

THEMATIC PROFILE

SPORT AND GENDER

Last updated: June 2009

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Introduction

This topic presents the most salient aspects within the intersection between sport, gender and development. The topic is divided into various sub-sections: from defining concepts, to charting the historical progress made in sport and gender policy development, to providing a list of points to bear in mind for the practical application of gender-equity-through-sport programmes.

What is 'Gender'?

'Gender' refers to the socially-constructed roles of and relationships between men and women. Gender concerns men and women, including conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. The difference between 'gender' and 'sex' is that the latter refers only to biological differences.

Gender does not mean focusing solely on women or females, but rather on the inequalities between males and females, and should not be confused with feminism or women's studies.

Analyses of gender differences often show a disadvantaged and weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical issues. This is why there is a tendency for gender discussions and interventions to focus on correcting these imbalances by specifically targeting women and girls.

Recommended reading

UNDP (1995) **Human Development Report: Gender and Human Development**

http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1995_en.pdf

The 1995 Human Development Report was dedicated to the issue of Gender and attempted to take stock of the progress made in reducing the gender disparities and to monitor the opportunities available to women and girls.

Further links

United Nations Development Fund for Women

<http://www.unifem.org/>

UNIFEM was established in 1976 and provides financial and technical support to programmes that aim to enhance women's empowerment and foster gender equality.

The Role of Sport in Addressing Gender Issues

In recent years, there has been a significant shift from advocating for 'gender equity in sport' towards using 'sport for gender equity and personal development'. This sub-section contains some of the evidence of this shift so far.

Women's and girls' health and well-being

A large amount of research into the extent to which sport and physical activity has a positive impact on health has shown that involvement in regular physical activity enhances physical and mental health and well-being, including among women and girls.

Reproductive health and illegal drug use

Research from both Western and non-Western contexts has shown that female athletes are less likely to exhibit risky sexual behaviour. For example, they were shown to have fewer sexual partners and were more likely to use contraception than their counterparts who did not participate in sports. Research among young women in South Africa indicated that athletes from one sample were more likely to have fewer children than non-athlete females from the same region. Evidence from among young women in high-income countries shows that female athletes are less likely to consume drugs (such as cocaine, marijuana, etc.) than non-athletes.

Gender-specific disorders

Current research indicates that regular physical activity may decrease or slow down the onset of osteopenia and osteoporosis in women. Regular physical activity coupled with a calcium-rich diet can increase bone mineral density, reducing the risk of developing bone disorders and fractures among older women. Strong evidence supports the role regular exercise can play in controlling levels of fat, reducing the risk of lung and breast cancers.

Women's and girls' self-esteem and self-empowerment

Some research using the concept of self-esteem suggests that girls and women who participate in sport and physical activity in both developed and developing countries demonstrate higher self-esteem as well as improved self-perception, self-worth, self-efficacy and so on. These improvements are associated with enhanced feelings of accomplishment, perceptions of improved physical appearance and commitment to exercise. Evidence from developing countries shows that involvement in organised sports activities helped to enhance girls' sense of agency, self-empowerment and personal freedom.

Social inclusion and social integration of women and girls

There is a large amount of compelling evidence from both developed and developing countries reflecting the relationship between sport participation and social integration and social inclusion of women and girls. Access to safe spaces becomes increasingly confined, restrictive, enclosed and domestic as girls in developing countries reach adolescence. Evidence from sport programmes shows that sport activities can allow women and girls access to safe social spaces in which they may exercise control and ownership. Evidence from post-apartheid South Africa shows that young women from different backgrounds could use football as a platform to engage with one another, mentor each other, as well as develop friendships and strengthen relationships. Similar findings from Nigeria suggest that sport plays a crucial role in enhancing social cohesion and encouraging social interaction among young women and girls.

Challenging and transforming gender norms

Most research that examines the relationship between sport and gender refers to the transformative potential of sport to challenge or alter gender norms. 'Gender norms' refer to the responsibilities and privileges assigned to men and women.

Although the participation of women and girls in sport remains largely imbalanced when compared to participation among men and boys, most researchers are in agreement that the consistent and continued participation of women and girls in sport has had a major impact on achieving gender equality in certain contexts.

Research conducted on the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) programme reveal that girls' participation in the MYSA football programme appears related to the way male football players perceive their roles. Boys are observed to have adopted a positive and supportive attitude towards their female counterparts participating in the programme. Participation in the programme has become synonymous with being aware of gendered roles and norms.

Opportunities for women's and girls' leadership and achievement

Evidence from developing countries indicates that some sports programmes provide women and girls with opportunities to develop leadership skills. The Moving the Goal Posts Kilifi programme (MTGK) in Kenya provides opportunities for participants to compete and train, as well as participate directly in developing the organisation and overseeing governance.

In both the MYSA and MTGK girls' football programmes, the provision of possibilities to develop specialised skills in coaching, refereeing, training, league organisation as well as access to information on health and peer education is of great value to the participants of these programmes. Exposure to competing internationally is seen to add a boost to public recognition of the skills that women and girls can develop through sport.

Recommended reading

Saavedra, M. (2005) **Women, sport and development**
<http://www.sportanddev.org/data/document/document/148.pdf>

This article addresses the issues relating to the intersection between women, sport and development. The article explores the obstacles women and girls face in getting involved in sport and the extent to which sport can be used as a tool for women and girls to contribute to development.

Policy Development in Gender and Sport

Policy development at the nexus of sport, gender and development has centred mainly on sport and gender. Increasingly, there is recognition of the need to involve and engage with gender issues through sport in the context of developing countries.

Major highlights in policy development in sport, gender and development:

1949 – International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) is formed

1968 – a female athlete lights the Olympic fire for the first time at the Olympic Games in Mexico city

1975 – UN Women’s World Conference in Mexico City leads to the creation of the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

1979 – UN General Assembly adopts the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

1981 – Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) is formed

1981 – two female members are elected to join the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

1984 – Women’s Sports Foundation is founded in Great Britain

1994 – the first World Conference on Women and Sport and the signing of the Brighton Declaration, signals the ‘women in sport’ movement taking on an international dimension.

1995 – the International Working Group on Women and Sport is formed and receives the status of official IOC commission

1995 – the fourth UN Women’s World Conference takes place in Beijing, signalling the shift in discourse from ‘Women in Development’ (WID) to ‘Gender and Development’ (GAD)

1996 – the promotion of female sport is added to the Olympic Charter

2004 – the third IOC World Conference on Women and Sport is held in Morocco, entitled: ‘Sport as a Vehicle for Social Change’

Recommended reading

The World Conference on Women and Sport - Brighton Declaration

http://www.iwg-gti.org/uploads/media/Brighton_Declaration_e.pdf

The Brighton Declaration symbolises the first international policy document on women and sport and is addressed to all actors who can influence sport development for women and girls.

Understanding and adapting to local contexts

This sub-section provides suggestions to bear in mind when attempting to understand local contexts and for appropriately adapting gender interventions through sport to local situations.

Socio-economic considerations

In many of today's developing countries, everyday tasks to meet basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) require most time, leaving few to think of the perceived 'luxury' of recreational activities. In most cases, work conducted by women and girls in the home as providers of food and carers of the family is not considered as productive because it is not a directly income-generating activity, which implies the assumption that females may not require recreational or free time as much as men. In such contexts, it is important to determine the extent to which women and girls can access time and resources to participate in sport.

In developing countries, lack of time and division of labour between men and women may prevent women and girls from participating in social activities outside the home, including sport. At the beginning of the 20th century in Western Europe, most female sports were exclusive to the wealthier, upper class groups who had time to spare.

Socio-cultural issues

The socio-cultural context of established gender norms must be considered when conducting sport programmes that aim to address gender norms. It may be considered a provocation for women and girls in some contexts, to be seen in public, wearing sports attire that may not cover all parts of the body. Not behaving according to established gender norms determined by socio-cultural influences, can have significant negative consequences for those who deviate from these norms.

Safety concerns

Sport and physical activity deals primarily with the body and "physicality". Adults or older children may hold a position of power in relation to their younger counterparts, especially when they are in the role of a coach or trainer. In this sense, children and young people are in a position of vulnerability. Codes of conduct for coaches and appropriate reporting systems are necessary to avoid incidents of possible abuse or exploitation.

The lack of appropriate facilities (e.g. with changing rooms, water and sanitation facilities, etc.) and/or sports equipment can deter women and girls from participating in sport activities. The risk of injury, especially towards women and girls, can be particularly restrictive.

Material, infrastructural and technical issues

Evidence from a sports programme in Bam, Iran shows that girls and women could only participate in sports and physical activity indoors, protected from public view. During the summer, activities were cancelled because it was not possible to open windows and doors while the female participants were playing.

Experience shows that facilities that are close to residential areas, with appropriate lighting are more likely to have greater participation of women and girls. Activities should also be scheduled at appropriate times, e.g. before dusk.

Ideals of masculinity and femininity

Sport is often perceived to express heterosexuality and male excellence. Experience shows that in most contexts, women who would like to be successful in sport competition have to demonstrate some 'typically male' attributes (such as: ambition, self-confidence, aggressiveness and power). Girls and women who 'trespass' on these socially and culturally

defined boundaries, are seen to challenge and perhaps transform well-protected gender norms.

Lack of female role models

Research has shown that most girls learn 'culturally-appropriate styles of movement' by imitating their older female counterparts. But communicating the achievements of those exceptional women to others remains a challenge. For example, media coverage of sports remains biased towards male sport, with comparatively less attention paid to the accomplishments of female athletes. Practical efforts to focus attention on the triumphs of women and girls in sport have shown to help other women and girls perceive possibilities for developing themselves.

Recommended reading

Meier, M. (2005) **Gender Equity, Sport and Development: working paper**

<http://www.sportanddev.org/data/document/document/103.pdf>

This working paper explores the nexus between sport, gender and development and highlights practical experiences largely based on research conducted on sports programmes Iran and Zambia.

Promoting gender equity through sport

This sub-section provides general guidelines, based on experiences from various interventions, on promoting gender equity through sport.

Claiming space

The provision of designated spaces for women's and girls' sport activities can have practical benefits but also a symbolic character, especially if these areas are public. In general, access to community areas is primarily granted to men and boys. In *some* cases, should women and girls frequent these community spaces, they are usually allowed to do so under specific conditions (e.g. while being accompanied by a male family member). Experience shows that by women and girls claiming public space, the community may become slowly accustomed to seeing women and girls sharing public space with men and boys.

Access to resources, structures and leadership

Besides infrastructure, sports programmes for women and girls have shown to require organisational structure as well. Sports programmes that assure women and girls active board membership in leading positions, equity, financial means, participation in decision-making and strategic planning are likely to be more successful in producing lasting change in the self-perception and self-confidence of female participants in such programmes.

Choice of sport

Successful sport programmes for women and girls have shown to have paid careful attention to categories of sports, such as: sport vs. games; contact vs. low-contact vs. non-contact sports; mixed vs. single-sex sports activities; team vs. double vs. single sports; etc. Careful consideration of these aspects can help to establish female sports participation and its integration into everyday life. Research conducted on perceptions of sport in e.g. the US has shown that basketball is seen as a 'rough' sport, while similar research in Senegal shows that basketball is considered a 'feminine' sport, indicating that an understanding of the community's perception of different sports is required.

Traditional games and competition

Traditional games have shown to be useful in promoting gender equity, an approach which does not focus heavily on mainstream sport. This can help to avoid potential issues with promoting competitive sports. But some indigenous games and activities derive from e.g. male-dominated hunting or war practices and therefore might be counterproductive in reaching gender equity objectives, reinforcing existing patriarchal structures and gender norms. As such, experience shows that modifying existing games, changing certain rules and focusing on participation and fun rather than on competition and performance, is more effective in achieving an inclusive approach to promoting gender equity.

Didactical considerations

In many cases, sport activities have shown to act as an ideal platform on which to address gender roles among children and adults. This is largely due to the ways in which sports activities are taught. For example, a significant learning experience can derive from witnessing a female referee at a sports tournament or training with a female coach. The role of females in such positions has shown to relay an implicit message that women do possess knowledge and leadership skills, and are also capable and familiar with a male-dominated field. Research on such programmes has shown that male participants and stakeholders tend to experience an 'eye-opening effect' when witnessing and learning from female experts in sport.

Providing incentives

Sports programmes in developing countries are usually run by sport coaches who work on a voluntary basis. But sports projects have shown to require specialised and trained staff in order to reach the desired outcomes. As such, in order to get capable people to become actively involved in girls' and women's sport, research shows that added incentives must be provided (such as: remuneration, transferable skills, equipment, further education, media exposure, travel opportunities or other resources) to make the programme sustainable.

Holistic approach

Sports programmes that have proven most effective thus far in promoting gender equity are those that are well-integrated into the community and context in which the programme takes place. Experience has shown that programmes implemented with resistance from the community are less likely to continue activities once the programme comes to an end. The programmes that have used available input, knowledge and resources from the community tend to be more effective in maintaining longer-term impact of the initiative.

Recommended reading

Meier, M. (2005) **Gender Equity, Sport and Development: working paper**
<http://www.sportanddev.org/data/document/document/103.pdf>

This working paper explores the nexus between sport, gender and development and highlights practical experiences largely based on research conducted on sports programmes Iran and Zambia.

Project Case Study

Title

Moving the Goalposts

Target group

Girls and young women aged 8 to 25

Location

Kilifi and Kaloleni districts, Coast province, Kenya

Organisations involved

Lead organisation: Moving the Goalposts (MTG)

Partner organisation(s): Ministry of Education (Kenya), Ministry of National Development and Planning (Kenya), Ministry of Gender, Sports and Youth (Kenya), Plan International, Local community based groups in Coast Province, Girl Power Initiative (Nigeria), MYSA (Nairobi), Kids League, Kampala (Uganda).

About this Project

The Moving the Goalposts project gives young women and girls the chance to build confidence, develop their leadership and organising skills through football.

Moving the Goalposts (MTG) aims to provide opportunities for girls to fulfil their potential using football. It promotes gender equality (Millennium Development Goal 3) by giving girls the chance to develop their leadership, confidence and organising skills through football. It also encourages girls to champion their rights through being a part of an empowered critical mass of young women. MTG provides reproductive health and HIV/AIDS information and services, economic opportunities and promotes access to education. MTG aims to ensure girls and young women access opportunities and make informed choices in their lives.

Impact

The most significant impact of the project has been allowing girls to gain individual skills by taking responsibility for all activities associated with the project. But the project also faced a number of challenges. Read more here on the lessons learnt from the project.

Facts and Figures

The number of girls playing football has increased. Over 150 girls have been trained as coaches, 37 as referees, 47 as health peer educators, 33 as first-aiders, 12 as counsellors and 6 in monitoring and evaluation.

MTG has linked with a school, Waa Girls, and KESHO, a local group that sponsor 13 MTG girls in secondary school. One girl is in university, the first from MTG and her village to go to university. 8 girls are employed by MTG and 4 more have found jobs as a direct result of volunteering for MTG.

Lessons learned

The most significant benefit of the project is that girls gain individual skills by taking responsibility for all activities: football league matches, refereeing, tournaments, health peer education. However, this comes with a challenge that the girls did not, initially, have the capacity and confidence to take on responsibility. Strong mentorship, on-going training & support and constant monitoring are essential in a girls' sports programme in Africa.

An unintended outcome of the project has been the level of collective action among the girls. This has allowed them to organise and assert themselves on various issues, from age

cheating in local football tournaments to their reproductive health rights.

MTG has learnt many lessons:

- the importance of local partners and supporters, especially in local government, which provides the project with legitimacy in the community;
- listening to the issues and problems of the girls is important so that the project is responsive to their needs;
- having a strong and accountable institution, rooted in the community, with a diverse base of both local and international supporters, is essential for sustainability.

Recommendations

Football for girls can be a very effective way to promote gender equality (Millennium Development goal 3). However, projects need clear objectives that tackle local issues.

These must be developed with community involvement. For example, in a poor rural area such as Kilifi, football leagues are challenging to organise because the teams have to travel long distances and cannot afford the transport. Planting and harvesting seasons also clash with activities. The problems will be different in an urban area, therefore football activities must adapt to the local environment.

Strong partnerships with local government and the national football federation are important as are good relations with donors and funding partners. Involving parents and teachers so that they support the activities for girls is essential. This can be done through community meetings and teachers' meetings to ensure good will for the project.

In considering financial sustainability a social enterprise could be a viable option. In MTG a feasibility study for producing sanitary pads is being carried out.

Voices from the field

A selection of comments made by members of MTG at a meeting in August 2007

MTG has helped me to:

Build my confidence', 'Believe in myself', 'Put my ideas into action', 'Know how to organise activities', 'Interact with others and make new friends', 'Be less shy; now I'm able to make decisions', 'Get lots of information on HIV and STIs, children's rights', 'Get training e.g. in counseling, peer education, refereeing', 'Fight for our human rights', 'Use a computer', 'Go back to school', 'Visit many places like Nigeria', 'Secure a job'.