The Untapped Potential of Sport to Accelerate Global Progress towards Gender Equity

By MARIA BOBENRIETH

We are at a point in history where it is possible to find gender-equitable spaces in the world. The Parliament of Rwanda. A classroom in Iceland. Perhaps your local coffee shop. Sport, however, is not one of those spaces. It is, arguably, one of the last frontiers of gender equity. It is the place where discrimination against women and male domination are broadly considered reasonable and acceptable, despite the right to sport being enshrined in international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A girl in Mumbai, India, is still most often not welcome to step up to bat at the local cricket ground. Even in the most visible sporting environments, arcane attitudes and practices persist. This is evidenced by the fact that less than 1 per cent of voting members of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), the governing body of the world’s most popular sport, are women.

It is precisely this stark gender imbalance that makes sport a prime lever to accelerate extreme changes in gender equity globally. The strategy of using sport to improve gender outcomes is transgressive and unlikely. History shows us, however, that when we make sporting space equitable, what becomes possible for girls and women expands exponentially.

In 1972, the United States enacted a law known as Title IX of the Education Amendments Act, which made discrimination on the basis of sex illegal for any institution receiving federal funding. One of the most significant implications of the law was the mandate to fund men’s and women’s sport programmes equally. Over 40 years later, Title IX has been credited with reducing the gap in girls’ sport participation in the United States from 1 in 27 to 1 in 3.

The impact of Title IX transcends the playing field. Recent research suggests that sport participation for girls has a causal effect on their social lives as adults. Phoebe Clarke and Ian Ayres of Yale Law School write in the Journal of Socio-Economics that athletic competitions “create forums for individual success,” and this appetite for achievement appears to last well into adulthood. Their research showed that sport made women “physically and mentally stronger and promoted emotional development.”

Women Win is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that uses sport as a strategy to empower adolescent girls to achieve their rights. Our work is based on the premise that sport has a unique ability to build girls’ leadership skills and address limiting gender norms at the community level. Since 2007, we have positively impacted the lives of over 1.75 million girls to address the most pressing issues of adolescence through sport, helping them access sexual and reproductive health and rights, address gender-based violence and achieve economic empowerment.

At Women Win, we see considerable challenges within the field of sport with regard to Sustainable Development Goal 5, to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” At the same time, however, we see significant potential, if leveraged well, for sport to have a positive impact on global efforts to achieve this Goal.

Evidence from partner programmes we support reveals precisely how sport participation can influence specific targets for Goal 5.
Two young girls from rural Nonghet in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic learn to play rugby and develop life skills through the Pass It Back programme, 201
Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

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, almost 50 per cent of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 15 years of age.

Building Young Women’s Leadership through Sport was a three-year programme to increase the leadership of adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in formal and informal decision-making processes. Women Win worked closely with eight partner organizations in seven countries to deliver quality sport and gender-based life-skills education to over 65,000 AGYW. A significant aspect of the programme was aimed at increasing knowledge of gender-based violence and improving attitudes towards gender equity. Results from the programme show that, following a one-year intervention,

- 90 per cent of participants know that a woman has the right to say no if someone tries to touch her or have sex;
- 87 per cent of participants know of a place they can go or person they can approach to report violence or abuse of a girl or woman; and
- 97 per cent of parents had an improved perception of their daughter as a leader.

Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Marriage before 18 years of age is a fundamental human rights violation. Early and forced marriage (E/FM) disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys. The latest international estimates indicate that worldwide, about one in seven adolescent girls (from 15 to 19 years of age) are currently married or in a union. The International Center for Research on Women conducted a systematic review of 23 programmes aimed at addressing E/FM to better understand what solutions work. Empowering girls with information, skills and support networks was found to be a top strategy.

Since 2013, Girl Determined has been implementing a sport-based Goal programme through their Colorful Girl Circles initiative in Myanmar, including at camps for internally displaced persons in Kachin State. Participants, who range from 12 to 17 years of age, are vulnerable to...
Adolescent girls from Moving the Goalposts in Kilifi, Kenya, develop important leadership skills and peer support networks through football. © MOVING THE GOALPOSTS

Extreme poverty and the myriad associated, interrelated conditions, including sexual violence, trafficking and E/FM. Despite their curiosity and engagement, girls often lack self-confidence, have poor communication and relationship skills, and exhibit self-harming behaviour. In conjunction with weekly volleyball sessions, girls participate in experiential educational activities aimed at developing their leadership skills and raising awareness about their rights. Programme outcomes reveal that girls and parents report improved health benefits, greater social cohesion, increased self-confidence and enhanced knowledge of their rights, including those related to gender-based violence and E/FM.

**Target 5.6:** Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.

Grassroot Soccer is an adolescent health organization that leverages the power of soccer (football) to empower adolescents to make educated choices about pressing health challenges such as HIV/AIDS, sexual health, gender-based violence and malaria. Their girls-targeted intervention, Skillz Street, combines an activities-based HIV prevention and life-skills curriculum with football. Numerous formal evaluations, conducted by Stanford University, the Population Council and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, have documented the effectiveness of Grassroot Soccer in significantly reducing sexual risk behaviour; decreasing stigma; and improving girls’ knowledge, attitudes, communication and decision-making skills, and perceived social support related to HIV/AIDS.

**Target 5.5:** Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

There is a clear lack of women in leadership positions within both national and international sport bodies. It’s anticipated that around 45 per cent of the athletes competing at the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics will be female, but women are still underrepresented on the boards of
the International Olympic Committee, international federations and many national sport committees. Although getting more women in leadership roles within sport bodies is an important step towards achieving this target, it is not enough to have women represented in senior positions without the support network and enabling environment to allow them to succeed.

Isha Johansen is President of the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA); a member of the FIFA Security and Integrity Committee, as well as the Committee for Women's Football and the FIFA Women's World Cup; and CEO of FC Johansen, a football club in Sierra Leone. Isha is one of only two female FA presidents in the world. When you talk to Isha about her experiences, it is clear why that number is so small.

Since taking up her post as SLFA President, Isha and her office have been subjected to protests, threats, name-calling and physical violence. Isha strongly believes this is down to her being a woman trying to enforce change through good governance in a traditionally entrenched, male-dominated arena. By exposing corruption, and at the same time striving to give women a voice through football and football administration, Isha has received little support for her condemnation of the wrongdoings of the old status quo. In a recent Huffington Post opinion piece, Isha described her country's football mismanagement and corruption as an "epidemic", comparing its pattern of destructiveness in the nation to that of the deadly Ebola virus.

Girls are born leaders. What they lack, almost universally, is an equal opportunity to practice that leadership and to build the resilience required for decision-making in political, economic and public life. It is clear that sport has a role to play in turning the dials of history on gender in this context. Sport builds the vital resilience necessary to venture into the challenging context of political, public and economic office. Individual efforts and NGO programmes, however, are not enough to allow girls and women access to sport and for all of us to experience the benefits sport has to offer. Title IX was the equity game changer in the United States. The conversation about equity through sport must be addressed by policymakers who, beyond simply understanding the value of a sports experience, have also benefited from one.

We therefore urge as a first step for the United Nations thematic mechanisms and rapporteurs with a relevant remit to call for a commission of evidence from NGOs, leaders in sport, ministers of sport and governing bodies to explain their actions on the elimination of sexism and discrimination against women and girls. Sport could serve as a powerful tool in addressing gender discrimination and promoting positive role models, but the review of the relevant conventions, such as CEDAW articles 10 and 13, and their implementation, often fail to cover the position of women in sport.

At the same time, we call for more research, resources and investment to be channelled to programmes that invest in sport as a game-changing strategy for girls and women globally. The leadership of girls and women is necessary for a just and prosperous world and the untapped potential of sport to accelerate progress towards gender equity is a sound investment towards this aim.

Contributions to this article were made by Sarah Murray (Women Win), Isha Johansen (SLFA), Yasmin Waljee OBE and Emma Rehal-Wilde (Hogan Lovells).

Notes


2 Ibid., pp. 70, 63. The authors refer to the article by Reed W. Larson of the University of Illinois analyzing the development of initiative in the best suited contexts, such as sports, arts and participation in organizations. See Reed W. Larson, "Toward a psychology of positive youth development", *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, No. 1 (January 2000), pp. 170-83.


7 Evaluations and reports on the work of Grassroot Soccer are available from http://www.grassrootsoccer.org/research-development/proven-results/ (accessed 29 June 2016).
