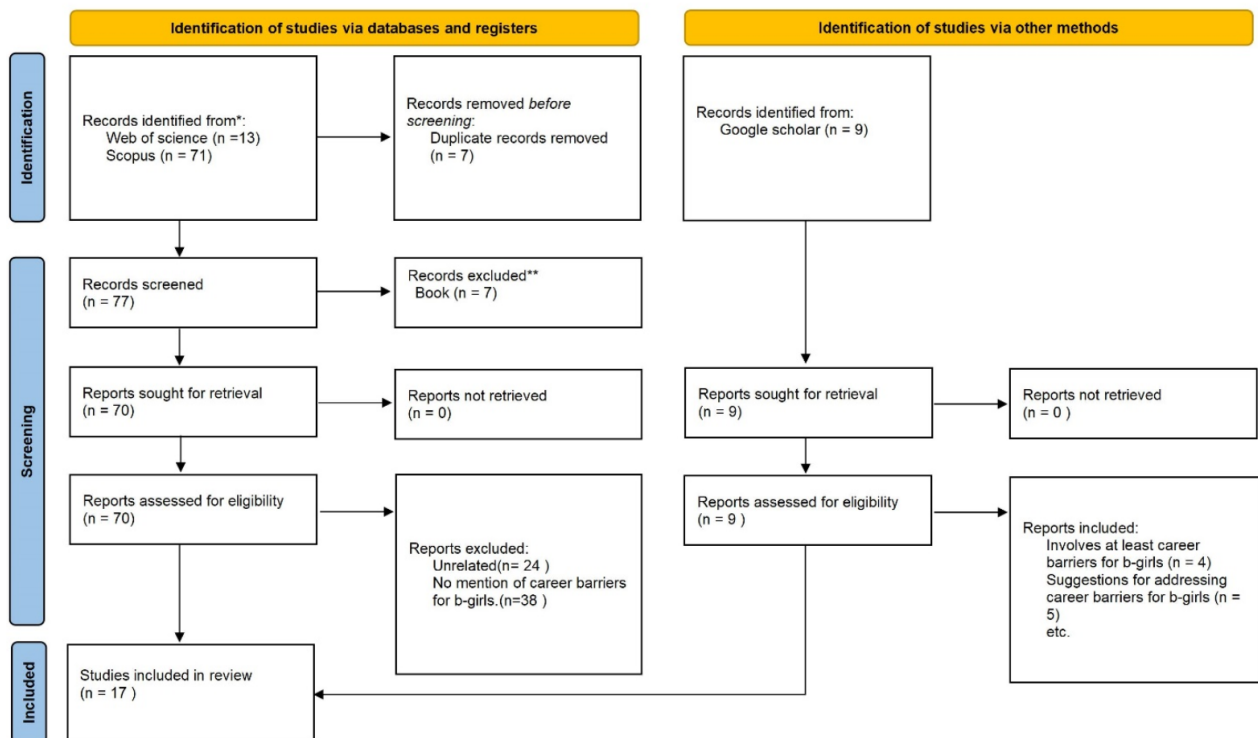


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing identification, screening, exclusion reasons, and the 17 included studies.

2.3. Data extraction and thematic synthesis

For each included study, the reviewer extracted bibliographic information, geographical setting, design, participants, sample size when applicable, reported barriers, proposed responses, and quality-appraisal items into a literature grid. Analysis followed a hybrid thematic approach. Initial deductive sensitizing concepts came from career-barrier and HRM research, while open codes were generated inductively from the included studies.

Open codes were compared and consolidated into focused codes, which were then grouped into four higher-order dimensions. For example, male-centred historical accounts and assumptions about strength were coded as gendered cultural norms; absent certification and unequal judging access as institutionalized pathway constraints; injury, pain, and body scrutiny as physical and occupational-health constraints; and family pressure, harassment, and restricted networks as social and relational constraints. The dimensions were not treated as mutually exclusive. Each finding received a primary dimension based on its most immediate mechanism and a secondary cross-dimensional link where warranted. **Supplementary Material B** provides the coding framework and worked examples.

2.4. Quality appraisal

The first author appraised all 17 studies using the Indicative Behavioral Standards developed for qualitative breaking research (Yang & Whatman, 2025). The instrument covers purpose statements, referencing, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. **Figure 2** outlines the scoring criteria for this assessment scale, while **Figure 3** presents the overall scoring matrix for this assessment scale. Although developed for qualitative research, the instrument was used here only as a common descriptive framework for reporting transparency and methodological traceability across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, rather than as a design-specific risk-of-bias tool. It may therefore omit some design-specific features, and total scores should not be interpreted as fully comparable comprehensive measures of methodological quality. The scores were not used as thresholds for exclusion.

Indicative behavioral standards
1. Writing purpose statements (Indicative behaviour)
1.0 Insufficient evidence
1.1 Describe the types of qualitative research being conducted, such as narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, or case study
1.2 Use specific action verbs consistent with the type of qualitative research, such as develop or generate (useful in grounded theory) and meaning ascribed (associated with phenomenology)
1.3 Determine the central phenomenon (or central concept) based on the use of specific action verbs consistent with the nature of qualitative research types
1.4 Describe further the participants or location of the research (e.g., an individual, several people, a group, or a site) by referencing specific research types or central phenomena
2. Use a specific style referencing (Indicative behaviour)
2.0 Insufficient evidence
2.1 Include in the reference list some (but not all) elements required by the specific style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago), such as the full title, all authors' names (last name, initials), full journal name, year, volume number, and page numbers.
2.2 Include in the reference list all elements required by the specific style
2.3 Present one or more punctuation or capitalization errors while including all the elements of the reference list required by the specific style
2.4 Accurately present punctuation and capitalization, ensuring that all elements of the reference list comply with the requirements of the particular style
3. Provide evidence to support the credibility of the study's findings (Indicative behaviour)
3.0 Insufficient evidence
3.1 Using one of the three techniques to strengthen the credibility of the study findings (e.g., use multiple data sources but neglect to provide evidence of long data collection and member checking)
3.2 Using two of the three techniques to enhance the credibility of the study findings
3.3 Using three techniques to ensure the credibility of the study findings
4. Provide evidence to support the transferability of the study's findings (Indicative behaviour)
4.0 Insufficient evidence
4.1 Using one of the three techniques to strengthen the transferability of the study findings (e.g., provide thick description of research findings but neglect to explain the sampling strategies or discuss the findings' resonance with the existing literature in different contexts)
4.2 Using two of the three techniques to enhance the transferability of the study findings
4.3 Using three techniques to ensure the transferability of the study findings
5. Provide evidence to support the dependability of the study's findings (Indicative behaviour)
5.0 Insufficient evidence
5.1 Using one of the four techniques to strengthen the dependability of the study findings (e.g., follow saturation principles for data collection but neglect to provide evidence of iterative data collection, iterative data analysis and flexible/emerging research designs)
5.2 Using two of the four techniques to enhance the dependability of the study findings
5.3 Using three of the four techniques to bolster the dependability of the study findings
5.4 Using four techniques to ensure the dependability of the study findings
6. Provide evidence to support the confirmability of the study's findings (Indicative behaviour)
6.0 Insufficient evidence
6.1 Using one of the four techniques to strengthen the confirmability of the study findings (e.g., provide audit trails to document the steps and decisions taken in the study and its motivations, but neglect reflexivity, peer debriefing and searching the data and/or literature for evidence that inconsistent with findings)
6.2 Using two of the four techniques to enhance the confirmability of the study findings
6.3 Using three of the four techniques to bolster the confirmability of the study findings
Using four techniques to ensure the confirmability of the study findings

Figure 2. Indicative behavioral standards used in the quality appraisal

Note. Adapted from Yang and Whatman (2025, p. 5). Yang, Z., Whatman, S. Development and validation of standards for evaluating the quality of qualitative research on Olympics breakdance. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 12, 471 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04792-1>

		Mapping of judgement-based quality standard to construct levels						
		Quality description	Indicative behavioral standards					
Quality progression	Level 4	Qualitative research articles at this level feature carefully constructed purpose statements. They mention the type of qualitative research, use specific action verbs consistent with the research type, identify the central phenomenon, and foreshadow the participants or locations of the study. Their reference lists include all elements required by the specific reference style and adhere to details such as correct punctuation, appropriate letter case, and the inclusion of DOIs or URLs. This thoroughness ensures that readers or reviewers can easily retrieve sources. To ensure the study's quality, they employ three techniques for credibility and transferability and four techniques for dependability and confirmability. In short, these articles demonstrate a commitment to high standards of academic rigor.	1.4.	2.4	3.3	4.3	5.4	6.4
	Level 3	Regarding purpose statements, qualitative research articles at this level describe the type of qualitative research, use specific action verbs consistent with that research type, and identify the central phenomenon or concept. Their reference lists include all elements required for a particular reference style but might overlook some details, such as punctuation errors. Additionally, these articles focus on enhancing the credibility and transferability of findings, employing two techniques to achieve this. Notably, these articles aim to bolster dependability and confirmability by utilizing three techniques.	1.3	2.3	3.2	4.2	5.3	6.3
	Level 2	Regarding purpose statements, qualitative research articles at this level use specific action verbs consistent with the type of qualitative research and describe the research type. The reference list contains all the elements required for a particular reference style. Notably, these articles begin to focus on the credibility and transferability of findings, employing two techniques to strengthen them. Similarly, dependability and confirmability are further enhanced by using two distinct techniques.	1.2	2.2	3.1	4.1	5.2	6.2
	Level 1	Qualitative research articles at this level describe the type of research being conducted and include parts of the elements required for a specific reference style. They also present a technique to strengthen the reliability and confirmability of research findings.	1.1	2.1			5.1	6.1

Figure 3. Construct map for the judgment-based quality standards

Note. Adapted from Yang and Whatman (2025, p. 6). Yang, Z., Whatman, S. Development and validation of standards for evaluating the quality of qualitative research on Olympics breakdance. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 12, 471 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04792-1>

Each item was coded as present (1) or absent (0) at the applicable level, producing a total score for each publication. **Figure 4** shows the item-level matrix and totals. The appraisal was also recorded in a reflective journal to document judgments and potential inconsistencies (**Supplementary Material C**).

		Level 1				Level 2						Level 3						Level 4						
First Author	Number	S1.1	S2.1	S5.1	S6.1	S1.2	S2.2	S3.1	S4.1	S5.2	S6.2	S1.3	S2.3	S3.2	S4.2	S5.3	S6.3	S1.4	S2.4	S3.3	S4.3	S5.4	S6.4	Total
Gunn, R. (2016a)	Publication9	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	16
Langnes, T. F., & Fastang, K. (2017)	Publication13	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	16
Gunn, R. (2016b)	Publication10	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	15
Gunn, R.(2019)	Publication8	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	14
Gunn, R. (2022)	Publication2	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	14
Chew, M. M. T., & Mo, S. P. S. (2019)	Publication4	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	13
Gupta-Carlson, H. (2010)	Publication11	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	13
Kurfürst, S. (2022)	Publication12	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	12
Noer, J. J. S. (2023)	Publication3	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	12
Lindner, S. M., Nonnenmann, J., Schott, N., & Steinberg, C. (2024).	Publication16	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	12
Olga Tjukov et al.,2020	Publication17	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	11
Foley, C. G. (2016)	Publication1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	10
Gordana Blagojević,2009	Publication5	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	10
Johnson, I. K. (2014)	Publication14	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	10
Aprahamian, S. (2020)	Publication7	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
Grčić, V., Miletić, A., & Miletić, D. (2017)	Publication15	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9
Hall, M., Lim, H., Kim, S., Fulda, K. G., & Surve, S. A. (2023)	Publication6	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
	Total	17	16	17	17	17	3	17	17	6	8	17	2	12	13	2	1	14	2	6	1	0	0	

Figure 4. Item-level quality appraisal matrix and total scores for the 17 included studies

Note. Columns correspond to the standards shown in Figures 2 and 3. A value of 1 indicates that the criterion was present. Colors group criteria by construct level; red numerals identify present items. Row totals are publication scores and column totals show how frequently each criterion was met.

3. Results and discussion

Quality-appraisal scores ranged from 9 to 16. Publications 9 and 13 received the highest score of 16. Publications 6, 7, and 15 received the lowest score of 9. **Table 2** summarizes the geographical setting, design, participants, sample size

where applicable, principal career barriers, and quality score for each included study.

Table 2. Characteristics of the included studies

ID	Study	Setting	Design	Participants	Sample size	Principal career barriers	Quality score
1	Foley (2016)	United States	Practice-based curriculum report	Breaking educators and learners	NR	Limited standardized pedagogy and recognition pathways	10
2	Gunn (2022)	Sydney, Australia; online cases	Analytic autoethnography, participant observation, interviews, online case studies	Sydney b-girls and author-practitioner	NR	Invisibility, gatekeeping, harassment, limited authority and representation	14
3	Noer (2023)	United States and international breaking community	Critical listening and practitioner analysis	B-girls and practitioners represented in published accounts	NR	Sexual harassment and assault, unequal prizes, limited protective power	12
4	Chew & Mo (2019)	Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China	Multi-sited interviews and participant observation	Professional b-girls	15	Body ideals, family pressure, gatekeeping, unequal roles, unstable income	13
5	Blagojević (2009)	Belgrade, Serbia	Ethnographic case study	Focal b-girl and local scene	1 focal case	Gender stereotypes, legitimacy, partner and social expectations	10
6	Hall et al. (2023)	Online/international dancer sample	Cross-sectional survey	Breakers and dancers aged 18-40	141	Traumatic alopecia, treatment barriers, appearance and performance concerns	9
7	Aprahamian (2020)	United States; historical breaking context	Historical and archival analysis	Early women breakers and historical sources	N/A	Historical erasure and masculinized origin narratives	9
8	Gunn (2019)	Sydney, Australia	Cultural and ethnographic analysis of all-style battles	Street-dance battle participants	NR	Gendered identity boundaries and recognition	14
9	Gunn (2016a)	Sydney, Australia	Practice research and analytic autoethnography	Author-practitioner and breaking scene	1 focal case	Regulation of bodily expression and gendered assumptions	16
10	Gunn (2016b)	Sydney, Australia	Analytic autoethnography and interviews	Author and prominent scene figures	NR	Othering, masculine norms, restricted expression and legitimacy	15
11	Gupta-Carlson (2010)	United States and transnational b-girl networks	Qualitative political and cultural case analysis	B-girl networks and artists	NR	Exclusion, weak visibility, limited women-centered networks	13
12	Kurfürst (2022)	Hanoi, Vietnam	Ethnography, narrative interviews, social-media observation	10 women and 8 men dancers	18	Family and career expectations, gendered evaluation, public-space constraints	12
13	Langnes & Fasting (2017)	Oslo, Norway	Ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews	11 men and 6 women breakers	17	Devaluation, gender stereotypes, pressures on style and self-presentation	16
14	Johnson (2014)	United States and transnational cultural context	Performance and cultural analysis	B-girl performances and historical-cultural material	N/A	Femininity norms and recognition of gendered performance	10

Continued table:

ID	Study	Setting	Design	Participants	Sample size	Principal career barriers	Quality score
15	Grčić et al. (2017)	Croatia	Retrospective cross-sectional questionnaire	Female street dancers	137	Musculoskeletal pain and limited injury supervision	9
16	Lindner et al. (2025)	Germany, Austria, Spain, Poland, Netherlands, United States	Mixed methods: questionnaire, video observation, interviews	National-squad breakers (8 women, 4 men)	12	Self-directed training, limited structured guidance, workload and recovery gaps	12
17	Tjukov et al. (2020)	Germany	Retrospective cohort survey	Hip-hop, breaking, popping, locking, and house dancers (67 women, 79 men)	146	Injury incidence, recovery time, unsupervised risk factors	11

Most studies clearly reported their purpose, but reporting was less consistent for reference completeness, iterative data collection or analysis, audit trails, and reflexivity. The appraisal therefore indicates variation in reporting transparency and methodological detail across the evidence base.

Because the first author completed the appraisal, the scores remain susceptible to interpretive subjectivity. The reflective journal in **Supplementary Material C** records the decision rules used, but it does not replace independent appraisal.

4. Discussion

The synthesis produced a multilevel framework in which cultural, institutional, physical and health, and social and relational barriers interact through four career mechanisms: access to opportunities, recognition and advancement, safety, and resources and support (**Figure 5**).

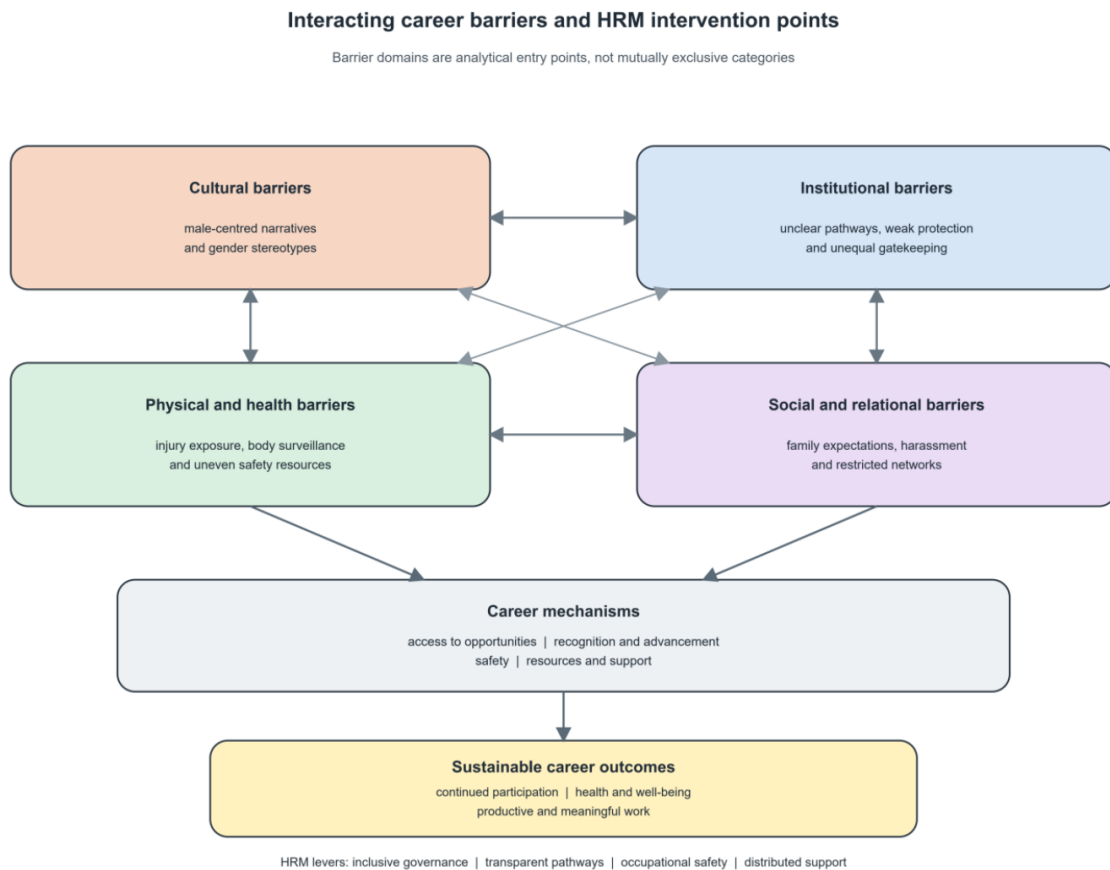


Figure 5. Interacting career barriers and HRM intervention points. The four domains are analytical entry points rather than mutually exclusive categories. Their effects converge on access, recognition, safety, and support, which shape sustainable-career outcomes.

The findings reported below derive from the 17 included studies. Sources outside the eligibility criteria are used only as contextual or supporting literature for interpretation and proposal development and were not included in data extraction, thematic synthesis, or quality appraisal.

4.1. RQ1. What career barriers are commonly reported for b-girls?

The included studies were organized into four primary domains. These domains summarize the dominant mechanism in each finding, but they overlap in practice. Sexual harassment, for example, is an interpersonal act, a cultural expression of gendered entitlement, and an institutional failure when reporting and protection are absent.

4.1.1. Cultural barriers: male dominance and gender stereotypes

Historical and contemporary narratives frequently present breaking as a masculine activity and minimize women's contributions (Aprahamian, 2020). Such narratives influence legitimacy in current practice by positioning b-girls as exceptions who must repeatedly demonstrate belonging.

Contextual literature outside the formal review evidence base similarly documents the gendered policing of b-girls' presentation. Rose (1994), for example, described women using conventionally feminine movement to emphasize individuality or deflect criticism while still being characterized as masculine, undesirable, or sexually available (p. 49).

Gender stereotypes also shape how bodies and styles are evaluated. Assumptions that strength is the defining standard can disadvantage performers whose work emphasizes other legitimate qualities, while expectations to appear conventionally feminine constrain clothing, movement, and professional identity (Blagojević, 2009; Chew & Mo, 2019; Gunn, 2016b).

4.1.2. Institutional barriers: unclear pathways, weak protection, and unequal gatekeeping

Breaking has few standardized pathways connecting experience to recognized roles in teaching, judging, event management, or leadership. Access often depends on informal gatekeepers and scene-based reputation, while women remain underrepresented in positions that allocate opportunities and recognition (Foley, 2016; Gunn, 2022).

Institutional weakness also affects safety and career continuity. When crews, studios, and events lack reporting procedures, codes of conduct, or accountable leadership, interpersonal harassment can restrict training and prompt exit. Smaller prize funds, lower visibility, and unequal recruitment further reduce the resources available for sustained careers (Chew & Mo, 2019; Noer, 2023).

4.1.3. Physical and health barriers: injury exposure and body surveillance

Pain, musculoskeletal injury, and traumatic alopecia can interrupt training and shorten career participation (Grčić et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2023; Tjukov et al., 2020). These risks are not purely individual. Their consequences depend on access to informed coaching, recovery time, health services, suitable facilities, and appropriately fitted protective equipment. Body ideals can further discourage strength development or intensify scrutiny of muscularity, hair loss, and clothing (Chew & Mo, 2019).

4.1.4. Social and relational barriers: family expectations, harassment, and restricted networks

Families and communities may view breaking as unsafe, unfeminine, or incompatible with education, marriage, and caregiving expectations (Chew & Mo, 2019; Kurfürst, 2022). Within breaking scenes, harassment and dependence on male-controlled learning networks can also limit access to instruction, crews, and career information (Gunn, 2022; Noer, 2023).

The four domains form a reinforcing system. Cultural stereotypes can shape recruitment, judging, advancement, and family approval. Institutional deficiencies can increase physical risk by leaving training and recovery unsupported, and they can increase social risk by leaving harassment unaddressed. Physical injury can reduce visibility and income, which weakens bargaining power and network access. Social isolation can then make institutional gatekeeping harder to challenge. The framework therefore rejects a one-barrier, one-solution model.

4.2. RQ2. What evidence and practices can inform responses to these barriers?

The recommendations are classified as (a) interventions supported by empirical evidence, (b) practices reported in prior studies but not formally evaluated, or (c) author-derived proposals based on the synthesis. **Table 3** reports the classification and implementation boundaries. This distinction prevents plausible proposals from being presented as proven interventions.

Table 3. Evidence status and qualification of proposed interventions

Intervention	Target mechanism	Evidence category	Evidence basis	Qualification and implementation boundary
Gender-neutral terminology and historical archives	Cultural legitimacy and visibility	(b) Reported practice	Aprahamian (2020); Gunn (2022)	Plausible for correcting invisibility, but career outcomes have not been evaluated.
Diverse performance styles and transparent gender-inclusive judging	Recognition and fair evaluation	(c) Author-derived proposal	Gunn (2016a, 2016b); Sato (2022)*; Sato & Hopper (2021)*	Use the same transparent criteria across genders; test reliability and audit gendered patterns.

Continued table:

Intervention	Target mechanism	Evidence category	Evidence basis	Qualification and implementation boundary
Women-focused entry events and platforms	Initial access, confidence, and networks	(b) Reported practice	Chew & Mo (2019); Gupta-Carlson (2010); Noer (2023)	Should complement equal access to mixed events; effects on retention and advancement remain untested.
Portable certification and advancement pathways	Skill recognition and role mobility	(c) Author-derived proposal informed by reported curricula	Foley (2016); Vexler et al. (2023)*	Ensure affordability, transparency, portability, and equal access; evaluate employment and advancement outcomes.
Codes of conduct, reporting routes, and accountable leadership	Safety, voice, and organizational support	(c) Author-derived proposal	Gunn (2022); Noer (2023)	Representation alone is insufficient; specify authority, confidentiality, due process, and safeguarding.
Workload monitoring, warm-up, recovery, and health education	Occupational health and career continuity	(a) Empirical risk evidence; intervention efficacy limited	Grčić et al. (2017); Lindner et al. (2025); Tjukov et al. (2020)	Prospectively evaluate injury, participation, and recovery; adapt to individual needs and work roles.
Appropriately fitted protective equipment	Reduction of specific physical exposures	(c) Author-derived proposal based on empirical risk evidence	Hall et al. (2023)	Test comfort, fit, performance, and effectiveness before broad adoption.
Moderated media visibility, women-led networks, and mentoring	Information, belonging, and distributed support	(b) Reported practice	Chew & Mo (2019); Fogarty et al. (2018)*; Gunn (2022)	Specify safeguarding and mentor preparation; evaluate retention, learning, and advancement outcomes.

Note. References marked with an asterisk are supplementary contextual sources and are not among the 17 studies included in the systematic review. They were not included in data extraction, thematic synthesis, or quality appraisal.

4.2.1. Addressing cultural barriers: inclusive narratives and diverse performance styles

4.2.1.1. Reclaiming the narrative

Using the gender-neutral term breaking and documenting women's historical contributions may reduce linguistic and historical invisibility (Aprahamian, 2020). Public archives, oral histories, and visible organizational roles are reported practices rather than evaluated causal interventions. Their value should therefore be assessed through changes in participation, recognition, and leadership access.

4.2.1.2. Supporting diverse performance styles and individual agency

B-girls should not be expected to display abilities presumed to be inherently female. Breaking permits varied combinations of power, rhythm, musicality, flexibility, originality, and expression, and these qualities vary among individuals rather than by sex. Supportive practice should widen the range of legitimate performance styles and allow dancers to develop distinctive identities without rewarding conformity to masculine or feminine stereotypes (Gunn, 2016a, 2016b).

Women may also contribute as teachers, organizers, judges, archivists, and managers, but these contributions should be recognized as acquired expertise and experience rather than as gendered traits. Transparent selection criteria and access to development opportunities are more defensible than assumptions about women's natural managerial competence.

4.2.2. Addressing institutional barriers: entry platforms, protection, certification, and advancement

4.2.2.1. Women-focused entry platforms

Women-focused events such as Hiphop4lady have been reported as lower-pressure entry spaces in which novice dancers can gain experience without unwanted filming or a dominant male gaze (Chew & Mo, 2019). This practice has not been shown to improve long-term career outcomes. It should therefore

complement, not replace, equal access to mixed competitions, prize structures, and mainstream visibility.

Other women-led platforms and community projects have created performance, political-expression, and networking opportunities (Gupta-Carlson, 2010; Noer, 2023). Their reported benefits support further evaluation, but the current evidence does not establish causal effects on retention, income, or advancement.

4.2.2.2. Certification, advancement, and protective governance

Within the included evidence base, Foley (2016) shows that training can be formalized. Supplementary contextual literature outside the included set discusses judging competence (Vexler et al., 2023). A portable certification pathway for coaches and judges is an author-derived proposal because the included studies did not evaluate such a system. Any certification should be affordable, transparent, and accessible across gender and employment status.

Events, crews, studios, and federations should also adopt clear codes of conduct, reporting routes, conflict-of-interest rules, and criteria for appointing judges and leaders. Increasing women's representation can improve voice, but representation alone is insufficient unless decision authority and accountability are also addressed (Noer, 2023).

4.2.3. Addressing physical and health barriers: transparent assessment and injury prevention

4.2.3.1. Transparent and gender-inclusive assessment

The evidence does not justify female-specific judging criteria. A more defensible approach is to define transparent criteria that recognize multiple dimensions of breaking and apply them consistently to all dancers. Supplementary contextual literature suggests that assessment systems should be audited for reliability and gendered patterns rather than built on assumptions about sex-specific ability (Sato, 2022).

Further supplementary evidence indicates that anonymous assessment can reduce identity-related bias in some dance-evaluation settings (Sato & Hopper, 2021), although its applicability to live battles requires testing. Digital or animated tools may support assessor training, yet they should be treated as formative tools rather than evidence that bias has been eliminated.

4.2.3.2. Injury prevention

The included evidence supports attention to workload, warm-up, recovery, and common injury sites (Tjukov et al., 2020). Supplementary contextual evidence is consistent with this pattern and additionally highlights biomechanics and injury occurrence (Tsiouti & Wyon, 2021). However, the included studies provide limited direct evaluation of prevention programs for b-girls. Studios and teams should therefore implement monitoring and education while prospectively evaluating injury, participation, and recovery outcomes.

Appropriately fitted protective equipment may reduce specific exposures. For example, Hall et al. (2023) identified scalp and hair concerns associated with head-spinning. Protective headgear is a plausible design response, but comfort, performance, effectiveness, and differential fit require empirical testing before broad recommendation.

4.2.4. Addressing social and relational barriers: visibility, networks, and mentoring

4.2.4.1. Media visibility

Social media can increase access to tutorials, role models, event information, and accounts of harassment (Gunn, 2022). These reported practices may

strengthen information access, but visibility can also shift responsibility onto individual women and expose them to online hostility. Platform-based initiatives therefore require moderation, safeguarding, and organizational support.

4.2.4.2. Networks and mentoring

Within the included evidence base, women-led networks and mentoring initiatives have been reported in China as sources of skill sharing, confidence, and emotional support (Chew & Mo, 2019). Supplementary contextual literature reports similar initiatives in Canada (Fogarty et al., 2018). Their effects on retention and advancement have not been formally evaluated. Future programs should specify mentor training, safeguarding, access criteria, duration, and measurable career outcomes.

No single intervention is sufficient because each barrier can be reproduced through several mechanisms. Inclusive narratives without transparent pathways may increase visibility but not advancement. Certification without safeguarding may formalize an unsafe system. Injury prevention without financial or scheduling support may remain inaccessible. Effective HRM therefore requires coordinated governance, career development, occupational safety, and distributed support, with evaluation matched to the evidence status of each intervention.

4.3. Contribution to HRM and transferability beyond breaking

The findings confirm a central claim of gendered-organization theory: rules that appear neutral can reproduce gender inequality when they are built around historically masculine participation patterns (Acker, 1990). In breaking, this occurs through informal recruitment, style expectations, judging conventions, and access to decision-making roles. The review extends this perspective by showing that organizational effects can arise across a distributed career ecosystem even when no single organization employs the worker.

The framework also extends organizational-support and inclusion research. For b-girls, support is not a single perception of one employer. It is the combined experience of crews, studios, organizers, judges, federations, sponsors, and platforms. A supportive career ecosystem must therefore align recognition, safety, learning opportunities, and voice across organizational boundaries. This alignment is directly relevant to sustainable careers because health, well-being, and productive participation unfold across person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020).

The framework may inform other male-dominated, informal, creative, athletic, and project-based occupations in which work depends on reputation, temporary teams, embodied performance, and multiple gatekeepers. Examples may include freelance performance, coaching, action sports, and cultural production. Transfer should remain cautious because the relative importance of bodily risk, public judging, family norms, and formal employment protection differs across occupations and countries.

5. Conclusion and limitations

This review identifies four interacting domains of career barriers for b-girls: cultural, institutional, physical and health, and social and relational. Their effects operate through access to opportunities, recognition and advancement, safety, and resources and support. The main contribution to HRM is a distributed career-ecosystem perspective that connects gendered organizations, inclusion, organizational support, occupational well-being, and sustainable careers in work that is not contained within a single employer. The proposed responses should be read according to their evidence status. Some address documented risks, some are practices reported in prior studies, and others remain author-derived proposals requiring evaluation.

Several limitations constrain the conclusions. The search used only Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, and only English-language journal articles were eligible. Although the Google Scholar date, query, and manual procedure are documented, rankings can vary over time and manual supplementary screening is less reproducible than indexed-database retrieval. Applying a qualitative-oriented appraisal instrument across heterogeneous study designs may also have omitted design-specific quality criteria and limits the direct comparability of total scores. Publication bias and the underreporting of negative or unsuccessful initiatives are possible. Both authors screened the literature and resolved eligibility decisions through discussion, but the first author conducted data extraction, coding, and quality appraisal, creating a residual risk of interpretation bias. No independent screening-agreement statistic was calculated. The four-domain framework simplifies overlapping mechanisms, and most proposed interventions have not been empirically evaluated for effects on retention, health, income, or advancement. Future research should use preregistered multi-database searches, independent reviewers, longitudinal and comparative designs, and explicit evaluation of implementation and career outcomes.

Supplementary materials: The search strategies, coding framework, study characteristics, and quality-appraisal summary are provided in the manuscript and **Supplementary Materials A-C**.

Author contributions: Conceptualization and methodology: XL and HY. Literature searches, deduplication, data extraction, coding, quality appraisal, and original draft: XL. Manual title-and-abstract screening, full-text assessment, and eligibility decisions: XL and HY. Review, interpretation, supervision, and editing: HY. Visualization: XL and HY. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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Informed consent statement: The authors confirm that the review was conducted in accordance with relevant research-integrity and publication standards.

Data availability statement: All data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Supplementary Material A. Search strategy and reproducibility record

Search coverage: 1984-2025. Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, and Google Scholar were searched on 9 August 2025.

(1) Web of Science Core Collection (ALL field)

Set 1: ALL = ("urban dancer" OR "popular dancer" OR "Piliwu dancer" OR breakdancers OR "street dancer" OR "hip-hop dancer" OR "hip hop dancer" OR hip-hoper OR hiphoper OR dancer OR "breakdance educator" OR "breakdance teacher" OR B-girls OR B-girl OR "B girl" OR "B girls")

Set 2: ALL = (barriers OR "career barriers" OR "gender inequality" OR "glass ceiling" OR "sexual harassment" OR assault OR machismo OR discrimination OR "objectification of women")

Set 3: ALL = (woman OR female OR women)

Final combination: Set 1 AND Set 2 AND Set 3. Records retrieved: 13.

(2) Scopus (TITLE-ABS-KEY field)

Set 1: TITLE-ABS-KEY("urban dancer" OR "popular dancer" OR "Piliwu dancer" OR breakdancers OR "street dancer" OR "hip-hop dancer" OR "hip hop dancer" OR hip-hoper OR hiphoper OR dancer OR "breakdance educator" OR "breakdance teacher" OR B-girls OR B-girl OR "B girl" OR "B girls")

Set 2: TITLE-ABS-KEY(barriers OR "career barriers" OR "gender inequality" OR "glass ceiling" OR "sexual harassment" OR assault OR machismo OR discrimination OR "objectification of women")

Set 3: TITLE-ABS-KEY(woman OR female OR women)

Final combination: Set 1 AND Set 2 AND Set 3. Records retrieved: 71.

(3) Google Scholar supplementary discovery

Set 1: ("urban dancer" OR "popular dancer" OR "Piliwu dancer" OR breakdancers OR "street dancer" OR "hip-hop dancer" OR "hip hop dancer" OR hip-hoper OR hiphoper OR dancer OR "breakdance educator" OR "breakdance teacher" OR B-girls OR B-girl OR "B girl" OR "B girls")

Set 2: (barriers OR "career barriers" OR "gender inequality" OR "glass ceiling" OR "sexual harassment" OR assault OR machismo OR discrimination OR "objectification of women")

Set 3: (woman OR female OR women)

Final combination: Set 1 AND Set 2 AND Set 3. Google Scholar served as a manual supplementary discovery source for studies not retrieved from Web of Science or Scopus. Results were screened manually against the same eligibility criteria; screening depth was determined by manual eligibility review rather than a fixed page-depth cutoff. Nine additional eligible studies were retained.

Screening reconciliation

84 indexed-database records; 7 duplicates removed; 77 records screened; 7 books removed; 70 full texts assessed; 24 outside scope and 38 without career-barrier evidence excluded; 8 database studies included; 9 additional Google Scholar studies included; final n = 17.

Supplementary Material B. Extraction fields and coding framework

Extraction fields: citation, setting, research design, participants, sample size, occupational role, barrier evidence, proposed response, evidence status, quality criteria, primary dimension, secondary cross-dimensional link, and reviewer memo.

Source finding	Initial code	Focused code	Primary dimension	Secondary link
Women omitted from histories; b-boying used generically	Historical invisibility	Gendered cultural legitimacy	Cultural	Institutional recognition
Informal access to crews, judging, teaching, or leadership	Gatekeeper dependence	Unclear career pathways	Institutional	Social networks
Pain, injury, alopecia, or body scrutiny affects training	Bodily exposure	Occupational-health constraint	Physical and health	Institutional safety support
Family pressure to prioritize marriage, education, or care	Family-role conflict	Relational constraint	Social and relational	Cultural gender norms
Sexual harassment without reporting or protection	Harassment and unsafe environment	Relational harm and governance failure	Social and relational	Institutional protection

Theme-generation logic: deductive sensitizing concepts from career-barrier and HRM research were combined with inductive open codes from the included studies. Focused codes were grouped by their most immediate mechanism. Overlap was preserved through secondary links rather than forcing mutually exclusive categories.

Supplementary Material C. Quality-appraisal summary and audit notes

The Indicative Behavioral Standards were applied descriptively. Scores were not used as exclusion thresholds because the 17 studies included qualitative, practice-based, historical, and quantitative designs.

Publication	Study	Total score
1	Foley (2016)	10
2	Gunn (2022)	14
3	Noer (2023)	12
4	Chew & Mo (2019)	13
5	Blagojević (2009)	10
6	Hall et al. (2023)	9
7	Aprahamian (2020)	9
8	Gunn (2019)	14
9	Gunn (2016a)	16
10	Gunn (2016b)	15
11	Gupta-Carlson (2010)	13
12	Kurfürst (2022)	12
13	Langnes & Fasting (2017)	16
14	Johnson (2014)	10
15	Grčić et al. (2017)	9
16	Lindner et al. (2025)	12
17	Tjukov et al. (2020)	11

Audit correction: Publications 9 and 13 received the highest total score of 16. Publications 6, 7, and 15 received the lowest total score of 9. The original Results incorrectly listed Publication 13 among the lowest-scoring publications.

Reviewer/coder note: Both authors manually screened titles and abstracts, assessed full texts, and finalized eligibility decisions through discussion. Xi Ling conducted the searches, deduplication, data extraction, coding, and quality appraisal; Hang Yin participated in screening and contributed to methodology and interpretation. No agreement statistic was calculated because eligibility decisions were resolved collaboratively rather than through an independent duplicate-screening exercise. The single-reviewer extraction, coding, and appraisal steps remain a source of interpretive subjectivity.