



THE ROLE OF SPORT IN WOMAN

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Annotation

Women's participation in sport has a long history. It is a history marked by division and discrimination but also one filled with major accomplishments by female athletes and important advances for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls

Keywords: sport, women, gender equality, independence.

Introduction

Sport has the power to change lives. The ability to drive gender equality by teaching women and girl's teamwork, self-reliance, resilience and confidence. Women in sport defy gender stereotypes and social norms, make inspiring role models, and show men and women as equals.

Led by UN Women, the Sport for Generation Equality Initiative is inviting stakeholders from across the sports ecosystem to be part of a powerful coalition to make gender equality a lived reality in and through sport.

Together, this coalition will accelerate efforts to promote women's leadership and equality in governance models, prevent and respond to gender-based violence, close the gap in investment in women's sport and promote equal economic opportunities, promote women's equal participation and bias-free representation in media, and provide equal opportunities for girls in sport, physical activity and physical education. As some of the world's top women athletes prepare for the Olympic Games in Tokyo, we're celebrating the remarkable achievements and unmatched potential of women and girls in sport.

Although many of the clinical trials and epidemiological studies in health research have excluded women, the data available suggest that women derive many health benefits from an active lifestyle.³ The health benefits of women's participation in physical activity and sport are now well established. Participation in sport and physical activity can prevent a myriad of noncommunicable diseases which account for over 60 per cent of global deaths, 66 per cent of which occur in developing countries.⁴ For girls, it can have a positive impact on childhood health, as well as reduce the risk of chronic diseases in later life. For older women, it can contribute to





the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, which account for one third of deaths among women around the world and half of all deaths among women over 50 in developing countries.⁵ Physical activity also helps to reduce the effects of osteoporosis, which women have a higher risk of developing than men.⁶ Participation in physical activity aids in the prevention and/or treatment of other chronic and degenerative diseases associated with aging, such as type-2 diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, osteoporosis and cardiovascular abnormalities. It also helps in the management of weight and contributes to the formation and maintenance of healthy bones, muscles and joints. Physical activity can reduce the incidence of falls among older women. An important role of physical activity in the life of older women lies in prolonging independence. Much of the physical decline that was presumed an inevitable consequence of aging is now thought to be the result of inactivity. While no one can guarantee that exercise will prolong life, it can enhance the quality of life for older women who value their independence.

The benefits for women and girls with disabilities are also well established. It has been noted that sport provides a double benefit to women with disabilities by providing affirmations of self-empowerment at both personal and collective levels. Apart from enhancing health, wellness and quality of life, participation in physical activity and sport develops skills such as teamwork, goal-setting, the pursuit of excellence in performance and other achievement-oriented behaviours that women and girls with disabilities may not be exposed to in other contexts. Participation in sport and physical activity can also facilitate good mental health for women of all ages, including the management of mental disorders such as Alzheimer's disease.¹⁰ It can promote psychological well-being through building self-esteem, confidence and social integration, as well as help reduce stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. This is particularly important as rates of depression among women are almost double those of men in both developed and developing countries.

In addition to benefits for women and girls themselves, women's increased involvement can promote positive development in sport by providing alternative norms, values, attitudes, knowledge, capabilities and experiences. The contributions of women, particularly in leadership positions, can bring diversity and alternative approaches and expand the talent base in areas such as management, coaching and sport journalism. The participation of women and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision-





makers, especially in traditional male domains. Women's involvement in sport can make a significant contribution to public life and community development.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing understanding that access to and participation in sport and physical education is not only a right in itself, but can also be used to promote a number of important development goals through facilitating democratic principles, promoting leadership development, and encouraging tolerance and respect, as well as providing access to opportunities and social networks. All areas of development can be influenced by sport, including health, education, employment, social inclusion, political development and peace and security.

Under the critical area of concern on education, the Platform calls for Governments, educational authorities and other educational and academic institutions to provide accessible recreational and sport facilities and establish and strengthen gender-sensitive programmes for girls and women of all ages in education and community institutions and support the advancement of women in all areas of athletics and physical activity, including coaching, training and administration, and as participants at the national, regional and international levels. In relation to health, the Platform calls for Governments to create and support programmes in the education system, workplace and community to make opportunities to participate in sport, physical activity and recreation available to girls and women of all ages on the same basis as they are made available to men and boys. In the critical area of concern on power and decision-making, the Platform notes that the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in the areas of art, culture, sport, the media, education, religion and law have prevented women from having a significant impact on many key institutions. In relation to the situation of the girl-child, the Platform calls for Governments and international and non-governmental organizations to promote the full and equal participation of girls in extracurricular activities, such as sport, drama and cultural activities.

The relationship between gender equality and sport is not solely about achieving equality in women's participation and treatment within sports, but it is also about promoting "sport for gender equality", or harnessing the potential of sport for social empowerment of women and girls. Sport offers a valuable channel to strengthen women's and girls' capabilities and provide information on important social issues, such as health, HIV/AIDS and women's rights. Women's and girls' participation in sport can also challenge gender stereotypes and break down entrenched discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Myriam Lamare, a World Boxing





Association champion from France, has said that the punches she lands shake the foundations of society.

Sport can be an important tool for social empowerment through the skills and values learned, such as teamwork, negotiation, leadership, communication and respect for others. The social benefits of participation in sport are thought to be especially important for girls, given that many girls, particularly in adolescence, have fewer opportunities than boys for social interaction outside the home and beyond family structures.

The “Law of Sports”, enacted by the Hungarian Parliament in December 2000, ensured equal opportunities for men and women and for boys and girls to choose and participate in sport, contribute to the development of leadership in sport and enjoy funding to execute different sport programmes. It also required all sporting organizations, foundations, federations and committees to raise the participation of women to 10 per cent by November 2001, 20 per cent by November 2002, 30 per cent by November 2003 and 35 per cent by November 2004.

Women continue to be discriminated against in official regulations of international competitions and rules of major sporting facilities. The Augusta National Golf Club in the United States, which hosts the annual Masters Tournament, continues to uphold its men-only membership policy. This has led to strong opposition by national women’s organizations and women’s rights activists.

Women playing volleyball at a camp for displaced Somalis in Kenya have encountered considerable pressure from their community because of dress codes. In response, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has worked with Nike and other private companies to design sporting apparel that is comfortable and practical for sport but which keeps within the dress code acceptable to communities.

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