

# The Contribution of Sports to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In both subtle and explicit ways, women face many barriers to participating in sports, which prevent women and girls from reaping the many benefits that can be gained from playing sports and engaging in physical activity. Around the world, women encounter discrimination and stereotyping. Women athletes receive lower levels of media coverage, and are subjected to sexist and derogatory language in the media and from people in their communities. The sporting world epitomizes many of the gender stereotypes which persist around the world today, and has proved to be highly resistant to meaningful gender reform. By creating opportunities for women and girls to engage in sport, communities and societies empower women and girls on an individual level, by promoting self-confidence, leadership, teamwork skills and a sense of achievement. They also challenge existing gender norms and roles within society. Sport provides a space in which women can renegotiate concepts of femininity and masculinity, challenge stereotypes which label women as weak and inferior, and demonstrate to their communities what they are capable of achieving. As such, promoting girls' and women's involvement in sports is an important tool in gender equality and women's empowerment and, more broadly, in development and social change.

## Introduction

I am honoured to make the opening keynote speech at this first International Conference on Gender Equity for Social Change in Rwanda. I am sure that this conference will make a significant contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment in sport in this country.

I speak on this topic with some experience and considerable conviction. I will begin with my experience as a girl child, as a mother, using examples from my children's participation in sport, and as a researcher, investigating the involvement of girls in Australian sport in the 1970s. The paper will then address some statistics on current participation of women in sports, legislative initiatives, the involvement of the private sector and UN agencies in sport, and then go on to discuss the positive benefits of sport in moving towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the International Conference on Gender Equity on Sports for Social Change, Kigali, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Biographical note at end of paper.

## .Women's Marginalization and Trivialisation in Sport

### **Disparities in Participation**

In the 1940s in Australia, there was considerable discrimination between men's and women's, girls' and boys' sport. As a child I was the first girl in a family of four children, with one brother 15 months older than I, and one brother 15 months younger. My young sister was born three years later. So I spent my early childhood days in the company of my two brothers and their friends, climbing trees, playing cricket, kicking a football. My mother was criticised for allowing me to play with the boys, and I was called a 'tomboy', in those days a derogatory term for girls who were assertive and not 'feminine'. But my mother was determined: she taught me swimming along with my brothers, and paid for tennis lessons for all of us each weekend, even though this was uncommon for girls in those days. So from my earliest years I was conscious of gender discrimination in sport.

When I married and had children my consciousness of that increased. I am the parent of two boys and two girls. Both my husband and I were enthusiastic about their involvement in sport: my husband because he had represented our state, Western Australia, in athletics and hockey as captain of the team; myself because of school representation in swimming, lifesaving, tennis and hockey, where I participated in spite of my self consciousness about my physique, especially my growing growing breasts. In the 1950s in Australia, sport was a big thing for boys, both in and out of school. Girls were encouraged in indoor activities, like reading and home duties, so I was privileged to be encouraged to enjoy outdoor activities. Accordingly, in the 1960s and '70s, we made sure that all of our children learned to swim early, were physically fit and had every opportunity to excel in sport. Despite our busy schedules, we attended their sports carnivals and encouraged them to practise and to excel.

I noticed the difference in participation between boys and girls again when I had an opportunity in my professional life to visit many schools around Australia during the 1980s. I noted that while boys spent their lunch hours and recess times playing sport on the playgrounds, girls sat on the edges, watching the boys, talking to each other, or reading books. The boys 'owned' the playground space.

I have described these inequalities between boys and girls in participation in sport in Australia, where I have lived most of my life, but over the last 12 years of my work in the Pacific, Asia and Africa I have seen the same disparities in the participation of the sexes in sport.

## **Disparities in Rewards**

Differences were also clear in the rewards that boys and girls received for their participation in sport. In the case of my family, each of my children won their section of the cross-country running competitions in the Australian Capital Territory Championships. The two boys came home with cup trophies, the two girls with two spoons. My two sons were national rowing champions when my two daughters asked their coach if he would teach them rowing. It was only when they told him that they wanted to row in the Olympics that he agreed to coach them. Within the first year they won the Australian Under 23 Rowing Championships. Once again there was the usual discrimination in the trophies handed out at the regattas, The boys came home with huge cups, the girls with small ones. (Some of my friends even warned me against allowing the girls to continue rowing, in case their arms became too 'muscley', and they became less attractive to boys).

In both amateur and professional sport, where the value of prizes for winning championships has moved from trophies to money and has kept increasing in value, men have taken home more money than women, until very recently where there are now some exceptions. For example, for the first time since its inception, the 2007 Australian Open Tennis Championships gave equal prize money for both male and female winners. It is encouraging that this is now the norm for all Grand slam tennis tournaments except Wimbledon.

## **Disparities in Media Coverage**

There have also been disparities in the acknowledgments for sports success in the press. My boys' rowing wins were written up in the national and state newspapers; the girls' were hardly mentioned. Twenty years later, my son and my daughter are coaching elite rowing squads in Australia. My son's achievements are trumpeted; my daughter's, Australia's first woman Olympic rowing coach, are rarely reported.

When I worked for the Commonwealth Schools Commission in the 1970s, I was Convener of a study of Social Change and the Education of Girls. One of my research tasks was to scrutinise the press for evidence of discrimination against women and girls in news coverage. One glaring disparity was in the sports pages where we found that there was rarely a photo of a female sportsperson, and the coverage of their activities was less than 5 percent of all sports news.

Thirty years later, there have been some changes in Australia and women are much more visible. A contributing factor has been the success of Australian women on the world stage at the Olympic Games, the Commonwealth Games and World Championships. However, examples from around the world show that women continue to face many of the same obstacles today as they have for centuries.

An examination of news articles in the *New Times* for the month of March 2007 showed that female athletes were mentioned in significantly fewer articles, and comprised only a fraction of photographs, compared to male athletes. Women were mentioned in only seven articles without pictures, out of a total of 631, thus women received only one percent of the total coverage. These stories included one on Rwanda being selected for the volleyball championships in Khartoum Sudan, and one on the Rwanda national women's soccer league preparing to send a team to the inaugural Cecafta women's championships in Zanzibar. Of the articles with pictures, only nine included pictures of women, compared to 365 of men. Four of the stories showed photos of Rwandan women athletes and five showed international female athletes. One article reported on a basketball tournament for eight men's and four women's clubs in the Kigali Challenge Cup; one reported on a monthly golf tournament, with a photo of Rowena Ingabira winning the 'ladies' category; one reported on five tennis youngsters starting a ten-day training camp in Burundi, with a photograph of Lize Karenzi; and one showed a group of women winners, captioned "humble faces", and reported Nyiransabimana being selected to compete in the Mombasa World Cross Country Championship. Three of the four photos of Rwandan women accompanied stories about both men and women. The five photos of international women included three of tennis players, one of scantily-clad women accompanying Jamaican singer Sean Paul as a musical attraction for the opening of an international cricket event, and one of Maradona's daughter accompanying a story about her father.<sup>3</sup>

Women athletes are simply not accorded the same level of publicity or visibility as men. This problem is not specific to Rwanda, or even to the developing world. In America, Europe, Australia and other developed countries, women's sports are given less television airtime and receive significantly less newspaper coverage than do men, to the detriment of female athletes. Women who have worked just as hard as male athletes in order to compete on the international level are not given the recognition that comes with media coverage. They are seldom hired for the lucrative product endorsements that male athletes receive.

### **Lack of Female Role Models**

Sports personalities flood news headlines, endorse all varieties of products and, in this globalized world, are among the most recognized celebrities worldwide. Even children in remote rural African villages wear T-shirts and carry notebooks depicting football stars who play for Manchester United or Arsenal, and can name their favorite players. These stars serve as role models and idols for children around the world, particularly during major sporting events, such as the World Cup. Yet female sports figures are noticeably absent.

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<sup>3</sup> *New Times*, 1-30 March, 2007, Research conducted by Alice Umulisa.

As a result, girls who aspire to participate in sports have less exposure to female role models. Consequently, they are less likely to benefit from the positive example that these figures can serve. An example from research conducted in Lusaka and Kabwe, Zambia by the Swiss Academy for Development illustrates this dearth of female sports role models. When a sample of boys and girls were asked to name their sports idols, 61 percent of girls could not name a sportsperson at all, and of those who could, only 19 percent mentioned a woman. Only 13 percent of boys questioned could not name a sports idol, and none named a female sports star.<sup>4</sup> 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.

An exception to this has been noted every two years, during the coverage of the summer and winter Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee and networks covering the games have made a concerted effort to give equal airtime to women's and men's events. It is no coincidence that in the months following the games, there is a surge in women's participation in sports,<sup>5</sup> this in spite of lower numbers of female athletes. Women comprised 40.7 per cent of participants in the 2004 Athens Olympic Games<sup>6</sup>, a record in women's participation. However, many countries send fewer female participants than male, and some countries send no women at all. Once every two years, as girls around the world see women excel in figure skating, gymnastics, running, skiing, and many other sports, they are inspired to participate in physical activities themselves, and are encouraged by the knowledge of what women can achieve.

### **Use of Discriminatory Language**

Even when women's sports do receive media coverage, the language used to describe women athletes reinforces notions of inferiority or difference concerning women's athletic ability and the acceptability of women's participation in sports. Many of society's gender stereotypes find some of their most vehement expression in the hyper-masculinized world of sports. These perceptions are reinforced, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, both at the school and community level, through the media, and in popular culture.

The most shocking recent example is American commentator Don Imus's racist and degrading remarks about the Reuters University women's basketball team, who were playing for the National Collegiate Athletic Association Women's championship. Describing the players as 'nappy headed ho's' - a term belittling their physical appearance and alleging their sexual promiscuity - the American

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<sup>4</sup> SAD-Evaluation "Gender, Sport and Development" in Zambia, June 2005 (published 2006). Reported in Meier, M., "Gender Equity, Sport and Development: Working Paper," Swiss Academy for Development, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Women's Sports Foundation website, available at: <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> Hannan, C. "Challenging the Gender Order," Opening Keynote Speech at the Fourth World Conference on Women and Sport, Kumamoto, Japan, 11-14 May 2006.

commentator at once summarized and epitomized gender stereotypes which persist in women's sports, and put down all of the hard work and achievement of these women, who finished the season as the second best team in the United States. In many media outlets, women are not given serious credit as competitive athletes in their own right, but instead judged and ascribed value on the basis of their physical appearance and sexuality. Thanks largely to public furore over his remarks, Imus was taken off air by the news agency for which he worked.

Though this example may be an extreme case, other examples of stereotype and bias pervade the way that women's sporting competitions are covered within the media. On 26 March 2007, the *Age* newspaper in Australia, reporting on a female swimmer's success at the World Swimming Championships, printed the headline "It is so fantastic! Girls beat the world to grab first gold".<sup>7</sup> So even today adults are divided into men and girls, reinforcing notions of women's inferiority by equating them with children. Moreover, analysis of Olympic coverage in consecutive years shows a persistent bias against coverage of women's events, with no improvement over time.<sup>8</sup>

Another study which analyzed hours of media commentary to compare coverage of men's and women's University-level basketball competitions in the United States, revealed that men's games and performances were used as a standard by which to judge and compare women's performance, that non-parallel and sexist language was used to describe the female athletes and to assess their performance, that assumptions were made as to women's relative physical ability and athleticism, and that women's games were continually qualified as "women's basketball", implying inferiority of the sport.<sup>9</sup> Overall, such coverage works to entrench gendered notions of women's abilities and capacity to participate in competitive sports, and establishes a standard of performance which is judged in comparison to men's, rather than in its own right.

## **Cultural and Religious Barriers**

Around the world, cultural and religious factors prevent women and girls from engaging in sport. From an early age, boys are encouraged to participate in sports, while girls may be told to stand and watch from the sidelines. An extreme example in the past was in American football, where scantily dressed women stood at the edge of the field to cheer on the male competitors. Although, it should be noted that now cheer leaders have become acrobatic specialists, participating in their own sport of cheerleading. This has become one of the most

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<sup>7</sup> The *Age*, "It is so fantastic! Girls beat the world to grab first gold," March 26, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See Higgs, C, K Weiller, and S Martin,, "Gender Bias in the 1996 Olympic Games," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 52-64 (2003); Eastman, S. and Billings, A., "Gender Parity in the Olympics: Hying Women Athletes, Favoring Men Athletes," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23 (2): 140-170 (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Blinde, E. Greendorfer, S., and Shanker, R., "Differential Media Coverage of Men's and Women's Intercollegiate Basketball: Reflection of Gender Ideology," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 24 (2): 192-213 (2000).

dangerous female sports played in America, leading to some catastrophic injuries, and is the biggest sports danger for girls in high school in America<sup>10</sup>. For example, girls are sometimes flung up to four meters in the air and are supposed to land in a handstand position on the arms of a man on the ground. If he loses his balance she may fall, causing head and spinal trauma, and occasionally leading to death<sup>11</sup>.

In many countries, women are socialized to play more 'feminine' sports, like handball, and those who decide to cross these gender lines to play football may be subjected to harassment. Nonetheless, as women and girls attempt to engage in a wider variety of sports, they may encounter different forms of resistance imposed upon them by the societies in which they live.

I observed cultural and religious barriers to women and girls participation in sport in the Pacific and in Asia. In the Pacific, village elders forbid women and girls to wear shorts and until very recently they have had to compete wearing skirts. In Muslim countries like Bangladesh, it has also been the convention that women and girls, if allowed to play sport at all, compete in their long skirts and behind their veils. In Africa and other developing regions, the heavy burden of household chores and responsibilities imposed on girl children may limit the time that they have to engage in sport activities. The lack of time, coupled with cultural and religious barriers to participation, prevents many young girls from joining in sports.

Other discriminatory practices limit women's opportunities to participate in sports in an equal capacity. The prestigious Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta, Georgia in the United States, continues to uphold a male-only policy. More subtle forms of discrimination also persist. Men's sports teams may be given preferential access to sports fields or weight rooms, and men's competitions are often scheduled for times of high visibility, while women's are relegated to times when there are likely to be fewer spectators. Less than 20 years ago, my mother told me of her frustration when playing club lawn bowls in her 80s, that the men had the use of the grounds all weekends and three of the weekdays, and that the women could only play on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Furthermore, the women had to provide the men with morning and afternoon tea on the days they were playing.

## Hope for Policy Reform

Despite advances in gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide - in the business place, politics, academia, and on the sports field - women continue to lag behind men in opportunities, support and resources. Thanks largely to years of advocacy work by committed individuals, many themselves professional athletes who have battled discrimination in their respective fields, the policies of

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<sup>10</sup> Randall Parker, "Save the Cheerleaders, Save the World", *ParaPundit*, 31 March 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

major sports organizations have begun to change. Organizations have emerged to support opportunities for girls and women to become involved in sports, such as the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW), and the Women's Sports Foundation, founded by tennis champion Billie Jean King. Moreover, the International Working Group on Women and Sport has been organized to consider policies to advance the involvement of girls and women in sports. The declarations which have emerged from their World Conferences on Women and Sport call on governments, sporting organizations, and individuals to promote opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport<sup>12</sup>. These included the Magglingen Declaration, which identifies participation in sport as a human right, and refers to the need to prioritize women, girls and other marginalized groups within sports initiatives; the Brighton Declaration, which sought solutions to address imbalances and to accelerate the advancement of women's participation in sports; the Windhoek Call for Action, which stressed the linkages between participation in sports and the promotion of health, education, and human rights; and the Montreal Communique, which called for the development of a sustainable infrastructure on which to build women's sports opportunities.

Today, women have greater opportunities than ever before to engage in sports and recreation, up to the professional level. However, the number of female athletes lags behind the number of males in all countries around the world. Moreover, women are significantly under-represented in coaching positions, management of sports teams, and as referees and umpires. The absence of women at high levels limits the potential for meaningful reform toward equality in women's sports.<sup>13</sup>

Equality has been a major focus of advocacy efforts. As noted above, all of the major tennis tournaments, with the exception of Wimbledon, now offer equal monetary prizes to the male and female champions. The Royal and Ancient Golf Club in Scotland, considered the world's leading authority on golf, permitted women to play in its Open Championship for the first time in 2005.<sup>14</sup> Within the International Olympic Committee, women's and men's competitions have been added for almost all sports. Moreover, the Committee has promoted a policy to include women in management structures both at the international and country levels. America's Title IX policy, which was passed into National Law, mandates that within all publicly funded secondary schools and universities, equal funding be allocated to women's and men's sports. This policy served to rectify years of practice in which women's sports departments in these institutions were allocated substantially less funding than popular- and revenue earning- male sports such as American football and basketball.

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<sup>12</sup> See website of the International Working Group on Women and Sport, available at: <http://www.iwg-gti.org/e/brighton/index.htm>

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> Hannan, 2006.

In Rwanda, women are seeing increasing opportunities to become involved in sports. New sporting opportunities are blooming, such as women's football and volleyball leagues. The Association Nationale pour la Promotion de la Sport Feminine has been established to oversee and advocate women's participation in sports. The 25 sports federations in Rwanda have registered both men's and women's teams, and women are participating in ever greater numbers.<sup>15</sup> Yet, undoubtedly, Rwanda has a long way to go to ensure that girls and women have equal opportunities to engage in sports, particularly within schools and communities.

## **Benefits of Sport**

Having addressed some of the challenges facing women's and girls' participation in sport, let us turn to the benefits that they experience when these challenges are overcome.

**Health.** By participating in sports, girls can derive many of the benefits long reserved for boys. Physical activity develops healthy life style habits and is beneficial for physical and mental health. Just four hours of physical activity a week has been shown to reduce the risk of many diseases, such as breast cancer and heart disease. Developing such positive habits in childhood can have life-long positive benefits. Moreover, the beneficial effects of sport on individual health accelerate overall health indicators of the community.

**Confidence.** Participation in sports can help to build self-confidence, a crucial component in empowering girls and young women to take on new roles and to challenge the barriers that they encounter. Moreover, participation in sport promotes body consciousness, which has been shown to reduce rates of teenage pregnancy.<sup>16</sup>

**Teamwork.** Membership on a sports team has positive benefits in terms of building relationships between team members, and teaching teamwork skills, which can later be useful to women in a professional environment.

**Role Models.** Sport can also be used to motivate groups of supporters by role modeling. Girls can benefit from the encouragement and leadership of a coach, who can serve as an important role model and trusted confidante for them as they manoeuvre the difficult period of adolescence.

**Academic Success.** *It is recognised that there is a strong connection between participation in sport with academic success.* Girls who participate in sports tend to be more focused, disciplined in their studies and successful in school.

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<sup>15</sup> Mutara, E. and Chaka, I. "FIND TITLE," The New Times, March 8, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> See Women's Sports Foundation website, available at:  
<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html>

**Workplace Skills.** Sport contributes to development of a work ethic, organisation and time management skills, fund raising capacity, and positive character traits, such as accepting others' personality flaws and learning to work towards common goals. Sport also gives practice in developing positive competition between supporters.

**Community Development** Participation in sports is also intrinsically linked to community development initiatives. The values which sport enshrines - teamwork, inclusion, and personal achievement - build a strong foundation for personal and community growth.

**Economic Development.** In terms of economic growth, creation of sports teams can provide jobs as athletes, coaches, managers, and administrative staff; the worldwide trade in sporting goods can provide opportunities for product exports; and the revenue brought in by hosting major sporting events can be used to support economic growth in other areas.

**Peace Building.** In post-conflict environments such as Rwanda, sports have been used effectively to promote reconciliation between divided groups. Sporting events present an opportunity to bring groups together in a forum which is competitive without being adversarial, learning to work through and see beyond their differences. Moreover, in countries divided by civil conflict, support for a common national team can unite divided parties behind a common cause.

**National Pride.** The USSR and other eastern block countries along with the Canadians in the 1970s directed millions of dollars into developing Olympic sports in an attempt to develop national pride and patriotism. This is an important aspect to consider in Rwanda given the commitment to unity and reconciliation.

## **Sport as an Engine of Gender Equality: Empowering Women through Sport**

In most cultures, sports have traditionally been divided along gendered lines, often reflecting the values and stereotypes underlying that society's notions of masculinity and femininity. Traditional 'male sports' often emphasized brute strength, aggression, or mimic war-like behaviour; while 'women's sports', such as dance, valued the properties of grace, delicacy and, in many contexts, mimicked or expressed forms of sexuality. Women and men who showed no interest or skill for these sports were considered less feminine or masculine, and crossing these gender lines was seen as a defiance of social norms.

As more women and girls come forward to defy prohibitions which prevent them from playing particular sports, they are at the same time challenging existing gender roles and patriarchal structures. Each time a girl has the courage to join a boys' football game, or better yet, starts an all-girls football team, she

demonstrates to the boys in her community that she is tough and can compete on an equal level, challenging gendered norms which view women as fragile or inferior. In societies where women's roles are predominantly confined to the domestic sphere, and where they are not expected or permitted to participate in public life, participation in sport can challenge these barriers and enable women to assume new roles within their communities. Thus, sports provide an environment in which gender norms, and accepted conceptions of masculinity and femininity, can be renegotiated. In sports, values such as aggressiveness and competition are valued, and sports fields are an acceptable territory in which women can demonstrate these qualities. As these values become more entrenched, gendered stereotypes are slowly changed, and women who exhibit these qualities become valued by the society.<sup>17</sup>

Right to Play<sup>18</sup>, an organization which advocates the right of every child to sport and leisure activities, has shown how creating opportunities for girls to participate in sports can challenge these gender norms in a way which has a lasting impact on gender roles. Working in Nyagurusu, Tanzania with Congolese refugees, Right to Play has set up sports activities for girls, with overwhelming success. The girls benefit from participation in sports as well as from the leadership of female coaches, who have become widely respected role models within the camp community. Moreover, though Congolese society traditionally forbade girls to play sports, many within the camp believe that the refugees will return to their homes with an appreciation for the important role that sport can play in the lives of young girls. As Mama Salima, one of the coaches, explains, "For some girls it will be good for them, because those that would prevent them, namely their parents, have accepted sport and play in camp and so when they return to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, they should still be free to continue."<sup>19</sup>

On an individual level, participation in sport empowers girls, giving them confidence, teamwork and leadership skills, which they carry with them for the rest of their lives. In a speech addressing the Pasifika netball challenge in Waitakere, Hon. Luamanuvao Winnie Laban, the first Pacific woman in New Zealand's Parliament, highlighted the role that girls' participation in netball has played in empowering young Pacific girls in New Zealand. "There are many Pacific role models in netball and opportunities for leadership in sport arise early for our young Pacific girls – becoming a team captain, going on to become coaches, umpires, club captains and administrators. The leadership experience gained at a young age through sport can and should spur our young Pacific women to strive for leadership positions as they grow and become adults."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sever, C., 'Gender & Sport: Mainstreaming Gender in Sports Projects,' Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Right to Play website, available at:

[http://www.righttoplay.com/site/PageServer?pagename=tanzania\\_mamasalima\\_march2007](http://www.righttoplay.com/site/PageServer?pagename=tanzania_mamasalima_march2007)

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Pacwin internet news bulletin, 20 March 2007

Furthermore, research has shown that, in a highly masculinized work environment, team sports play a role in socializing children to work within certain organizational structures, preparing them for their entry into the workforce. Without accepting that these environments should, or must, be the norm, sports can help girls to gain skills which will enable them to compete on a more equal footing when they join the workforce, particularly if they pursue hierarchically structured corporate careers. Competitive sports can help players learn to exude an illusion of confidence, even when afraid or insecure, and to understand that making mistakes and learning from them is 'part of the game.' Children gain confidence in their ability to take on unknown roles or tasks, and become more comfortable with 'learning by doing.'

Sport teaches teamwork skills such as loyalty to one's teammates, deference to a coach's decisions, and the fact that teams are chosen based on relative skills, not on the basis of popularity or personality. Participants learn that pressure, deadlines and competition can be fun, and are more prepared when they encounter these forces in a professional environment. All of these skill sets are highly valued in the workplace, and by fostering these values in girls from a young age, they are better prepared to interact and compete with their male colleagues.<sup>21</sup>

Fostering opportunities for women's participation in sports is not just about advocating for the right of women to play. It entails identifying social and economic barriers to women and girl's participation in sports, and designing programs which will be particularly relevant and meaningful to female participants.<sup>22</sup> Restrictions on girls' and women's leisure time include physical risks related to participation which are specific to girls, such as danger associated with sports events that keep girls after dark. Girls also experience poverty-related barriers, such as lack of appropriate equipment, clothing or sanitary items. These serve as unique barriers to girls' participation in sporting activities.

An example of the unique concerns associated with designing sports programs for girls was demonstrated in a project set up by Play Soccer in Zambia. Many of the extremely poor children in this community, particularly those living in orphan-headed households, could not afford undergarments or clothing that wasn't torn. Many girls were afraid to join in the football games that were organized, for fear that bending in funny ways or accidental collisions would cause them to expose themselves and cause embarrassment. After first providing the children with adequate clothing and equipment, girls readily joined in the game.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Women Sports Foundation website, available at:  
<http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> Sever, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Meier, 2005.

In Iran, where women's activities are highly controlled by male relatives and society at large, girls were traditionally not allowed to participate in outdoor sports. A solution was found when an indoor space was located in which women could play volleyball. The windows had to be covered to prohibit men from watching the game. Even though during certain times of the year, the building becomes too hot for the girls to play, this encouraging example demonstrates how creative thinking can help to circumvent societal restrictions on women's physical activities.<sup>24</sup>

The examples in Zambia and Iran demonstrate the importance of taking into consideration the particular social concerns and needs of girls and women when creating sports and leisure opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

With self-confidence, leadership and teamwork skills, girls are better equipped to challenge societal norms which continue to oppress women and relegate them to being second-class citizens. Though discrimination persists around the world, and acts as a deterrent to girl's participation in sport, the value of challenging these norms has become increasingly recognized, by international actors, government bodies, and communities themselves. United Nations Resolution 58/5, adopted in 2003, calls on governments to use sports to promote education, health, development and peace. UNESCO and UNDP have both recognized the value of sport as a tool of development, and have supported projects to use sport as a means of empowerment and development. But the real testimony comes from girls and women themselves. With each woman who excels in sport, barriers are broken, and a new generation of girls is able to benefit from participation in sports in a way that their mothers and grandmothers could not.

Taking inspiration from the determination and dedication of female athletes from around the world, the next generation of girls can be inspired to participate in sports. In the process, these girls are challenging the barriers which exist in their societies, refuting gender stereotypes, and changing cultural norms, proving that women can excel in all manner of activities if only given the opportunity. Describing the key to her success, American tennis star Serena Williams said, "Luck has nothing to do with it, because I have spent many, many hours, countless hours, on the court working for my one moment in time, not knowing when it would come." Ranked 81<sup>st</sup> in the world, Williams recently defeated top-ranked Maria Sharapova to win the Australian Open.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Mutara and Chaka, 2007.

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