From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, girls and women are participating in sports and play programs in record numbers. Even in the most unlikely settings, girls are stepping onto playing fields, joining teams, and participating in ways that were unprecedented a decade ago. The burgeoning interest in girls’ and women’s sports around the globe provides an opportune moment to create innovative programs that empower girls and bring them safely and confidently into the public arena.

Sports as a development tool
In recent years, sports has begun to appear on the development agenda of many countries and international bodies. In response to growing evidence that strengthening the right of children to play enhances their healthy development and builds stronger communities, the United Nations established a Sport for Development program and declared 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. Increasingly, sports and play programs are being incorporated into international frameworks and conventions, lending further credence to the effort.

With this international recognition, many countries now support sports programs through their youth ministries. While official government policy and the mission statements of most sports organizations recognize the equal rights of boys and girls, implementation of gender-equitable programs remains elusive. Historically, social and cultural norms and practices often prevent girls from participating in organized sports. With this in mind, Population Council researchers have collaborated with a wide range of women’s sports groups, international agencies, and ministries of youth to develop programs and policies that include girls in sports programs. The Council has worked directly with programs in Kenya and Mali, cre-
ated an innovative model in Egypt, and examined and synthesized information from these and other programs around the world.

Examining the evidence
In 1996 the Council convened a meeting of women’s health advocates, sports experts, and researchers—diverse constituencies that had never before met—to discuss the role of sports in girls’ lives. The meeting coincided with the convergence of two important trends: the development community’s appreciation of sports as a legitimate field of action and inquiry, and the desire of the women’s sport community to incorporate broader health and development objectives into their agenda. This watershed moment spurred interest in girls’ sports in the developing world and led to program innovations. In 2007, the Council and the nongovernmental organization Right to Play convened an expert group to examine evidence and identity research gaps related to girls and sports in developing countries.

Most of the research linking girls’ sports participation and various health and development outcomes has been carried out in Western nations. The physical and mental health benefits of sports for girls have been well documented; regular participation in sports promotes physical fitness, helps reduce chronic disease, and boosts mental health by reducing symptoms of stress and depression. Sports and play are associated with healthy child development and have been associated with building self-efficacy. More recently, sports has been used in refugee and post-conflict settings to aid community regeneration and encourage social inclusion. To date no national data sets or large-scale research studies on any of these topics exists in the developing world.

The Council has been a leader in exploring the role of sports in girls’ lives in developing countries. The Council’s work has focused on understanding sports as a means of creating safe spaces and boosting social, health, and development assets for girls.

Challenging traditional scripts and transforming gender norms
Sports and play programs, when well conceived and effectively implemented, offer girls access to and visibility in the public sphere, while providing opportunities to:

• Develop new and valued life skills;
• Form friendships and expand their social networks;
• Enjoy freedom of expression and movement;
• Build leadership and citizenship opportunities and skills;
• Receive mentoring support from trusted adults; and
• Take advantage of new opportunities to learn.

Furthermore, by seeing girls in this new, action-oriented role, boys learn about the strengths, capabilities, and contributions of girls and women, which in turn may begin to reshape male perceptions of appropriate roles for females. Sports programs also help transform the ways girls view themselves and the ways in which their families and communities perceive them.

Social networks and team membership: Building social assets
Social networks are an important part of sports participation. Affiliation with a recognized team or group provides girls with a sense of belonging, and their role as a team member offers an identity beyond the domestic realm. Participation in sports programs helps draw girls into a network of institutions, programs, and mentors to which they would otherwise not have access.
Ishraq: A ground-breaking program for girls in Upper Egypt

In villages in rural Upper Egypt—traditional settings where girls’ mobility is restricted and early marriage is common—an innovative program known as Ishraq (“enlightenment”) combines sports, literacy, and life skills training to empower girls. In most rural areas of Egypt, sports clubs are dominated by males. Ishraq challenges traditional concepts of gender-appropriate behavior by incorporating sports and recreational activities along with literacy, life-skills training, and health awareness.

Nongovernmental organizations and government partners provide protected spaces—such as a girl-friendly youth center—where girls meet for learning and recreation. Aimed at 11–15-year-old out-of-school girls, the Ishraq program has afforded girls greater participation in community life and entrance into the public arena. In this way, sports acts as a catalyst for the transformation of social norms.

Mathare Youth Sports Association: A co-ed organization in Kenya

The Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) is a large-scale, community-based, co-ed organization based in the urban slums of Nairobi, Kenya. For more than two decades, MYSA has offered programs for civic engagement, environmental activism, and its predominant activity, sports. As one of the largest youth organizations in Kenya, MYSA serves more than 18,000 boys and girls between ages 8 and 18; the girls’ football league is possibly the largest girls’ sports group in the developing world. Sports has offered the girls exciting opportunities, including participation in the Norway Cup—one of the largest international youth football tournaments.

Building evidence for ministries of youth and sport

While most youth ministries have policies that imply equal access for boys and girls to sports programs, facilities, equipment, and coaches, these policies are rarely implemented at the country level. In Mali, the Population Council worked with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the country’s formal government body charged with sports-related initiatives, to conduct a study in the urban zones of Bamako. The survey revealed several obstacles to girls’ participation in sports: a lack of access to safe playing fields; heavy domestic responsibilities; and an underlying attitude by parents and communities that sports is not suitable for girls. Mali’s Ministry of Youth and Sports has made efforts to increase women’s leadership role in sports at all levels. Engaging women in the planning and design of programs is one step in making programs more acceptable and effective for adolescent girls.

Generating evidence for policy and programs:
Areas for future work

As the momentum around sports programs builds, it is important to disentangle substantiated and purported benefits of sports, and to acknowledge their differential relevance and effect on girls’ lives in diverse cultural and economic settings. Experimental programs can be useful to learn about the experiences of girls in sports programs and identify ways to involve girls in sports. Researchers should also explore ways to identify the benefits and costs of girls’ participation, how they vary over time and place, and the overall effect on girls and women.

Ideally it would be useful to have comparable reviews across countries of nationwide data on girls’ participation in sports, their retention levels in programs, sports infrastructure available to them, and so forth, but no such data...
exists in most developing-country settings. Some key areas for action might include:

- Carry out situation analysis to evaluate a sports program, including a review of country-level policies and programs, level of infrastructure available, and opportunities for girls.
- Include key sports-specific questions into adolescent surveys or other national or regional data collection activities.
- Document the social conditions that foster or impede girls’ ability to participate in and benefit from sports.
- Identify effective strategies for increasing girls’ mobility and visibility in their communities through sports.
- Determine inputs required (technical, financial, physical) to develop effective, sustainable sports programs for girls in selected settings.
- Experiment with new programs, models, and implementers.
- Measure the effects of girls’ sports participation on a set of health and development indicators.

Moving forward

For good or ill, the sports industry, sports media, and sports competition have become increasingly international. How this globalization shapes the perception, experiences, and practices associated with girls’ and women’s sports, particularly in the developing world, will be important to understand. The degree to which sports can be used effectively to bring girls safely and confidently into the public domain has only begun to be tested. More experimentation is needed, with various combinations of sports models and program content, in diverse settings, and with a broader range of program implementers. As sports programs continue to receive increased attention from feminists, academics, and development practitioners, the Population Council will continue to provide leadership through research that guides policy and programs.

References and related publications


Mathare Youth Sports Association. www.MYSAKENYA.org

Right to play. www.rightoplay.com


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World Health Organization. www.who.int/moveforhealth/en