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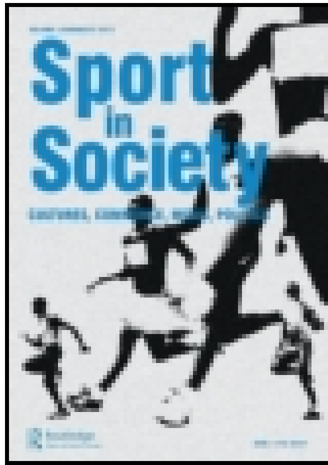

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The value of female sporting role models

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The value of female sporting role models

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Historical and sociocultural associations between sport and masculinity still determine the predominance of male 'sporting role models' (SRMs) in many parts of the world. The lack of female SRMs is one common theme among Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) publications. This article features potential benefits of available and relevant female SRMs in general and for SDP in particular. Findings from African case studies help to contextualize the theoretical concepts presented. Moreover, assumed functions and claims attributed to well-known top sportswomen or recreational female coaches are categorized. Different types and attributes of SRMs are identified which may enable SDP programmes to further enhance gender equity and empowerment. Thereby, key issues such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, patriarchy, type of sports, patriotism, and media coverage are considered.

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Introduction

> It is not a disgrace not to reach for the stars, but it is a disgrace not to have stars to reach for.[1]

It is widely agreed that physiological, cognitive, and psycho-social competences can be acquired through physical activity and sport. Though there are historical associations between sport and masculinity around the globe, there is no reason why only men and boys should benefit from such competences. Despite an increase in recent years, females in elite and grass-roots sport are still under-represented as coaches, athletes, staff, referees, and journalists in most parts of the world. The predominance of male 'sporting role models' (SRMs) at the expense of available female SRMs reflects these facts. This article follows the premise that female 'asportism' is primarily linked to sociocultural environments rather than to innate causes. It considers the consequences of this through an examination of the value and need of female SRMs, especially in Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) contexts.

SDP programmes use sport as an instrument to enhance social change and empowerment which also include self-esteem, leadership skills, etc. Since sport is directly dealing with the body and its functions, SDP organizations can convey gender-based knowledge – for instance, regarding pregnancy, violence, HIV/AIDS, sexual harassment, or prostitution – which enables especially girls and women to better control their own lives. The transfer of such life skills from the pitch into 'real life' should have top priority for SDP programmes. Role modelling is a decisive transfer enhancer (Taylor, Russ-Eft, and Chan 2005; Burke and Hutchins 2007).

The lack of female SRMs is commonly acknowledged by various SDP publications which will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent pages. But what kind of value can be expected from female SRMs in general and for SDP programmes in particular? What are attributes of well-known top sportswomen or recreational female coaches?

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What types of female SRMs are needed to potentially promote gender equity and empowerment through SDP programmes?

This article begins with a review of existing SDP publications (IOC and NOC Morocco 2004; UN 2007; UNICEF 2007; SDP IWG 2008; UN 2008; Women Win 2008; UNICEF 2010) referring to female SRMs. Based on interdisciplinary literature, it then provides an overview of characteristics of SRMs and details the selection process of SRMs. Drawing on empirical research conducted in Zambia and South Africa, two case studies contextualize the theoretical portion of this article. This article finally categorizes assumed functions of female SRMs and scrutinizes them in terms of their relevance for SDP with a focus on Africa. Thereby, implications of key issues such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, patriarchy, type of sports, patriotism, and media coverage are considered.

Lack of female sporting role models

The lack of female SRMs is frequently discussed in international manuals, reports, and strategies which aim at a development of female sport and/or women's and girls' empowerment through sport. Since societal values and norms differ in each setting, the 'lack of culturally relevant role models' is identified as an especially significant obstacle to female physical activity (UN 2007, 18). Particularly in gender-stereotyped domains such as sport, the selection of male SRMs by females may be related to the unavailability, scarcity, and invisibility of female SRMs (Ely 1994; Gibson and Cordova 1999; Singh, Vinnicombe, and James 2006).

A lack of female SRMs was noted as a key issue in the *Brighton Declaration* in 1994 and prominently re-emphasized in the 2002 *Montreal Toolkit*.[2] This inhibiting issue still warrants attention 20 years after Brighton, as it appears in the 2014 *Helsinki Legacy* (IWG 2014, 7):

> Without women leaders, decision makers and role models and gender sensitive boards and management with women and men within sport and physical activity, equal opportunities for women and girls will not be achieved.

The 'International Working Group on Sport for Development and Peace' did also address the gap in its recommendations to governments (SDP IWG 2008, 162):

> Provide female role models. Recruit positive, enthusiastic, and encouraging girls and women as coaches, referees and officials. Developing a talented pool of female leaders is an urgent need in most countries because few females occupy such positions.

A similar directive to increase the number of actively involved females in sport was provided in a study that specified the importance of female SRMs to be locally rooted for the sake of ownership and sustainability:

> The organisation of sports groups and programmes should include women in key roles, such as coaching and mentors, and role models drawn from within local communities and schools. These should reflect differences in perspectives and interests, (...), to ensure continuity of engagement in sports and physical activities throughout life. (Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore 2005, 7)

Consolidated findings from various SDP programmes also demonstrate the need for a holistic gender perspective to tackle inequality:

> The establishment of positive role models and development of mentoring systems are important strategies. Positive role models and support are not only required for girls and young women; there is also a critical need for gender-sensitive male athletes, coaches,

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> journalists and other leaders to provide positive role models and support for boys and young men. (UN 2007, 30)

As is clear from the above examples, the lack of female SRMs was and is widely identified as an issue in need of significant attention. However, a simple quantitative increase of sportswomen in key positions does not automatically foster gender equity or female empowerment as these are both outcomes and processes. Therefore, just 'adding women' and raising the number of visible stereotypical SRMs are a short-sighted and even counterproductive solution. They remain invisible and irrelevant, if they are not seriously covered by the media, not allowed to speak out, or not in charge of key domains (Yancey, Siegel, and McDaniel 2002; Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005).

Certain stereotyped female SRMs can even reinforce existing forms of depreciation and 'subjugate women through an intensification of feminine expectations' (Engh 2010, 75). Constructing and presenting female SRMs who fully conform to sociocultural expectations and sex-role stereotypes mask hindering structures for 'deviant individuals' who do not adhere to these traditionally assumed ideals of femininity (Hargreaves 2000). Most reviewed SDP publications did mention the importance and lack of female SRMs, but did unsufficiently provide recommendations for adequate recruitment, training, advocacy, incentives, etc. Moreover, the scarcity of literature from the 'Global South' needs to be stressed and the caution regarding knowledge transfers from one context to another.

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Types and characteristics of 'sporting role models'

In order to organize the discussion of SRMs, three categories on a 'continuum of interaction' between an observer and a potential SRM are proposed (adapted from Pleiss and Feldhusen 1995; MacCallum and Beltman 2002). This typology reaches from 'high/intensive degree of interaction' (type 1) such as parents or mentors to 'low/no degree of interaction' (type 3) such as famous athletes; type 2 is in between. Depending on the context, observers can be young participants, peers, or fans. A predominance of personal one-to-one support by close family members and mentors (type 1) is fairly uncontested. This article therefore turns major attention to type 2 SRMs and considers SDP coaches as an example, and famous athletes for type 3 SRMs. Both have the potential to influence participants and staff of SDP programmes.

Before the expected value of female SRMs is scrutinized, general characteristics of potentially influential SRMs are identified. Attributes of SRMs are not identical for every sociocultural setting, and may have regional or even local limitations (Whannel 2002). Basic characteristics of SRMs depend on contextual myths, tradition, popular memory, and value systems. If a sportsperson wants to achieve heroic status, he or she has to 'embod[y] the elements that a society holds most dear' (Maguire 2009, 1261). Moreover, the selection process is also determined by the observer's age, media access, and personal and idiosyncratic priorities which are subject to change over time (Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore 2005; Giuliano et al. 2007). Specific attributes of role model are often picked at the expense of selecting 'entire' models with all their strengths and weaknesses (Biskup and Pfister 1999; Gibson 2004).

What are the factors which promote the emulation of a model's behaviour? Bandura (1986) and Lockwood and Kunda (1997) emphasize 'similarity' as well as 'attainability and relevance' in terms of role modelling. The more a model and an observer are similar, the more likely that the model's behaviour is considered relevant and worthy of imitation. If a role model is not both attainable and relevant, demotivating effects may occur.

However, personalities who influence observers do not necessarily have to be famous. They do not even have to be successful, since individuals learn from both positive and negative role models (Bandura 1986; Gibson 2004). Moreover, many scholars argue that learners who observe a coping model are more likely to acquire self-regulatory skills enabling them to perform well and stay more motivated than learners who are exposed to expert or mastery models (Weiss et al. 1998; Kitsantas, Zimmermann, and Cleary 2000; Singh, Vinnicombe, and James 2006). Since coping models had or have to defy adversities to succeed, many observers can easily identify with them.

There is also a difference between male and female SRMs which confirms 'gendered heroism' (Hargreaves 2000). While a sportsman can easily combine his athletic and private life with socially expected masculinity, sportswomen need to find compromises. Potential inconsistencies between heteronormativity, femininity, moral values, and sport necessitate adaptations to meet marketing criteria, and to obtain media coverage or public attention. Such requirements for female SRMs need to be cumulatively met, since an empathetic, successful, and skilled female coach, for example, can still lose her reputation and legitimacy as an SRM, if she 'comes out' as a lesbian in a strongly heteronormative setting.

This is especially true for those female athletes who perform and succeed in male-dominated sports:

> Sportswomen, too, can be stylized as stars, but they are faced with the problem that the competitive sport they practise also has its negative side and that turning athletes into idols necessarily follows the logic of the market. Consequently, (...), the effect of sports stars being taken as models is frequently quite ambivalent. The message can also be: even if you are an athlete, try to be sexy. (Biskup and Pfister 1999, 213)

Thus, stereotyped symbols of femininity and heterosexuality seem compulsory to counterbalance the masculine traits associated with sports such as rugby, ice hockey, or boxing (Griffin 2002).

Since glory and wealth are not predictable for any athlete, it is risky to be 'deviant' and challenge sociocultural norms. Nevertheless, success can often retrospectively legitimize deviance. For example, outstanding African female SRMs such as Maria Mutola (Mozambique) or Nawal El Moutawakel (Morocco) dared to trespass sociocultural boundaries (Meier and Saavedra 2009). These female SRMs gained legitimacy because they excelled internationally, thus evoking national pride. Nowadays, they are highly respected personalities inside and outside Africa.

In sum, women who perform in traditionally male domains set new standards. They must aptly balance career aspirations and display heterosexual feminine appearance to become attractive and acceptable SRMs. The less 'famous' a female athlete, the more heteronormativity is needed to counterbalance a muscular body. For male SRMs, in contrast, there is no need to juggle several roles, since they are not challenging prevailing sociocultural norms (Giuliano et al. 2007). SRMs are never just famous or heroic in isolation. But they are socially constructed and reflective of values of their environment and era (Maguire 2009).

Gendered choice of sporting role models

Based on the 'model-observer similarity' and the theory on 'attainability and relevance' (Bandura 1986; Lockwood and Kunda 1997), it might be assumed that only female athletes performing in specific sports are selected as SRMs for girls and women. But this is not the case. There are relatively consistent findings that girls and women tend to choose

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both male and female role models, while boys and men usually avoid female role models (Bandura 1986; Gibson and Cordova 1999; Yancey, Siegel, and McDaniel 2002; Giuliano et al. 2007).

Many scholars corroborate that 'gendered heroism' influences the choice of role models (Biskup and Pfister 1999; Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005). There is a gender-based difference between selected attributes of SRMs. In most instances, males focus on performance and achievement of SRMs, while females often prefer SRMs who display empathetic, prosocial, and democratic behaviour (Gilbert and Trudel 2004; Meier 2005; Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005; Giuliano et al. 2007).

'Availability' and 'status' are two main factors which determine the choice of SRMs. The availability hypothesis suggests that women and girls tend to choose male SRMs due to the unavailability and scarcity of female SRMs (Ely 1994; Gibson and Cordova 1999; Singh, Vinnicombe, and James 2006). Thereby, a correlation between available female SRMs and selected female SRMs is assumed. Despite broad support for the availability hypothesis, it needs to be stressed that even the availability of outstanding sportswomen does not guarantee that girls and women select female SRMs. Thus, the perception that a society lacks female SRMs is actually more about the invisibility of them in popular culture as opposed to the idea that none exist (Gibson and Cordova 1999; Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005; Murrell and Zagenczyk 2006). The second aspect is 'status' and validates the fact that youth and especially children tend to select 'outstanding individuals' who adhere to traditional gender stereotypes (Bandura 1986; Biskup and Pfister 1999; Gibson and Cordova 1999). Based on 'gendered heroism' (Hargreaves 2000) and the 'model-observer similarity' (Bandura 1986), boys and men are offered both similarity and status by picking male SRMs (Giuliano et al. 2007). However, there seems to be a contradiction for girls and women who choose male SRMs. The paradox of available, but not visible, female SRMs especially relates to athletic women who excel in 'traditionally male' sports. They are often socially marginalized and belittled by media coverage which reduces their status and attractiveness as SRMs (Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005). The societal power status of an adult represents a key factor of cross-sex or same-sex modelling for children. Girls and boys generally observe and learn from both sexes, but often display selective behavioural patterns (Bandura 1986) which also involve status.

An Australian survey (Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005) established an 'SRM profile' appealing to female teenagers. As observed in many other settings, only a few adolescent girls in this survey selected a sport personality as role model. Among the participants in this survey who did pick an SRM, the following attributes were identified: 'mostly female, under 40 years of age, similar sporting background with a combination of essential feminine and masculine personal qualities' (Vescio, Wilde, and Crosswhite 2005, 166). Addressing this seemingly ideological contradiction, Giuliano et al. (2007, 187) state:

> [W]omen tend to have both male and female athletic role models because they cannot meet all of their needs with one or the other. They are drawn to men for their higher status and ready availability, and they seek out women for the similarity that same-gender role models can provide.

After scrutinizing the gendered choice of SRMs, the next section will provide a contextual link to the theory on SRMs presented thus far.

Research on female SRMs and African SDP programmes

The following two case studies draw on empirical research results collected in Lusaka (Zambia) and Port Elizabeth (South Africa) in 2008–2009 with two SDP organizations.

The research was interpretative and qualitative in design. It adopted a mixed methods approach involving questionnaires, interviews, self-recording video, and focus group discussions. The data collection was conducted with adult staff ($N = 71$) and children ($N = 138$) of Black communities involved in programmes focussing on football for social change.

Overall, this research on SRMs revealed some trends despite the difference of the sites: the predominance of male footballers, the tendency to select male SRMs, and the lack of SRMs for girls and women in general (and the lack of sportswomen in particular). Almost half of all male participants chose African male footballers as personal SRMs, followed by international male footballers. The majority of female participants did not mention any SRM. However, contrasting with the boys, girls' choices were more diversified.[3] More astonishing was the obvious popularity of theoretically 'deviant', but outstanding female athletes such as the boxer Esther Phiri in Zambia and the swimmer Natalie du Toit[4] in South Africa. They were both selected by girls as personal SRMs.

When asked specifically about their favourite 'female sport star', Natalie du Toit was by far the most mentioned personality in South Africa. The successful White Paralympic and Olympic swimmer was nominated by more than half of all consulted coaches and participants.

In Zambia, men selected a woman as a personal SRM, and this was Phiri. When participants were specifically questioned about their preferred female athlete, 60% of male and female coaches as well as boys selected the Zambian boxer. In contrast, only a third of the girls mentioned Phiri, while most of them did not know any sportswoman.

In support of the theory on 'attainability and relevance', same-gender similarity was marginal in these two case studies. Effects of patriotism, socio-economic, ethnical, and cultural background seemed to be much stronger than gender similarity. Swimming in South Africa and boxing in Zambia are popular sports linked to national pride, and thus relevant to the lives of participants. Furthermore, both athletes serve as 'coping models' as they faced major challenges on their way to success. Finally, the dimension of a newsworthy momentum also needs emphasis regarding SRMs selection. Since the Olympic Games in Beijing were a failure for South Africa, the very successful Paralympic athletes restored the nation's pride.[5] One of these victorious athletes was Natalie du Toit who won five gold medals and received broad media coverage. These results indicate that athletic excellence fuelled by patriotism may soften sociocultural norms pertaining to SRMs and ultimately transcend gender, ethnic, or other constraints.

Assumed value and functions of female SRMs

Main SRM characteristics and selection parameters have been defined. But why are female SRMs important? What are the assumed claims and values expected from female SRMs in general and for SDP in particular? Nine functions attributed to female SRMs are now presented, but this list is not exhaustive. Generally, these potential values apply to any SRM type, since not only high-profile sporting individuals are effective models. Influential personalities may also come from families, local clubs, or school environments (Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore 2005). Some values are more likely to be displayed by top-level sportswomen (type 3 SRMs), whereas other favourable functions are rather attributed to recreational female coaches (type 2 SRMs) working for SDP programmes. The presented functions of SRMs may partly overlap and influence one another.

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Participation

One major claim which is attributed to female SRMs relates to an increased physical activity of women and girls. It is argued that 'The use of high-profile female sport ambassadors and role models can [also] be effective in promoting female participation' (SDP IWG 2008, 160). However, precisely how such an effect occurs is rarely described. Furthermore, potential demotivating parameters also need consideration when selecting female SRMs who should help to inspire participation. Since self-efficacy is partly influenced by vicarious experiences mediated through modelled success, the use of mastery models is not always appropriate (Bandura 1997). If the missing similarity, for example, between a skilled, well-toned SRM and a less talented, overweight observer is neglected, participation may even be inhibited. Thus, in certain circumstances, coping models – who often are type 2 SRMs – are more promising SRMs in terms of boosting participation. In addition, female and male SRMs may facilitate women's and girls' sport participation. Interaction intensity, long-term commitment, as well as cultural and personal relevance of an SRM also trigger female participation. These factors may be provided by either male or female SRMs with appropriate mindsets.

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Leadership

The second function of SRMs consists of featured and promoted leadership which is linked to participation. More visible women as decision-makers as well as displayed female leadership skills may motivate women and girls, thus increasing female participation at all levels in sport (UN 2007). This claim involves a differentiation between two main 'leadership functions' of female SRMs: first, key positions are envisaged and occupied by powerful female SRMs to set an example. Second, female SRMs explicitly and implicitly teach leadership skills and constantly improve their own competence by doing so. The first 'leadership function' rather refers to type 3 SRMs, whereas the second added-value is often linked to type 2 SRMs.

Since prestigious jobs in international sport bodies are still predominantly occupied by men, female leadership at the institutional level is indeed significant. Women who hold powerful positions in sport bodies may also publicly corroborate female leadership capabilities, thus tackling stereotypes. These female SRMs, moreover, symbolize change and pave the way for new structures and social attitudes (UN 2008). However, we must remain mindful that a simple increase in the number of female leaders is contested terrain, since 'statistical changes in representation do not, in themselves, guarantee cultural changes in gender dynamics' (Brackenridge 2007, 28). Additional quality standards need to be applied which indicate long-term progress in terms of equity.

Leadership skills are not only displayed top-down in public, but also foster bottom-up personal growth which may affect young participants and female SRMs themselves. Team sports may especially improve leadership skills; being a referee, captain, or coach can require skills that may be transferred into 'real life'. Being considered a leader and an SRM does likely entail personal responsibility and individual development.

Advocacy

One of the classic claims regarding SRMs involves advocacy. In other words, mostly adult female SRMs are expected to advocate for opportunities for girls and other women and can do so in a variety of ways. This article identifies three sub-functions of female advocates: (1) mandated SRMs who endorse campaigns, (2) proactive SRMs who launch their own

initiatives, and (3) sensitive SRMs who promote specific messages.[6] The first two sub-functions apply in tendency to type 3, whereas the third rather relates to type 2.

Many UN entities mandate sport personalities to reach out to vulnerable groups (UNICEF 2007). Thereby, adequate SRMs need to be identified which considers the topic, the sociocultural context, and the target group. There is, for example, an explicit need for female SRMs in sub-Saharan Africa, since female HIV prevalence in this region is considerably higher than among males. To further increase SRM impact, both 'HIV free and HIV positive sports personalities' should be recruited to pass on preventive messages (IOC and NOC Morocco 2004, 208).

Some SRMs proactively create high-profile or grass-roots foundations to raise awareness or to mobilize resources. Through such personal initiatives, an SRM transcends the advocate status and acts as 'a reformer, or even a revolutionary' (Meier and Saavedra 2009, 1161). Nawal El Moutawakel and Tegla Loroupe are two examples of African female SRMs who strive for social change. Besides personal determination, a certain social status and financial resources are needed to successfully pursue this kind of advocacy.

Type 3 SRMs are not the only effective advocates for specific topics, but individuals who work with young people on a day-to-day basis can also serve this function. Both male and female coaches in SDP programmes have the potential to address sensitive issues on and off the playing field (UNICEF 2007). However, all advocacy messages are only credible, if both the model's behaviour and message are authentic and consistent (Lyle 2009). In this sense, content seems to be as relevant as its way of delivery (Petitpas et al. 2005).

Gender stereotypes

Female SRMs are often expected to be catalysts that challenge gender stereotypes. This 'catalyst function' is mostly attributed to well-known type 3 SRMs, but it is also relevant for type 2 SRMs.

At an elite level, challenging social attitudes involves multiple sub-functions for female SRMs:

> Watching female athletes participate in high-profile sporting events, such as the Olympics, can transform male and female perceptions of the capacities of girls and women. Through their achievements, elite female athletes dispel the misconception that sport is not biologically or socially appropriate for females. An Olympic medalist (...) stimulates national pride, unity and a sense of accomplishment. When the athlete is female, she provides a visible demonstration of what is possible for women to achieve. (SDP IWG 2008, 153)

Female SRMs may particularly tackle existing norms if they excel in sport codes with a masculine connotation such as football in Africa. Again, the sociocultural context is crucial, since a woman playing football/soccer in the USA does not necessarily challenge prevailing gender norms.

The more international success an athlete achieves for his or her country, the less likely it is that they will receive criticism related to 'deviance' (as linked to ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, sexuality, etc.). For example, the South African runner Caster Semenya[7] raises the question of whether she would have received as much public support if she had not won gold. Her outstanding performance seemed to trigger South African patriotism, thus defying the potential for gender-based prejudice.[8]

At a grass-roots level, competent female coaches or athletes (type 2 SRMs) may affect both female and male participants, staff, spectators, journalists, etc. However, quality

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relationships and long-term commitment seem to be more influential than an ephemeral session with an outstanding sportswoman. But an 'eye-opening effect' may also occur when type 3 athletes who do not adhere to traditional gender stereotypes visit SDP programmes.

Role modelling through female athletes may also happen among peers. For instance, Brady and Khan (2002) describe the case of Kenyan female footballers who won the prestigious *Norway Cup*. This victory changed the sceptical male attitudes regarding female capabilities within the organization. Thus, female SRMs do not have to be adults to have an impact. Sex-segregated programmes may offer safer and more gender-sensitive structures. But they miss an opportunity to address gender-equitable values in day-to-day interaction (UN 2008). It is important to note that the process that entails female SRMs challenging gender stereotypes is not linear. Moreover, a differentiation is needed between 'challenging stereotypes' and 'transforming gender roles and structures'. Top-down and bottom-up initiatives may entail the transformation of existing sociocultural gender dynamics more slowly and over a long period of time.

Inspiration

A fifth sphere comprises the influence of an SRM as somebody to be followed and admired. SRMs become inspirational 'lodestars' and are believed to provide guidance in life. This function also involves a touch of idealism and spirituality. The lack of female SRMs means that youth are potentially deprived of important emotional and symbolic support:

> Without female athletes to look up to, girls miss out on the encouragement, inspiration, and exhilaration that can come from looking up to, and cheering for, a sports idol. (Huggins and Randell 2007, 5)

But again, inspiration and encouragement do not depend on fame or celebrity status. Interviewed staff and participants of SDP programmes such as 'Moving the Goalposts' (Kenya), AKWOS[9] (Rwanda), and 'Box Girls' (Kenya) identified female coaches and referees as their SRMs:

> Girls and women who have strong female role models may be encouraged to stay positive and to protect and take better care of themselves. (. . .). These female role models often represent the possibility of a happier and healthier life despite hardships. (Women Win 2008, 17)

Inspiration and encouragement gained through SRMs are hard to measure and usually transcend the sport world.

Ethics

Since sport closely relates to notions of 'fair play' and 'sportspersonship', SRMs are commonly expected to behave in an ethically extraordinary manner. It is often assumed that SRMs must be moral exemplars worth of emulation. So far, these claims are valid for male and female SRMs alike. It is useful to differentiate between role models in a descriptive and a normative sense. Following this pattern, a type 3 SRM is a role model in a descriptive sense 'whose conduct (or life) is actually the object of imitation or is at least believed to be worthy of imitation' (Feezell 2005, 22). But since SRMs are not morally 'better people', only some of them are also normative role models who behave in a truly ethical way. However, any sport personality has to reckon with the possibility of being picked as someone's SRMs – whether they want to be or not. An SRM's possible

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influence is mainly linked to his or her awareness and commitment. But even their willingness and dedication do not guarantee that modelled behaviour will be imitated. Observers themselves decide which characteristics of which SRM they want to adopt or not.

Against the background that the contradiction between 'being a woman' and 'being a sportswoman' still prevails in many sociocultural contexts, the concept of 'bracketed morality' (Bredemeier 1994) gains relevance for female SRMs. 'Bracketed morality' describes socially undesired behaviour which is legitimate in a sport context but deemed immoral in 'real life'. This concept involves both transformational opportunities and risks related to gender equity. It may, for instance, enable girls and women to wear trousers and run during a sport session in rural Zambia which would otherwise not be socially acceptable in public. Step-by-step, rigid ethical norms may be softened and opportunities created for increased physical activity. Nevertheless, potential female SRMs (types 2 and 3) in such areas have to set good examples of socially desired behaviour to be respected. Their influence needs to be more subtle, since 'undecent' moral behaviour risks being sanctioned. Constant negotiations with parents and communities driven by female SRMs are necessary to assure safe settings on and off the pitch.

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Safeguarding and prevention

The seventh suggested function of female SRMs concerns safeguarding. This function is predominantly related to type 2 SRMs. Many SDP programmes provide caring peers or adults who support young participants and bridge the gap between home and school. Such relationships are usually valuable, but may also bear the risk of emotional or physical exploitation. Therefore, safeguarding measures are necessary to prevent harm. Even though boys may also face sexual violence, girls belong to the most vulnerable group. Besides the establishment of codes of conduct, specific training and more female staff at all levels can additionally work to safeguard children in sport (Women Win 2008; UNICEF 2010). Providing female SRMs can offer trustworthy contact persons for children. Teenagers should especially have the choice to share problems (e.g. reproductive health issues or violence) with available male or female peers or adults.

In terms of safeguarding and prevention, it must be noted that male SRMs who speak out against any form of gender-based violence or discrimination are extremely important. The UNICEF (2007) manual for football coaches gives practical advice:

> Sit your players down and talk with them about respect, teamwork, tolerance and integrity. (. . .). Talk directly about racism and gender discrimination. Suggest they treat everyone the way they themselves would like to be treated. (3)

SRMs who implicitly and explicitly display an attitude of 'zero tolerance' towards any form of harm and discrimination apply a preventive standard.

Media and corporates

The eighth assumed function of female SRMs concerns the interaction between business, sport, and media. Type 3 female SRMs may fuel and at the same time interrupt the 'vicious circle' regarding the lack of media coverage, resources, success, sponsorships, and fans which again seems to justify limited media coverage for female SRMs. Even if sportswomen perform extremely well, the general public and sponsors will not react to marginal media attention. Non-existent or low-quality media reports reinforce traditionally

biased female sport coverage, and thus also determine the availability of SRMs. Reliable journalism may 'construct' and foster female SRMs and challenge existing attitudes:

> Non-discriminatory portrayal of female athletes in sport media and marketing could not only provide positive role models that encourage more women and girls to become athletes, but it could also persuade more women to become consumers of sport media and other products, as well as positively influence gender stereotypes and the sexualization of women in all areas of society. (UN 2007, 27)

In recent years, more and more women have obtained decision-making positions within the world of sport. Nonetheless, Mills (2010, 132) describes the 'lack of female representatives in corporate and media structures' as a main obstacle for the advancement of female sport. In terms of good practice, she reports on the unprecedented investment of an oil company in South African women's football which created new market opportunities:

> Female footballers could serve as much needed icons and role models in society. (. . .). There could be enormous positive impacts on inclusive participation of girls in physical activity due to increased visibility of female [SRMs], and as a result of the process of 'normalizing' women playing sport. This would greatly contribute to neutralising gender inequalities and lend to women realising their full potential.

Giving back

The idea of 'giving back to the community' (May 2009) is an expectation primarily targeting type 3 SRMs after their retirement:

> More than ever, we, the athletes, have an active role to play within society. (. . .). As ambassadors and role models, athletes should dedicate themselves by conveying the values of sport and Olympism to younger generations. (. . .). As athletes, we have received a great deal from sport, and it is now up to us to give something in return. (Bubka 2004, 1)

Due to the different social status of types 2 and 3 female SRMs, their scope of 'giving back' is not identical. Even though 'giving back' is basically expected from both male and female SRMs, it is quite different for those sportswomen who challenged sociocultural norms. Acceptance of athletic females usually drops as teenage girls develop into women. Therefore, some retired sportswomen have to respect existing norms after a phase of 'non-conformism'. 'Giving back' means an appreciation of the offered opportunities. But communities which disapprove of sporting females – especially if they excel in traditionally male sports – are not likely to appreciate 'experienced deviance' being passed on to future generations (Kabwila Kapasula 2010). Thus, 'giving back' in these circumstances often means conciliation by displaying heteronormative female behaviour such as getting married and giving birth to children.

Summary and conclusion

In this article, the potential value and functions of female SRMs have been outlined. To summarize, both types 2 and 3 of female SRMs are valuable, if deployed carefully and can potentially promote gender equity and empowerment through SDP programmes. There is no general recipe on how to mitigate the lack of female SRMs or to 'construct' them. Change should be enhanced on individual, structural, and societal levels by simultaneous top-down (gender policies, etc.) and bottom-up (educational and recreational frameworks) measures. Following an interactionist approach, SRMs themselves also form and have to deal with this system. SRMs need to take a stance to either corroborate

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prevailing structures or challenge them at the expense of being criticized or even discriminated against.

Public appreciation exists for mostly mainstream SRMs and the lack and absence of sport personalities who do not exactly conform to gender roles, heteronormativity, exemplary body forms, or health status reflects the limited tolerance for difference within a society. Older, Paralympic, queer, or HIV positive sportswomen who at the same time excel physically and challenge prevailing social norms are still marginalized. Somehow ironically, such empowering SRMs display archetypical heroic attributes such as bravery, selflessness, and loyalty, but are not recognized due to existing 'gendered heroism' (Hargreaves 2000). Abundant media coverage of mainstream SRMs does not make them 'imprints of reality'. SRMs are constructed 'snapshots' of an epoch which reflect existing values and norms of a sociocultural setting.

Even though more female SRMs at all levels are necessary and possible, role models can never be predetermined or imposed. SRMs are selected by the observer who also decides on the characteristics, if any, that he or she wants to emulate. In addition, behavioural patterns of SRMs may change over time. Thus, the selection of SRMs or different role model traits is an individualistic and dynamic process (Gibson 2004; Singh, Vinnicombe, and James 2006).

Rather than just increasing female SRMs in numbers, attention should be dedicated to the selection variety. SDP programmes should work with SRMs who really matter to the target group. Of course relevance and attainability are subjective issues depending on age, sex, ethnicity, disability, education, sport disciplines, and social status. But if available SRMs for socio-economically deprived children, for example, mainly consist of mastery models, then efforts should be made to also provide coping models. The broader and more heterogeneous the line-up of potential SRMs, the more easily an observer can identify with an SRM or certain model traits. Girls do not necessarily need female SRMs to be inspired or motivated, but female SRMs may have symbolic power and provide an additional spectrum, especially related to gender stereotypes. Again, gender sensitivity does not depend on being male or female, but on mindset and training. In any case, it is of utmost importance for a credible SRM to be authentic and to deliver consistent messages and actions (Lyle 2009).

SDP programmes can tap into the capabilities and resources of female athletes and coaches who are gradually gaining recognition in many places and become well-known SRMs. International success often legitimizes 'deviant' individuals who may have more leeway to challenge existing gender norms. SDP programmes could collaborate with or occasionally invite famous female SRMs as 'eye-openers' for staff, participants, and spectators. An outstanding female footballer, for example, could broaden horizons by demonstrating her skills. Such effects always depend on the sociocultural setting and could also be corroborated by a top-level male dancer. However, most SDP staff members (type 2 SRMs) are not famous. But they are more attainable and easily reachable in daily life. They cannot benefit from the 'celebrity asset', and therefore either need to conform to expected gender roles or face more social resistance. Type 2 female SRMs may challenge gender dynamics in a more subtle way in the long term. Many of these 'everyday SRMs' are directly connected to children's lives which underscore their value. Quality relationships between reliable SRMs and participants need to be provided and taken care of. Therefore, an assessment of the degree of interaction, similarity, relevance, and attainability between potential SRMs and participants is crucial.

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Notes

1. Benjamin Elijah Mays (1894–1984) was an American minister, sociologist, and civil rights activist.
2. See http://www.iwg-gti.org/@Bin/22427/Brighton+Declaration_EN.pdf; http://www.canada2002.org/tool_eng.html
3. Bryan Habana (Rugby), Makhaya Ntini (Cricket), and Serena and Venus Williams (Tennis).
4. In 2008, Natalie du Toit was the first-ever athlete to participate in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games in the same year.
5. South Africa won only one Olympic silver in Beijing 2008 and ranked at the 70th medal count position. In contrast, the South African Paralympic team 2008 won 30 medals and achieved the 6th position.
6. Some SRMs, of course, are simultaneously involved in more than one sub-function.
7. After winning the women's 800-m IAAF World Championship race in Berlin, Semenya was confronted with accusations regarding her sex, suspended, and forced to undergo highly questionable tests. After lengthy assessments, the runner was finally rehabilitated in 2010.
8. See http://www.awid.org/eng/Library/Caster-Semenya-is-a-hero-but-in-South-Africa-being-different-can-be-deadly-for-a-woman
9. Association of Kigali Women in Sports.

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