

Women, sport and development

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Is it curious that there should be a particular document addressing the issue of “women, sport, and development”? Why not one focused on men? I pose these questions to get at the heart of a dilemma – Why, if women and girls do engage in sport, are they still marginalized or at best a “special case” in the dominant practices, ideologies and organizations concerned with sport? Certainly in the beginning of the 21st century, it is not unusual for girls and women all over the world to participate in sport in some way or another. As well, over the last three decades, there has been considerable organized, focused attention on women’s role in development. Over the last 15 years an organized international women in sports movement also has gained momentum. Nevertheless, female participation in sport still raises a series of reactions, issues and questions that are theoretically challenging, culturally revealing and programmatically pressing. This emulates earlier discussions surrounding women and development. Furthermore, much work still needs to be done to systematically work through the relationships between women, sport and development – something that has just begun. Questions posed should include not only what are barriers to and opportunities for women’s and girls’ involvement in sport, but also what are the presumed benefits and costs, the variations over time and place, and the impact on women and girls of existing sporting ventures. Finally, a consideration of women in sport and development should sensitize us to the gendered implications of any and all work related to sport and development, not just to that focused on females. This article will examine the dilemma, recount a bit of the history of activism, and suggest some specific programmatic issues researchers and practitioners should bear in mind.

Unpacking the “dilemma”

At essence, sport involves disciplined body practices, which are rooted in systems of beliefs about physical possibilities, including those of sexual difference. If sexual difference is translated into gender distinctions and unequal power relations through socially infused body practices, these distinctions and inequalities will be magnified in sporting practice and ideology as they are reproduced or transgressed.¹ Emerging from a particular historical trajectory beginning in the West, the dominant modern practice of sport has largely been a hegemonic masculine enterprise. It is not that women and girls are unfamiliar with physical labor, nor that women and girls have not participated in what constitutes sport, leisure and play in their particular communities, especially in the “modern” era. Yet, for many, sport still exemplifies and upholds essential masculine traits, and becomes a code for heterosexual male superiority and domination over the feminine. Female participants in the world of sport put their “femininity” at risk and threaten the social order.² Hence, female involvement in sport is often a transgression that needs to be explained, encouraged, prevented, or managed, but somehow is not ‘natural.’

Despite this and actually because of this, many view female involvement in sport as a potential radical and transformative process for women and girls, and possibly for the world of sport and society in general. Sport as an embodied practice may liberate girls and women from constraining hegemonic feminine ideals,³ empower them within their communities, provide positive health and welfare outcomes, and ultimately transform gendered notion leading to a more egalitarian world and unleashing the productive, intellectual and social power of women. This then would contribute to overall development – economic, social and political.

Advocates for female involvement in sport often approach first from a rights perspective, i.e., the sporting world provides benefits both large and small, and girls and women should have access to that world just as boys and men do. Outcomes may have consequences for developmental goals, but the effort to secure access to sport can be an end in itself. Yet, equal opportunities, if they can be achieved, do not necessarily result in equal outcomes. As Michael Messner notes, even if there are greater possibilities than ever for women in sport, and those possibilities do pose a challenge, the center of sport still retains “its conservative role in gender relations,” with the multibillion dollar “sport-media-commercial complex” ever focused on the central men’s sports.⁴ Alternative sport, including modifiers such as women’s, indigenous, gay, extreme, etc., have their niches, but do not radically change the institutional core. If they do approach the “limelight,” Messner argues they may simply be reinforcing white, male hegemony, such as in extreme sports.⁵ For those who envision an alternative gender regime, a liberal approach which secures a niche does not go far enough, given that certain outcomes associated with modern sport – violence to others and one’s own body, misogyny, and homophobia – can make the world of sport uninviting.

There is a further caution to embracing the emancipatory power of sport for women: While acknowledging the global influence of the western sporting trajectory and its gendered forms, the relationship between sport, body practices and gender vary across space and time. For instance, the success of female elite athletes from China in international competition might be greeted as a sign of a progressive sport environment for women. It may be, but it may also reflect gender disparities in which males are encouraged towards more valued intellectual pursuits, while females are ‘relegated’ to the less culturally valued physical endeavors. Scholars have also noted that cultural expectations may make females more compliant and less able to resist potentially abusive aspects of state organized sport development programs.⁶ There is a growing body of research that explores the relationship between gender and sport in many parts of the world, yet there is still more research to be done. What makes sense for one region or one group will not necessarily bear out in another place or time. The lesson is that gender and how gender operates in a community should always be part of preliminary assessment, and one must be open to variances even within a community.

From WID to WIS to WSD: Global women’s movements and grounded practice

Whatever approach one favors, actual practice has been intertwined with international movements advocating women’s issues that have gained momentum over the past 35 years. In 1970, Esther Boserup published *Women’s Role in Economic Development*.⁷ The book, now a classic, marked the beginning of serious attention by academics, policy makers and practitioners to women’s role in development. Boserup specifically critiqued the impact of western style development, which ignored the importance of women’s participation in the economy, chose strategies which undermined their work, and, thereby, inhibited overall economic development. Since then a considerable body of research, analysis, activism, policy, practice and discourse as well as backlash have emerged around the topic of “women in development” (WID).⁸ Practices such as gender sensitivity training have now infused the field of development. Work has focused not only on ‘development,’ but also human rights and law, justice, family planning and fertility, and it has led to countless workshops, projects, organizations and national, regional and world conferences.

While the “WID” movement is by no means defined by official conferences, the United Nations conferences provide snapshots for observing change in practices, discourse and involvement. Out of the first official conference in 1975 in Mexico City, the United Nations

declared 1976-1985 to be the International Decade for Women. Each succeeding women's conference (Table 1), culminating in the 1995 Beijing conference, as well as other international conferences on the environment (Rio, 1992) and population (Cairo, 1993), marked a growing appreciation of the fundamental interrelatedness of women's issues with not just those of development, but with all world issues. The succession of conferences also marked an increasing visibility and efficacy of women from the "developing world," adding a greater diversity of voices.⁹ The Beijing Conference produced a declaration and "Platform for Action" to which 189 governments committed their efforts and resources. Five-year follow up conferences have reaffirmed the "Platform" and assessed progress in specific areas. No doubt there has been significant progress and change; still many NGOs and activists are concerned about the risk of backsliding as well as the efficacy of such conferences. In terms of WID, a veritable industry of government institutions, NGOs, international consultants and foundations exist now, indicating a legitimacy of sorts in the development world.

UN Sponsored World Conferences on Women

www.un.org/womenwatch

1975 - Mexico City

1980 - Copenhagen

1985 - Nairobi, *World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women Forward Looking Strategies*

1995 - Beijing, *Equality, Development and Peace*

Declaration and Platform for Action

2000 - New York, "Beijing+5", 23rd Special session of the UN General Assembly, *Women: 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century*

2005 - New York, "Beijing+10", 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, *Review and Appraisal*, 28 February - 11 March

A primary goal expressed in the Platform is to remove "all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life."¹⁰ Advocating just this, an international women in sport (WIS) movement emerged in the 1990s. WIS movement sought through international collaboration and activism to raise the profile of women in sport. Like the WID movement, there were conferences, declarations and new organizations (Table 2), all of which had influence, but were only part of the story. Similarly to the larger global women's movement, the internationally organized and visible WIS movement and its agenda initially represented the interests, experiences and desires of elite women in the North. Over time, punctuated by the international conferences, the WIS movement has become more inclusive, yet still retains an elite veneer.¹¹ Meanwhile, whether through direct or indirect influence of the WIS movement or in completely unrelated nodes of activity, advocates for women and girl's in sport have been active all over the women developing programs, classes, teams, leagues and opportunities.

The WIS movement did have influence on the official WID movement. In the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies from the 1985 world conference, there is no mention of women's sport or physical education, just one reference to encouraging recreational activities for elderly women (paragraph 286).¹² By 1995, WIS had entered official international discourse, and sport and physical education is mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action, albeit in a limited fashion in sections on education and training, health, power and decision-making and the girl-child. Nevertheless, the WID movement has not focused much on sport, and the WIS movement only began to focus more on development as more Third World participants became involved. WIS is rooted in the development of women's sport, and not primarily in women and development through sport. Still, both movements have served to give notice to the development and sport establishments respectively that women's perspectives must be considered, women must be involved, and gaps in this should be proactively addressed.

World Conferences on Women and Sport and Outcomes

1. May 1994, Brighton, United Kingdom - "Women, Sport and the Challenge of Change"
Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport, www.iwg-gti.org/e/brighton
Establishment of the International Working Group on Women and Sport, www.iwg-gti.org/e/index.htm
2. May 1998, Windhoek, Namibia
Windhoek Call for Action, www.iwg-gti.org/pdfs/call_e.pdf
3. May 2002, Montreal, Canada - "Investigating in Change", www.canada2002.org/e/index.htm
4. May 11-14, 2006, Kumamoto, Japan, www.iwg-gti.org
5. 2010-? (open for bids) - www.iwg-gti.org/e/archives/015-IWG_call_for_bids.htm

Both movements exhibit tensions between liberal equality, i.e., assuring that women have access to the establishment as it is, and a more radical transformation that seeks equity and justice, and incorporates diversity. Both movements have produced declarations or platforms for action that have confronted much of the establishment and forced some discussion, much lip-service, and some backlash, as well as some really change both along the liberal axis of more opportunities, but also in the axis of transformation. Change has occurred. And the declarations and activities have alerted, inspired and reassured many who were or became active in these areas. However, as Jennifer Hargreaves has noted, these movements have been dominated by western feminist perspectives and have only slowly become more inclusive. Even when there are representatives from the South at these meetings, they often represent the elite in their own countries. Rarely do grassroots activists get much say.¹³ Casting these movements as evidence that "sisterhood is global" masks layers of hierarchies and privileges, inequalities and inequities, and the diversity of women's and girl's realities. Paying attention to these realities can help lay the positive foundation for what is not a movement, but an emerging interest in the nexus of women, sport and development (WSD).

Women, Sport and Development: Benefits, Costs, Opportunities and Obstacles

Knowledge of the links and causal factors involved in sport and development is still in its infancy, especially as it applies to females. Still enthusiasm for sport and the pressing needs of development mean that programs and projects are going forward. A major reason to assure participation of girls and women in sport and physical education programs is simply to extend known and presumed benefits of sport to girls and women. General physical health benefits are best known, but there are also the social and psychological benefits both for individuals and groups. It is argued that participation in sport teaches discipline, self-control, self-confidence, independence, leadership skills, and the value of working within rules and structure. Individuals also can gain a sense of physical and psychological efficacy and power through mastery of skills and accomplishment of sporting objectives. Socially, participants gain experience in teamwork, negotiating, winning, losing and planning. Their social networks increase and horizons broaden. They learn more about their community and the world beyond, and thus see possibilities for themselves that they might not have imagined otherwise.¹⁴ Such outcomes, enhanced life skills all around, apply to males as well as females. Involvement in sport may also provide specific benefits to young women, such a greater control of their fertility and a lowered risk of teen pregnancy.¹⁵ In combating the HIV/AIDS pandemic, this may be a valuable intervention. Hence, in multiple ways, sport presents itself as a viable tool in the development tool chest. Given the presumption that women and girls are often disadvantaged relative to males in their societies on many factors (education, social status, physical mobility, freedom and range of choices, etc), if sport offers a means of empowerment, then it makes sense to support opportunities for girls and women to participate. Positive and successful experiences in sport may encourage girls and women in other areas of society.

With the tendency for sport to be a masculine venture in much of the world, those endeavoring to involve women and girls in sport must be prepared to navigate particular obstacles and confront certain issues. These can be grouped into three overarching categories:

- Safety
- Competing obligations
- Gender and Sexuality

Safety is key and has multiple dimensions. As with any sporting activity, the participants should not be exposed to undue physical risk from the equipment, the facility, the training regimen, the play or other participants. Organizers must be aware of and seek to prevent negative outcomes such as permanent injuries from over- or under training (e.g. ACL injuries), and eating disorders.¹⁶ Because of the authority, knowledge and power relationships involved, there is also potential for abuse from teachers, coaches, trainers or club representatives. This should be acknowledged, with clear preventative protocols instituted. For women, avoiding physical and social violence is a major safety concern and takes on particular meanings in relationship to sport. Just getting to and from sporting events may expose women to the risk of violence. Hence, affordable and reliable transportation, reasonable hours for events, and safe sporting locations all loom large for female participants. Social reputation is also a safety issue. Sporting activities often takes place in the public realm, outside the control – and possible protection – of family or community. As well, sport in general, or more likely, a specific sport, such as boxing or football, is often coded in a society as highly masculine. A women or girl seen to dishonor her referent group or overstep gender boundaries may face physical and social punishment by the family or retribution from elements within the community. Convincing families, parents and communities to endorse the participation of girls and even involving them in more concrete ways (e.g. administration, logistics, etc) may be essential.

Another aspect of safety for women and sport deserves attention. Anecdotal evidence and some research indicate a connection between sexual and domestic violence and sport.¹⁷ Programs considering how sport can help with development may look to these links with violence, and work with athletes and fans to change behavior associated with sport. Interestingly on a web site of the Association for Women's Rights in Development, a prominent organization in the WID community, women's sport is barely mentioned at all. Most of its references to sport involve programmatic suggestions to focus men's attention on women's issues, and in noting the presumed connection between sport and violence against women.¹⁸

Addressing safety is not the only issue at hand for women. Other obligations and time constraints are major obstacles to increased female participation in sport. Particular economic circumstances and systems of sexual division of labor mean that women and girls through much of the world have heavy demands on their time and energy with little leisure time available. For many women, sport will not be a primary concern, especially where basic needs such as food, shelter, safety, health care and education are far from adequate. And while sporting opportunities are often linked with education, the two can be in tension on an individual and institutional level, especially with limited resources. Creative and collective solutions will be necessary to allow space and time for sporting activity. For instance, linking sporting opportunities with other activities, such as music and literacy programs, visit to health clinics, market days, etc., may help. Provision of childcare also may enormously increase opportunities. Without doubt, participants – current and prospective – will be able to identify time and resource constraints and possible solutions. Eliciting their views and

incorporating them in the planning, execution and evaluation should be an early and regular part of any program. Finally, the issue of other obligations and time constraints to some extent reflects priorities and expectations of the women and girls and their communities. When there are role models and positive outcomes associated with it, sport for women and girls will move up in priority. Success breeds success. If women's sport brings things that are valued, e.g. remuneration, educational scholarships, transferable skills, media exposure, travel opportunities, or access to vital resources, then it will be more keenly encouraged and embraced.

There is one final consideration for those working to promote WSD – the question of confronting gender and sexuality norms. Whatever sort of program, sport or activity that one develops, it will be situated within a socio-culture system of gender and sexuality. How much does one want to confront this system, and in what ways? For instance, it might be radical to suggest a boxing program for women. It may be more radical to suggest co-ed football for under-10 children. An all-female netball or volleyball program may conform to certain gendered norms concerning sport, but within it may teach girls skills to challenge the larger system. Whether one looks to confront norms or not, the issue may come calling as witnessed in a recent incident in South Africa concerning the national women's football team, Banyana Banyana. Decrying deficiencies in the femininity of the players, the chair of the SAFA women's committee proffered etiquette classes and tighter shirts. The team captain argued in response that sexual preferences of team members were being made scapegoats to cover up for management failures and a lack of support.¹⁹ Men do not escape either. In Nigeria, hairstyles and fashion choices of male football players have been castigated by football officials as promoting homosexuality and effeminate behavior.²⁰ Such high-profile mediated stories might just be better ignored, yet they are revealing of the sturdy link between sport, body practices, gender and sexuality that operate in every day practice.

References

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- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Messner, M. (2002). *Taking the field: women, men, and sports*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. XXII, and 76.
- ⁵Ibid. p. 80-83.
- ⁶See Brownell, S. (1995). *Training the body for China: sports in the moral order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Dong, J. and J. A. Mangan (1998). "Gender Relations in Chinese Sports: Continuity and Change in Traditional Gender Culture," presented at the International Sociological Association Annual Conference, Canada; Plymire, D. (1999). "Too much, too fast, too soon: Chinese women runners, accusations of steroid use, and the politics of American track and field," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16 (2):155-173; and Riordan, J., and J. X. Dong (1996). "Chinese women and sport: Success, sexuality and suspicion," *China Quarterly* (145), p.130-152.
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- ⁸Over time there has been debate around whether it should be denoted as women IN development (WID), women AND development (WAD), or gender AND development (GAD).
- ⁹J. Dunlop, R. Kyte, and M. MacDonald (1998). "Women redrawing the map: The world after the Beijing and Cairo conferences," in *SAIS Review* 16 (1) p. 153-65.
- ¹⁰<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/plat1.htm>
- ¹¹Hargreaves, J. (1999) "The 'women's international sports movement': Local-global strategies and empowerment," in *Womens Studies International Forum* 22 (5), p. 461-71.
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- ¹³Hargreaves, J. (1999)
- ¹⁴This section is inspired by and draws on the excellent account of the costs and benefits of women, sport and development in one project, by M. Brady, and A. Banu Khan (2002) *Letting girls play: The Mathare Youth Sports Association's football program for girls*. The Population Council: New York. It also draws from Saavedra, M. (2004). "Football Feminine - Development of the African Game: Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa," in *Soccer, women, sexual liberation: kicking off a new era*. F. Hong and J. A. Mangan. London; Portland, OR: F. Cass.
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