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WOMEN HEALTH AND SPORTS

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Introduction

“Gender refers to the socially-constructed roles of and relationships between men and women. Gender concerns men and women, including conceptions of both femininity and masculinity. The difference between, gender and, sex is that the latter refers only to biological differences.

Gender does not mean focusing solely on women or females, but rather on the inequalities between males and females, and should not be confused with feminism or womens studies. Analyses of gender differences often show a disadvantaged and weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical issues. This is why there is a tendency for gender discussions and interventions to focus on correcting these imbalances by specifically targeting women and girls.

The Role of Sport in Addressing Gender Issues

An overview of the benefits of using sport to promoting gender equity and womens and girls empowerment. In recent years, there has been a significant shift from advocating for „gender equity in sport towards using „sport for gender equity and personal development. This sub-section contains some of the evidence of this shift so far.

Gender-specific disorders

Current research indicates that regular physical activity may decrease or slow down the onset of osteopenia and osteoporosis in women. Regular physical activity coupled with a calcium-rich diet can increase bone mineral density, reducing the risk of developing bone disorders and fractures among older women. Strong evidence supports the role regular exercise can play in controlling levels of fat, reducing the risk of lung and breast cancers.

Women’s and girls’ self-esteem and self-empowerment

Some research using the concept of self-esteem suggests that girls and women who participate in sport and physical activity in both developed and developing countries demonstrate higher self-esteem as well as improved self-perception, self-worth, self-efficacy and so on. These improvements are associated with enhanced feelings of accomplishment, perceptions of improved physical appearance and commitment to exercise. Evidence from developing countries shows that involvement in organised sports activities helped to enhance girls sense of agency, self-empowerment and personal freedom.

Social inclusion and social integration of women and girls

There is a large amount of compelling evidence from both developed and developing countries reflecting the relationship between sport participation and social integration and social inclusion of women and girls. Access to safe spaces becomes increasingly confined, restrictive, enclosed and domestic as girls in developing countries reach adolescence. Evidence from sport programmes shows that sport activities can allow women and girls access to safe social spaces in which they may exercise control and ownership. Sport plays a crucial role in enhancing social cohesion and encouraging social interaction among young women and girls.

Challenging and transforming gender norms

Most research that examines the relationship between sport and gender refers to the transformative potential of sport to challenge or alter gender norms. „Gender norms refer to the responsibilities and privileges assigned to men and women. Although the participation of women and girls in sport remains largely imbalanced when compared to participation among men and boys, most researchers are in agreement that the consistent

and continued participation of women and girls in sport has had a major impact on achieving gender equality in certain contexts.

Opportunities for women's and girls' leadership and achievement

Develop specialized skills in coaching, refereeing, training, league organization as well as access to information on health and peer education is of great value to the participants of these programmes. Exposure to competing internationally is seen to add a boost to public recognition of the skills that women and girls can develop through sport.

Policy Development in Gender and Sport

A historical overview of the major highlights in policy development in gender and sport. Policy development at the nexus of sport, gender and development has centred mainly on sport and gender. Increasingly, there is recognition of the need to involve and engage with gender issues through sport in the context of developing countries. This sub-section provides suggestions to bear in mind when attempting to understand local contexts and for appropriately adapting gender interventions through sport to local situations.

Socio-economic considerations

In many of today's developing countries, everyday tasks to meet basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) require most time, leaving few to think of the perceived „luxury“ of recreational activities. In most cases, work conducted by women and girls in the home as providers of food and carers of the family is not considered as productive because it is not a directly income-generating activity, which implies the assumption that females may not require recreational or free time as much as men. In such contexts, it is important to determine the extent to which women and girls can access time and resources to participate in sport.

Socio-cultural issues

The socio-cultural context of established gender norms must be considered when conducting sport programmes that aim to address gender norms. It may be considered a provocation for women and girls in some contexts, to be seen in public, wearing sports attire that may not cover all parts of the body. Not behaving according to established gender norms determined by socio-cultural influences, can have significant negative consequences for those who deviate from these norms.

Safety concerns

Sport and physical activity deals primarily with the body and “physicality”. Adults or older children may hold a position of power in relation to their younger counterparts, especially when they are in the role of a coach or trainer. In this sense, children and young people are in a position of vulnerability. Codes of conduct for coaches and appropriate reporting systems are necessary to avoid incidents of possible abuse or exploitation. The lack of appropriate facilities (e.g. with changing rooms, water and sanitation facilities, etc.) and/or sports equipment can deter women and girls from participating in sport activities. The risk of injury, especially towards women and girls, can be particularly restrictive.

Material, infrastructural and technical issues

Evidence from a sports programme in Bam, Iran shows that girls and women could only participate in sports and physical activity indoors, protected from public view. During the summer, activities were cancelled because it was not possible to open windows and doors while the female participants were playing. Experience shows that facilities that are close to residential areas, with appropriate lighting are more likely to have greater participation of women and girls. Activities should also be scheduled at appropriate times, e.g. before dusk.

Ideals of masculinity and femininity

Sport is often perceived to express heterosexuality and male excellence. Experience shows that in most contexts, women who would like to be successful in sport competition have to demonstrate some „typically male“ attributes (such as: ambition, self-confidence, aggressiveness and power). Girls and women who „trespass“ on these socially and culturally defined boundaries, are seen to challenge and perhaps transform well-protected gender norms.

Lack of female role models Research has shown that most girls learn „culturally-appropriate styles of movement“ by imitating their older female counterparts. But communicating the achievements of those exceptional women to others remains a challenge. Conclusion

- High school girls who play sports are less likely to be involved in an unintended pregnancy; more likely to get better grades in school and more likely to graduate than girls who do not play sports.
- Girls and women who play sports have higher levels of confidence and self-esteem and lower levels of depression.
- Girls and women who play sports have a more positive body image and experience higher states of psychological well-being than girls and women who do not play sports.
- Females who participate in high school sports are more likely to complete college than those who did not participate in sports.
- As little as four hours of exercise a week may reduce a teenage girls risk of breast cancer by up to 60%; breast cancer is a disease that afflicts one out of every eight American women.
- Through sports, girls learn important life skills such as teamwork, leadership and confidence.
- Female athletes who participate on one or two school or community sports teams are significantly less likely to smoke regularly than female non-athletes.
- Sports are an asset to American families, fostering communication and trust between parents and children.
- More than three-quarters of working women feel that sports participation helps enhance their self-image.
- Girls involvement with sports is related to higher levels of family satisfaction, in both single-parent and dual-parent families.
- High school female athletes have more positive body images than non-athletes.

How are we helping ensure the successful future of our girls? Go Girl Go!

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