

Sports: A Powerful Strategy to Advance Women’s Rights

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On the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, March 8, 2011, more than 1,000 supporters gathered in Washington, D.C., to celebrate and kick off CARE’s Annual Conference.¹ Each year, CARE bestows their “I Am Powerful” Award upon a person who has had a profound effect upon his or her community or the community of others. This year, CARE presented the award to Peninah Nthenya Musyimi, the founder of Safe Spaces, a sports-for-women’s-rights program in the Mathare slums of Nairobi, Kenya.

Safe Spaces provides an excellent example of a gender-targeted program that applies sports as a strategy to advance women’s rights. In addition to basketball, yoga, and dance classes, Safe Spaces’ leaders (who are all women) hold weekly discussions where participants talk about issues affecting girls and young women who live in the slums. Since its creation in 2008, Safe Spaces has worked with over 500 girls.

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had attended university on a basketball scholarship. As a child, she had witnessed the injustices women faced in the slums, where “all women’s rights are violated and nobody cares.”² She realized she could be most effective as a role model, finding that girls who participate in the Safe Spaces program have an increased determination to escape from the slums.³

Like Nthenya Musyimi, international development agencies, donors, governments, universities, and nonprofits are turning to sports as an innovative and effective way to engage young women in achieving their rights. Well-designed sports programs are an effective platform for learning and building skills, increasing knowledge, improving health and fitness, and ultimately yielding positive behavioral and health outcomes. In the United States, Title IX, approaching its 40th anniversary in 2012, has established a valuable precedent as a strategy for increasing women’s access to sports and, as such, is yielding data on positive outcomes from women’s participation. This essay is not a discussion of whether girls should play sports—that is an unequivocal right—but rather an evaluation of how rights-based sports programs are effective in helping young women achieve their rights, and how additional resources within the women’s rights and development sectors can be mobilized and targeted to improve outcomes for a woman and her community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN WOMEN AND GIRLS

While the use of sports as a development tool and strategy to advance women’s rights is growing, more funds must be targeted toward programs specifically geared toward women. In 2003, only 7.3 percent of total giving from foundations in the United States and 0.04 percent of total European Commission aid targeted “women and girls” programs and initiatives. Of the sixty-nine billion dollars distributed in 2003 in the category of

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“Official Development Assistance,” approximately USD 2.5 billion, or 3.6 percent, had gender equality as part of the objective.⁴

Investment in young women yields significant returns, especially when considering population statistics. Young women make up more

than twenty-five percent of the population of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa, and the total global population of girls between the ages of ten and twenty-four is predicted to hit its peak in the

next decade.⁵ But when it comes to the development of communities and nations, investments in women are about more than raw numbers. The Girl Effect, an initiative sponsored by the Nike Foundation in partnership with the NoVo Foundation, the United Nations Foundation, and the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, reports, “an extra year of primary school boosts girls’ eventual wages by ten to twenty percent. An extra year of secondary school: fifteen to twenty-five percent.”⁶

Women Win, founded in 2007, targets funding specifically to rights-based sports programs for girls and young women. In the past four years, Women Win has worked with 26 programs in 19 countries, making direct contact with over 9,000 girls and young women. Through its work, Women Win is finding that the participation of girls and young women in high-quality, rights-based sports programs, such as Safe Spaces, decreases a young woman’s tendency toward early pregnancy and marriage, and increases her chances of staying in school. Each additional year of schooling, and each year that childbirth or marriage is delayed, has a profound effect on a young woman’s self-empowerment and earning potential—a high return on investments targeted toward women.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHTS-BASED PROGRAMMING

Women Win supports rights-based programming. Rights-based programs start with the basic premise that every person has rights, and works to help each participant learn about and realize her rights. A well-known example of a rights-based approach is Title IX in the United States. Prior to 1972, universities and schools were distributing federal funding inequitably by gender. Title IX states:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...⁷

Although Title IX was not specifically directed at sports programs, Title IX’s equitable funding mandate for all federally funded universities and schools made sports programming for girls and women immediately available. While many funding decisions rely upon extensive research to determine need, Title IX establishes a strong precedent for a funding decision based upon rights.

Rights-based programs, like those supported by Women Win, are designed to accomplish two major goals: first, to educate each participant

about her rights; and, second, to help her build life skills that allow her to pursue the avenues necessary to realize her rights. For example, Safe Spaces' curriculum affirms for each participant that she has the right to realize

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..... economic empowerment. One way it does so is by emphasizing the importance of education in pursuing future employment. Musyimi's Safe Spaces program also includes team sports, such as basketball. Boxgirls, a rights-based sports program in Nairobi, engages participants through its curriculum on reproductive health and teaches girls how to box.

These programs are based upon the belief that when a girl or young woman learns about the rights to which she is entitled, she is able to develop the skills necessary to pursue her rights. If

she also has a support system to which she can turn when she experiences a violation of her rights, she is more likely to seek support and legal redress when those rights are violated. Knowing about her rights is not enough; each girl must also have the inner strength and the self-confidence to take action. Educating a girl about her rights provides her the opportunity to envision a different path, and the physical challenges and mentoring inherent to sports programs gives her the skills and support to follow it.

Because Title IX is a rights-based approach to human development, it is particularly relevant to the implementation of sports programming in countries where the realities of women's lives do not reflect the rights to which they are entitled. Many programs in emerging economies and "low-income" countries are designed around need; they identify something that is lacking either in the environment or in the people, and then work to fill that gap. A rights-based approach is just the opposite: it begins with the premise that every person has rights, and then educates and empowers an individual to achieve his or her rights. Rights-based programs are not dependent upon research for implementation. There is enough information available today to guide the scaling up of rights-based sports programs for girls and young women in countries across the globe.

AREAS IN WHICH RIGHTS-BASED PROGRAMMING HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL

Title IX provides evidence of the positive effect of rights-based programming upon a population whose rights had been denied. This has been particularly noticeable in regards to women and sports. After the passage of Title IX, the total number of girls playing high school sports increased from 300,000 in 1970 to almost three million today.⁸ Studies are starting to demonstrate the successes in education and careers achieved by women who grew up playing sports in the United States.⁹

Women Win works with sports programs on the ground to provide quality programming that improves participants' knowledge and empowerment in three areas central to women's rights: 1) economic empowerment; 2) gender-based violence; and 3) sexual and reproductive rights and health. These three areas are essential and interconnected. If a woman is to achieve economic independence, she must be free from oppression inflicted through gender-based violence. She also must be aware of her sexual and reproductive rights and health so she can choose to delay childbirth until completing her education. The ultimate goal is to help a young woman escape from poverty, achieve economic independence, and become a fully-developed human being. Early pregnancy, sexual abuse, rape, lack of access to financial institutions, and inability to own property are just a few of the injustices that limit a young woman's ability to achieve independence and contribute to her community. Women Win has selected these three focus areas because they represent the "triangle of oppression." When a young woman is able to exercise her rights in these three critical areas, she is more likely to realize a life free from poverty.

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Economic Empowerment

In 2010, the Population Council initiated a baseline survey of adolescent women participating in the Goal project in India. Goal, a "sports plus" program implemented by the Naz Foundation with support from

Standard Chartered Bank, targets adolescent girls aged twelve to twenty from low-income families in urban areas. Population Council researchers K.G. Santhya and Komal Saxena found that only three-fifths of girls surveyed knew how to count money correctly, barely half were aware of savings institutions, and just one-fourth could identify one or two services or products provided by banks.¹⁰ Goal's program is offered weekly, over a period of six to ten months, and includes a mix of sports- and life-skills-education modules that cover topics including financial literacy, communication skills, and health and hygiene. It is part of an increasingly large cadre of high-quality sports programs in which financial literacy is being integrated into curricula to assist young women in achieving economic independence. Since its founding in 2006 as a pilot program in Delhi, Goal has reached more than 14,000 girls in India, Nigeria, and Jordan. Its goal is to reach an additional 25,000 girls by the end of 2011.

Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is pervasive and crippling for young women in countries around the world, and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2005 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), almost fifty percent of sexual assaults are against girls under the age of fifteen.¹¹

Girls recognize the prevalence of violence in their communities. In 2010, Women Win worked with the Population Council to carry out a survey of 556 girls in four sports programs partnering with Women Win.

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They selected two programs in Kenya, one in Egypt, and one in Uganda. Seventy-six percent of girls surveyed believe that "violence against girls is a problem in their community."¹² A girl living with violence is often unaware that she has a choice to escape from it; programs must often teach the most basic aspects of human and legal rights.

For example, the Population Council survey of adolescent girls in India for the Goal program found that only sixty-seven percent knew that eighteen is the legal minimum age for females in India to marry, and only thirty-seven percent knew that twenty-one is the legal minimum age for males.¹³

For a woman to live a life free from gender-based violence, she must

first be aware that she has the right to live a life free from crimes inflicted upon her solely because of gender. Gender-based violence refers to a cluster of crimes, including sexual violence, trafficking, and property expropriation. Gender-based violence is inflicted at the domestic, community, and state levels. Quality sports programs for women's rights work on each of these levels. Nthenya Musyimi integrates lessons about gender-based violence into the Safe Spaces program because of her own experience in the Mathare slums.

A girl's need for mentors and positive peer groups makes quality sports programs, such as Safe Spaces in Kenya and Empowering Women of Nepal, particularly valuable because girls who do not have a personal network are more vulnerable to abuse. These sports programs create safe spaces. Eighty-nine percent of girls surveyed in the Population Council's survey of the four Women Win programs reported that they felt safe where they play sports; eighty-three percent reported they had made at least five new friends through the programs; and eighty-nine percent reported they had a female mentor they could confide in.¹⁴

Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Health

Adolescent girls are often forced to abandon schooling because of pregnancy. Every year, close to fourteen million adolescent girls give birth.¹⁵ The 2005 Adolescent Fact Sheet from UNFPA states: "Based on data from 56 countries, girls aged 15 to 19 from the poorest groups are three times more likely than their better-off peers to give birth in adolescence, and bear twice as many children."¹⁶ Women Win is working with sports programs to deliver information to girls about their sexual and reproductive rights.

Some girls have much to learn. As part of its baseline study for Standard Chartered's Goal program, researchers asked survey respondents about their knowledge of sex and pregnancy. Only twenty-five percent of respondents knew that a woman can become pregnant the first time she engages in sexual intercourse; sixty percent knew that there are ways to avoid pregnancy; and only seventy-six percent knew that a woman cannot get pregnant from kissing or hugging.¹⁷

The Population Council study of girls' perspectives from four programs found that over half of the girls surveyed know that it is okay to play sports while menstruating. The ten percent who noted they were "unsure" and the third who reported they felt that it was "not good" show that the program still has more work to do around education in this area.¹⁸ Program leaders continue to find that cultural practices around menstruation often interfere with a girl's ability to play while menstruating, so

each program's response must be qualified by the context of the community while still providing solid facts for participants. Program leaders also

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provide culturally relevant information about ovulation and pregnancy. Gender-specific sports programming provides a safe space for girls to initiate conversation about concerns, especially those that are often considered taboo. Women Win supports the training of peers as program leaders to provide information and support that aligns with cultural norms.

WOMEN WIN AND THE WORK IT DOES

Women Win brings an asset-building approach to the field by supporting and strengthening women's organizations and sports-for-development organizations to deliver conceptually sound and culturally relevant sports programs. Women Win's theory of change is built on the belief that adolescent girls and women benefit from, and are empowered by, sports and sports programs that build assets, provide access to resources, and develop agency and leadership.

For a sports program to effectively support a young woman in achieving a self-fulfilling, empowered life free from violence, it must combine two powerful pieces: 1) education about her rights (the building of *assets*) within a supportive community; and 2) the provision of *access* to resources allowing her to build personal *agency* and leadership. Women Win refers to these as the "triple A's."

Assets

Assets may be social, human, or athletic. Social assets include social networks, positive peer groups, and female mentors. Human assets include physical strength and fitness, mental and emotional health, self-confidence, and information and knowledge about gender-based violence, reproductive health, and economic empowerment. Sports skills are also assets, as participants must develop discipline and concentration to master a sport, and build one's sense of competence to compete. Women Win is tracking an emerging body of research suggesting that asset-building programs can result in long-term gains for girls and women.

Access

Quality sports programming also provides access to resources not often available to girls and young women. Sports programs allow for access to institutional and community resources, such as playing fields, basketball courts, and even something
 as simple as a soccer ball or basketball. Programming can also provide access to community resources, such as health centers, financial institutions, and community development organizations. Sports programs additionally create access to safe, female-friendly public spaces where girls can gather to learn new skills, form friendships, expand social networks, and receive
 mentoring. Access to these safe spaces is an important strategy in overcoming the social isolation that many girls face and that further exacerbates discrimination and gender-based violence. A safe and supportive environment is a contributory factor in motivating young people to make healthy choices.

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Agency

Finally, quality sports programming develops agency and leadership in young women. Sport is an ideal means to teach teamwork and goal-setting, and to develop and practice leadership skills. Sports programs help participants develop a sense of agency, empowering girls to act in their own best interest. Agency and leadership cultivated through sports programs for girls and women build a tremendous source of human capital by developing the maximum potential of each individual.

GAPS IN RIGHTS-BASED SPORTS PROGRAMMING

As funders look to increase their investments in girls and young women, Women Win encourages implementation of another lesson from Title IX: funding drives equity. Political structures and international resolutions are not enough. What if donors viewed funding of sports programs as an equity strategy and stipulated equitable access as a requirement for funds? What if they required communities to allow girls to play sports as a

condition of receiving a grant? How would this stipulation propel a donor's overall goals for a community? Women Win believes that sports-programming-for-women is a strategy that has tremendous impact upon communities, and encourages funders to see it as such and target and leverage funds to increase overall impact.

Funding is needed at all levels, not the least of which is research. In the field of quality sports programming for girls and women, there is an urgent need for longitudinal studies. The studies cited in this essay are snapshots in time and provide valuable baseline information. Research is needed to track changes over time. Programs work in both engaging and educating young women, but longitudinal studies would help to ensure quality and effectiveness. As noted in a sports-for-development impact study conducted by the University of Stirling and funded by Comic Relief and UK Sport, "the data enable us to identify 'what' happened, but there is a need to develop a more in-depth understanding of process—the 'how' and 'why'—and the reasons for inter-program differences, in order to consider issues of 'good practice.'"¹⁹ Women Win measures success by outcomes, not numbers. Women Win's interest is in seeing every young woman realize her rights, practicing economic and physical empowerment, and living a life free from gender-based violence.

CONCLUSION

Investors such as Comic Relief, the NoVo Foundation, the Inter-American Development Bank, Nike, and Standard Chartered are increasingly turning to sports as both a development strategy and a strategy for advancing women's rights. One must look no further than the positive outcomes that Title IX has reaped in the United States to acknowledge the benefits of increasing girls' access to sports. Yet, in communities where gender inequities are deeply embedded and oppressive, sports alone will not alter the outcome for girls and young women. Effective programming must marry human-rights education with the development of life skills. This pairing allows a young woman to both learn about her rights and to acquire the skills and mentors to forge her own path away from poverty and toward economic independence. To sustain the growing momentum of the sports-for-women's-rights movement, and to scale up current successes, investors should consider making the equitable delivery of services a requirement for funding, just as Title IX did almost 40 years ago. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 CARE is an international humanitarian organization that fights global poverty. CARE has found that working with women to rise out of poverty has a profound positive effect upon entire families and communities.
- 2 "International Women's Day Celebrations: VOA's Ndimyake Mwakalyelye talks to Peninah Ntheya Musyimi," YouTube video, 4:40, from TV2Africa, March 11, 2011, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO26pT8ISic>> (accessed April 19, 2011).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Cindy Clark, Ellen Sprenger, and Lisa VeneKlasan, *Where is the Money for Women's Rights?* (Toronto: Association for Women's Rights in Development, February 2006), 11.
- 5 Ruth Levine et al., *Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda*, (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2009), <<http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/15154>> (accessed April 19, 2011), 16.
- 6 "The Girl Effect Data: Why Should We Pay Attention to Girls," Girl Effect Media fact sheet, <http://www.girleffect.org/uploads/documents/1/Girl_Effect_Fact_Sheet.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2011), citing George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos, *Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2881, September 2002.
- 7 Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. § 1681 (1972).
- 8 Del Jones, "Many Successful Women Say Sports Teaches Valuable Lessons," *USA Today*, March 26, 2002.
- 9 A 2002 study showed that fifty percent of the women who make USD 75,000 and above identify themselves as athletic, and 82 percent of executive businesswomen played organized sports after elementary school. See Danielle Friedman, "Female Jocks Rule the World," *The Daily Beast*, September 29, 2010, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-09-29/women-and-sports-why-athletic-ladies-excel-in-business/>> (accessed April 20, 2011); see also Betsey Stevenson, *Beyond the Classroom: Using Title IX to Measure the Return to High School Sports*, National Bureau of Economic Research working paper 15728, (February 2010). The abstract notes, "Analysis of differences in outcomes across states in changes between pre- and post-cohorts reveals that a 10-percentage point rise in state-level female sports participation generates a 1 percentage point increase in female college attendance and a 1 to 2 percentage point rise in female labor force participation."
- 10 K.G. Santhya and Komal Saxena, *Assessing the Effects of Standard Chartered Bank's Goal Project on Adolescent Girl's Lives*, Population Council, 2010, 4.
- 11 UNFPA *State of the World Population 2005, The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the MDGs*, United Nations Population Fund, 2005 <http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2005/swp05_eng.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2011), 66.
- 12 Martha Brady, *A Snapshot of Girls' Perspectives on Sports, Health, and Empowerment: A Descriptive Study of Women Win Program Partners in Egypt, Kenya, and Uganda*, Population Council, 2010, iv.
- 13 Santhya and Saxena, 14-15.
- 14 Brady, iii.
- 15 UNFPA *State of the World Population 2005, The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the MDGs*, 14.
- 16 Ibid., 50.
- 17 Santhya and Saxena, 14.
- 18 Brady, iii-iv.
- 19 Fred Coalter with John Taylor, *Sport-for-Development Impact Study*, Department of Sports Studies, University of Stirling, October 2010, <www.uksport.gov.uk/docLib/MISC/FredCoaltersseminalMandEManual.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2011), xi.