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Leveling the playing field: Building girls' sports programs and creating new opportunities

Prepared by Martha Brady

From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, more girls and women are participating in sports than ever before. Even in the most unlikely settings, girls are stepping onto playing fields, joining teams, and participating in ways that were unprecedented a decade ago. What have opportunities in this historically male domain meant for girls? The burgeoning interest in girls' and women's sports around the globe provides an opportune moment to examine the role of sports in adolescent girls' lives and build the evidence base for future programming and policy development. Population Council researchers collaborate with a range of partners, including sports organizations, women's groups, international development agencies, and ministries of youth to help shape and evaluate innovative programs for adolescent girls.

Momentum building around sports: A tool in development

In recent years, sports have begun to appear on the agenda of many countries and international bodies. An increasing array of actors—public and private-sector entities, corporations, community groups, sports federations, and athletes—have been engaged in the field. In response to growing evidence that strengthening the right of children to play enhances their healthy development and builds stronger communities, the United Nations established a Sport for Development program. Several other UN agencies have incorporated sports programming into their work, lending further credence to the effort. A number of international conventions and frameworks affirm girls' and women's rights (including to sports and physical education), and some countries have laws in place requiring equal access to sports for girls and women. Despite these positive developments, more focused attention on girls' physical activity is needed. While official government policies and the mission statements of most sports organizations recognize the equal rights of boys and girls, implementation of gender-equitable programming remains elusive in many settings.



Exhilaration! Kenyan girls playing football in a public space while community spectators cheer on the sidelines. Group membership, robust friendships, and social support networks are protective factors for girls.

Given the diversity of players and interests, sports are being used in a variety of ways as a tool in health and development efforts. The rationale for sports is diverse and broad ranging—from its role in individual-level health promotion and fitness, to peace building and community regeneration post-conflict. Sports are considered a tool in promoting gender equity and social inclusion for girls and women. Sports programs are being used as platforms for delivery of health messages and development of skills. Recently, HIV prevention programs have begun to incorporate sports into their efforts, on the premise that sports can be a vehicle through which to transmit HIV prevention messages and to teach life skills.

Examining the evidence

The Population Council has been a pioneer in exploring the role of sports in adolescent girls' lives, and it recognizes the importance of disentangling the substantiated from the purported benefits of sports,

and of understanding the relevance and effect on girls' lives in diverse cultural and economic settings. In 1996 the Council convened a meeting of women's health advocates, sports experts, and researchers—diverse constituencies that had never before met—to examine the evidence around girls'/women's sports participation, identify research and program gaps, and chart a way forward. This watershed event spurred interest in girls' sports in the developing world and led to an array of program innovations. Many events, conferences, and organizations have been launched since that time, including those focusing specifically on girls' and women's sports.

Most of the research linking girls' sports participation and various health and development outcomes has been carried out in the United States and other Western countries. The physical and mental health benefits of sports have been well documented; regular participation in sports promotes physical fitness, helps reduce chronic disease, and boosts mental health by reducing symptoms of stress and depression (President's Council 1997). Sports and play are associated with healthy child development and with building self-efficacy. The therapeutic effects of physical activity and sport post-trauma have also been documented. To date, no national data sets or large-scale studies on these topics exist in the developing world. However, in these settings sports programs' utility in the delivery of health messages has received some confirmation (Clark et al. 2006).

What do we know about the role of sports in girls' lives in the developing world?

Because girls' sports programming is a relatively new field, robust evaluation and impact data are sparse. Few national data sets include questions related to sports and physical activity for girls and women. Some recent adolescent surveys have begun to incorporate questions related to sports participation, but this remains limited. However, qualitative data and case studies from a wide array of programs are emerging, and program-level data are increasingly being captured. The Council has worked with girls-only and some mixed-sex sports-related programs in Egypt, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Mali, South Africa, and Zambia, and is examining information from these and other programs.

Sports as a tool to build social and health assets: Insights and evidence

There is a growing consensus that sports can play a meaningful role in girls' lives. Beyond the clear physical and health benefits of sports, participation in sports programs provides girls with the opportunity to develop new skills, to learn and to lead, and to expand and deepen social support networks.

The Council's work in this area suggests that well-designed and carefully implemented girls' sports programs can:

- Provide a safe space in which to learn new skills and build assets
- Challenge traditional scripts for girls and break down gender stereotypes



In the unlikely setting of the Mayan Highlands, girls enjoy the fun and camaraderie that sports provide.

- Increase girls' visible, active presence in the public sphere
- Transform the ways girls think about themselves, and the way families and communities perceive them
- Improve girls' knowledge about their rights, their bodies, and their health
- Build leadership skills; offer opportunities to practice leadership
- Expand girls' social support networks, friends, and access to community resources
- Provide girls with female mentors and role models

Challenging traditional scripts and transforming gender norms

In many settings, social and cultural norms and practices have prevented girls from participating in sports. The emergence of these new opportunities represents a departure from the traditional scripts of femininity. Girls' entrance into and visibility in the public sphere through sports challenge male privilege and cultural myths of acceptable gendered behaviors. Moreover, by seeing girls in this new, action-oriented role, boys learn about the strengths, capabilities, and contributions of girls and women, which in turn may begin to reshape male perceptions of appropriate roles for females. Sports programs also help transform the ways girls view themselves and the ways in which their families and communities perceive them (Brady and Khan 2002).

Social support and team membership: Building social assets

Affiliation with a recognized team or group provides girls with a sense of belonging, and their role as a team member offers an identity beyond the domestic realm. Participation in sports programs helps draw girls into a network of institutions, programs, and mentors to which they would otherwise not have access. Group membership may also serve as a protective factor. A recent study conducted by the Population Council and its partners in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, investigated

the links between community social cohesion, group membership, and sexual experiences among adolescent males and females aged 14–18. Findings indicate that membership in sports programs leads to higher age at sexual initiation for young women and reduces their chances of experiencing nonconsensual sex. In fact, young women who are members of sports groups are significantly less likely to experience non-consensual sex and over 11 times more likely to have used a condom during their last sexual encounter than young women who are not members (Hallman 2008).

Girls-only programs: Offering girls a space of their own

It is widely recognized that adolescents need safe and supportive environments. Access to “safe spaces” is particularly salient for girls, given the restrictions placed on them by parents and communities (Brady 2003). Many “youth” sports programs have in reality been mostly dominated by boys, a fact that often curtails girls’ engagement. While debate around the benefits of girls-only versus mixed-sex programs continues, girls-only programs can be extremely powerful for girls. In general, sensitive topics are more easily addressed in single-sex contexts, girls voices are heard, and there are more opportunities to take on leadership roles. A recent study of over 550 adolescent girls from four girls-only sports-related programs in Africa found that 94 percent of the girls believe that both boys and girls should have opportunities to become leaders, and 93 percent of the girls indicated their willingness to lead a community event or activity (Women Win forthcoming 2011). Many girls’ programs are multi-dimensional, integrating relevant topics and issues including reproductive health and rights, addressing gender-based violence, and developing leadership, communications, and other skills. This holistic approach parallels girls’ interests and needs.

Moving the Goalposts (MTG)—Kilifi, Kenya

MTG is a multi-component girls-only program that combines football, leadership development, reproductive health and rights education, and

community service. One of the largest girls-serving sports programs in sub-Saharan Africa, MTG reaches over 3,000 adolescent girls in rural coastal Kenya, has received numerous accolades for its work, and is viewed as a model in the region. An external evaluation of MTG suggests that the longer a girl participates in the program, the more likely she is to agree that she can make decisions about her life, have access to sexual and reproductive health information, and believe that she can become as highly educated as boys (Forde 2010).

Ishraq: A ground-breaking program for girls in Upper Egypt

In villages in rural Upper Egypt—traditional settings where girls’ mobility is restricted and early marriage is common—an innovative program known as Ishraq (“sunrise”) combines sports, literacy, and life-skills training to empower girls. In most rural areas of Egypt, sports clubs are dominated by males. Ishraq challenges traditional concepts of gender-appropriate behavior by incorporating sports and recreational activities along with literacy, life-skills training, and health awareness. A consortium of nongovernmental organizations, including the Population Council and Save the Children, teamed up with local community groups and government partners who provide protected spaces—such as a girl-friendly youth center—where girls meet for learning and recreation. Aimed at 11–15-year-old out-of-school girls, the Ishraq program has afforded girls greater participation in community life and entrance into the public arena. For the first time in these rural villages, girls dressed in track suits playing sports act as a catalyst for the transformation of social norms (Brady et al. 2007).

Moving forward: Recommendations for research and action

As the momentum around girls’ and women’s sports grows, it is important and timely to strengthen existing programs, experiment with new models, and conduct robust program evaluations. Key areas for action include:

- Experiment with combinations of sports models and program content, in diverse settings and venues, with a broader range of program implementers
- Develop programs that ensure girls’ physical, emotional, and sexual safety, and that protect their reputation, honor, dignity, and marriageability
- Engage girls and their gate-keepers (parents, community leaders) in program development; it is essential to engage parents and communities to ensure sustainability
- Identify ways to “enlighten boys” while empowering girls; encourage boys to respect girls’ new roles and opportunities
- Embed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) into programs; gather better data on programmatic measures of success



The sheer joy of physical activity and movement in a traditional setting of rural Upper Egypt. Girls warm up as they participate in a first-of-its kind sports program using designated spaces in village youth centers.

- Conduct situation analyses to assess sports programs, including a review of country-level policies and programs, availability of sports infrastructure, and participation rates
- Include sports-specific questions in adolescent surveys or other national data collection
- Measure the effect of girls' sports participation on social, health, and education indicators

The sports industry, sports media, and sports competition have become increasingly international. How this form of globalization shapes the perceptions, experiences, and practices associated with girls' and women's sports, particularly in the developing world, will be important to understand. The number of programs that involve girls in sports and other forms of physical activity is expected to increase significantly over the next decade. The Population Council will continue to work with partners to gather insights and evidence on the power of sports in girls' and women's lives.

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Useful websites and resources

- Grassroots Soccer. www.grassrootssoccer.org
- International Council on Sport Science and Physical Education. www.icsspe.org/portal/index
- International Platform on Sport and Development. www.sportanddev.org/en/index.htm
- Mathare Youth Sports Association. www.mysakenya.org
- Moving the Goalposts (MTG) www.mtgk.org
- Right to Play. www.rightoplay.com
- Women's Sports Foundation. www.WomensSportsFoundation.org
- Women Win. www.womenwin.com.
- World Health Organization. www.who.int/moveforhealth/en

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