

Changing the 11%

At 15, sport does not feel like play. It feels rather uncomfortable. Wrongfully designed, sport can actually have a reverse effect; it makes you feel vulnerable. I quit competitive sports because it wasn't fun anymore. It didn't seem to be a safe place.

Most children need sport not to become the world's best, but to simply win at life.

Only 11% of girls aged 15 perform at least one hour of physical activity daily.

- (Health behaviour in school-aged children - HBSC, 2013/14)

Too often we believe sport is something destined for a chosen few; the future champions. Its value degrades as we begin to associate it with assumptions such as for the talented only, a weight loss tool, a form of punishment, a money making machine, or the worst, not appropriate for the ladies. Sport becomes a goal-achieving behaviour, leaving out its most essential fraction: simply doing it.

Before any of these, sport is about moving, physically and mentally, regardless of age, gender, region or level.

Girls are less physically active in most countries and most regions.

- (HBSC, 2013/14)

Fifteen was the age I felt most vulnerable. I quit competitive sports because it wasn't fun anymore. It didn't seem to be a safe place.

Nobody told me there is a level of it where training becomes enjoyment, a recreational level which has nothing to do with competing and measuring. Its sole focus is on being active in a way where joy is found in climbing the mountain, rather than reaching the top.

Women chair only 7% of international sport federations.

- Johanna Adriaanse for the Conversation

The vulnerability reaches its peak right at the edge of adolescence. As a fifteen year old girl taking part in sport, you make yourself exposed to issues such as not needed attention from older men, comparison, money issues, cultural obstacles, family history of no sports, all or nothing approach, any kind of abuse...

I believe sport in adolescence is crucial. Participation in physical activity is positively related to academic performance in children. It also affects their well-being, from physical to mental health. Research suggest sport can lead to better self-esteem among adolescent girls. It helps with awareness of what you deserve rather than what you feel: for girls sport is positively related to preventing domestic and drug abuse, eating and other mental disorders, obesity and weight issues...

Though a familiar phrase "sport builds a character" needs to be taken with caution. Fifteen year old girls are not supposed to toughen up; their true nature at this age is to be sensitive but curious.

Physical inactivity imposes economic costs of €80.4 billion per year to the EU-28.

- The inactivity time bomb, CEBR (Centre for Economics and Business Research)

Curiosity is a good place to start. Have you ever watched how children are acting while you, as an adult, are exercising? Every time I take training outdoors, girls passing by start mimicking me. Everything from grabbing weights to hanging on the bars. Same thing happened in an environment where culturally women don't take part in sports - India. When I asked the girls what active plays they do, they immediately started performing cart wheels and back bends to bridges.

- Exercising before classes with girls from Piali Ashar Alo centre in India. (Photo Urška Žnidar)
- Girls do want to move, so where these 89% do gets lost?

Changing the 11%?

51% of girls say they are put off sport because of PE experiences from school (Changing the Game, womeninsport.org).

Physical education starts at home, even though most homes have no history of taking part in it or putting importance to being active.

Crucial part to changing the 11% are supporting (smaller) communities which create:

- A safe place (free of verbal and other abuse),
- Social bonding,
- Mentorship.

The above mentioned communities can only develop with a better support and propaganda on the importance of (adolescent) girls taking part in sport.

- National campaigns
- European wide campaigns promoting the femininity and girliness of sport (girls move week)

More programs/projects to support the already existing organisations or clubs (for girls and sport).

Research suggest lower income class does less sport:

- free after-school sport programmes for lower income families
- sport scholarships for girls from disadvantage environments

Though more adult women are nowadays taking part in physical activity, everything started as a curative to obesity epidemic and other health risk factors. Still, those women are setting an example to a younger generation and are more likely to include their children in sport related activities.

In general women are still under-represented in sport federations, business, media and science. More work needs to be done in supporting the girls to take part in all fields of sport with more women taking over the key positions.

Although the tech innovations changed our lives for the (physically) worse, I believe technology and sport can be united with a development of physical activity supporting apps and similar programmes for children and adolescents.

To close down the article, as adults we need to extend our perspective: physical education is equally important as all other education.