

One Win Can Lead to Another

The opportunities and challenges posed by mega sporting events to promote gender equity

By Women Win

The profile of women's football is progressing, not just for the passionate female players and coaches who have always pushed, but for the mainstream. In this edition of the WWC, global growth is evident with new teams such as Jamaica, Chile, Scotland and South Africa making their debut performance. In the past year, FIFA released their first comprehensive Women's Football strategy. Grassroots girls' programmes are sprouting up all over the world, including in places where there is practically no legacy of girls' and women's sport. For example, the Diya Women's Football Club has been supporting growth of the sport not just in big cities like Karachi, but also in remote areas such as Tharparkar. In the Belameling refugee settlement in rural Uganda, girls and women are learning the game thanks to the vision and commitment of the Community Psychosocial Support Organisation.

The evolution of the women's game has an ebb and flow characteristic to it, often advancing during high-profile events and situations and rolling back in some manner when the spotlight isn't on. The top-ranked team in the world (U.S.) is embroiled in a lawsuit against their national governing body for equal pay. The Canadian and Afghanistan national women's teams have both unveiled massive sexual harassment cases with male coaches and administrative staff. In fact, if you look at the Olympique Lyonnais team photo, almost all the coaches are men – a far too common scenario reflecting a lack of women in leadership positions across the board. Not to mention, most girls in the world still will never play sport, including football, and experience the documented host of benefits that come from that experience.

Women Win is a nongovernmental organisation with the mission of advancing the playing field that empowers adolescent girls and young women to achieve their rights through sport and play. For more than a decade, we have focused not only on expanding girls' access TO sport, but more importantly, investing in the social benefits that occur through participation at all levels of sport. Our work has impacted the lives of over 3 million girls in more than 100 countries.

We recognize that major sporting events, like the WWC, *can* be powerful levers to shift gender norms and address most pressing issues of inequality in society, especially when it's a women's-specific or mixed-gender event. It's not a coincidence that 73% of the French population believes women's football promotes gender equality in society¹. However, mega sporting events are only an opportunity, not a promise, to make positive changes in the lives of girls and women. Actually, the reverse can be true. There is a documented history of men's mega-sporting events jeopardizing women's rights. For example, there have been reported increases in sex trafficking during the (American Football) Super Bowl to satiate the appetites of the massive influx of male spectators. According to a report published by the Pathway Project, domestic abuse increases by an average 38% when the England (men's) football team loses.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/767068/women-s-football-and-gender-equality-france/>

Leveraging mega events to improve gender outcomes is a complex affair and requires incredible intention to strategy, programme design, partnership building and evaluation. Women Win has experienced this first-hand with our One Win Leads to Another (OWLA) programme. The programme developed in partnership with UN Women and funded by the International Olympic Committee with support from the Sweden Postcode Foundation, originally as part of the legacy of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. The goal of was a reduction in harmful gender stereotypes and related behaviours. In order to achieve that goal, we aimed our efforts at two outcomes:

1. High-quality sports programmes instil a gender equality perspective for adolescent girls and boys
2. Powerful sustainable national and regional partnerships expand to promote change to empower girls

There were obvious benefits of working in a mega-event setting. However, the context in Rio de Janeiro and Brasil more broadly during the Olympic Games added a layer of complexity and challenge to implementation. For instance, there was a rise in violence during the lead up to the Games and during the Games themselves, which made traveling to/from the programme a safety concern for girls, their parents and facilitators. Inflation due to the influx of money to the city made costs for basic things like transportation higher than anticipated. Furthermore, our negotiations with the Ministry of Education to implement the programme in schools fell apart before the first session event started due to a change in government and a resulting policy that 'gender ideology' could not be taught in schools.

Despite the difficulties, OWLA had a clearly transformative impact on the girls (and facilitators) who participated. For example, girls increased their perception about being a leader (47% to 63%), recognized skills they are proud of (88% to 94%) and strongly agreed with statements regarding standing up for themselves and saying "no" to their friends (42% to 50%, 51% to 64%).

The 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup has promised to be a powerful milestone for the evolution of women's football. As the opening whistle blows in stadiums around France, including in Lyon, the home of the historic football club that has managed to develop a world-class women's programme, it's a fine time to celebrate. France is, after all, one of the most developed women's football nations globally. But off the pitch, it's a country that the World Economic Forum ranks 57th in the world, because of issues related to economic and political inequity. As a matter of fact, France ranks 129th in the world for wage equity. It is our hope that practitioners of sport and social change, policy makers, multi-lateral agencies, national governing bodies of sport, companies and media celebrate AND go beyond the 'feel good' stories, and seize the moment to address structural gender inequity in the host country and around the world. Game on!

To read the full article and learn Women Win's experience and learnings related to designing and delivering programmes in mega-event settings, click [here](#).