



ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH YOUTH SPORTS PROGRAMS

Purposeful engagement of boys and young men in conversations about gender norms is crucial for the positive effects of sport for gender equity.

Greater investments in research can help practitioners understand why and how sport can be better utilized for gender justice.

Sport can encourage gender equality through youth engagement and can serve as a medium through which gender equity curriculum can be taught.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the use of sport as a tool for development and peace has seen a dramatic increase in popularity among local and global development practitioners around the world.¹ Increasingly, both US and international programs are recognizing that sport has the potential to be a powerful and cost-effective tool for the advancement of gender justice.

Sport for development more broadly refers to the use of sport to achieve crucial development goals for children and youth—such as education, health, and gender equality.² Sport for gender justice refers to using sport as both a means of advancing gender equality—through increasing women and girls’ access to sport, as well as a means of achieving gender equity—using sport as a medium to shift gender norms.¹

There is an entire field of research devoted to sport for development which leads to a biased view that sport itself leads to development, despite a lack of research that evaluates the quality of sport programs and their effect on macro-level change.^{3 4 5} Focusing on sport and gender specifically, there have been several studies that report positive impacts of sport on gender equity, including increased knowledge around sexual and reproductive health as well as shifts in behavioral and societal norms around violence against girls and women.^{6 7 8}

The goal of this brief is to evaluate the evidence on several components of youth sport programs—engagement, curriculum, and mentorship & relationship building—to better understand which component or combination of components is most critical for informing effective sport programs.

PROGRAM COMPONENT: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Is it the sport itself—as an engagement activity for youth that shifts their attention from riskier activities—which makes youth sport programs promising interventions for advancing gender justice?

Sport programs engage youth and serve as a distraction and psychological escape from their everyday lives.³ Many young participants engaged in sport activities may find sport as an avenue for success; youth involved with sport reported higher self-efficacy and increased sense of purpose which seems to portray sport programs as an effective gateway for complementary curriculum.^{3,7}

One study in Tanzania found reductions in female reports of interpersonal violence associated with a soccer program intervention appeared to be driven by the decreased likelihood of having a male partner and spending less time with partners.⁸ This seems to support the idea that sport programs provide youth alternative engagement opportunities to riskier activities.

Engagement with sport itself can have positive impacts on gender equality, but can also serve as an effective medium for engaging youth in activities that open the door to life skill curriculum—including those intended to shift gender norms.

PROGRAM COMPONENT: CURRICULUM

Should the curriculum—designed to engage youth in establishing healthy and positive gender norms—be the focal point of sport programs?

In addition to youth engagement, sport programs often provide an accompanying curriculum designed to teach youth life skills or shift social norms. Sport-based learning programs provide an alternative approach to schooling and education to engage youth who cannot or will not continue formal education, opening up pathways—in formal and

informal settings—to learning.⁶

One study in Senegal shows that youth engagement in sport programming may potentially increase gender equity attitudes while decreasing gender stereotyping. The study found that girls and young women were more responsive to shifting gender norms and stereotypes after engaging in the program curriculum, but that adjustments may be needed to be more effective at reaching boys and young men.⁷ Research in Tanzania also supports the concept of designing gender equity lessons for both females and males, finding that when boys and young men engage in a soccer-based health intervention, female reports of intimate partner violence significantly reduce.⁸

PROGRAM COMPONENT: MENTORSHIP & RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

How important is mentorship and relationship building for effective sport for gender justice programming?

Youth sport programs can have positive and negative outcomes, both of which are dependent on the structure provided and the relationships developed throughout sport-based programs.³ Sport programs that provide youth with consistent, dependable environments can provide structure and routine youth need to engage in positive relationship building. Coaches, then, play an important role in helping serve as guides and mentors for youth—taking on an active role in providing ‘life lessons’ and administering curriculum.^{3,9}

Previous research on sport programs finds a strong link between youth participants’ relationships with coaches and life skill development. Coaches are situated in a unique position to serve as mentors for youth, helping participants to learn about positive behavior changes, such as changing gender norms around violence against women.⁹

In addition to the role coaches play as mentors, both positive and negative outcomes of youth sport programs are dependent on

the structure and opportunity provided for positive relationship building.³ Evidence from a study conducted in the U.S. supports the idea that actively engaging youth and their peers in their own development may be an effective strategy for teaching life skills and social behaviors.⁹ Relationship building among peers helps youth develop a sense of social agency in addressing and fighting against social injustices, which may be an important factor to consider when trying to shift social norms around gender.⁹

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The popularity of sport along with previous positive sport experiences among practitioners, advocates, policymakers, and researchers can often bias the view of sport as an “apolitical, neutral, and inherently integrative set of social practices that can deliver a wide range of positive outcomes.”³ If sport programs are not careful in fostering positive environments for growth and behavioral change, they can be detrimental towards development.³

Narratives of masculine resilience and masculine notions of power and control can detrimentally affect gender relations and norms in communities. It is possible for sport to hinder instead of foster development if there is an absence of positive relationships and role models.³

Purposeful engagement of boys and young men in conversations about gender norms is crucial for the positive effects of sport for gender equity. Future youth programming considerations should focus on developing tailored curriculum designed to shift gender norms, as well as training coaches to be better equipped to serve as mentors and facilitators for conversations about gender equality for both girls and boys. Further research on sport for gender equity is needed to better understand and tease out the impact of each component and how varying degrees of each component might maximize impact.

Recommendations for future youth sport programming:

Greater investments in research can help practitioners understand why and how sport can be better utilized for gender justice

Intentional design of sport-based curriculums to address gender equity and intentionally including boys and young men in conversations can help shift gender norms

Funding for coach training programs to improve mentorship and relationship building capacities can help to improve unequal gender roles, re-define gender norms, and challenge stereotypes

CONCLUSION

Sport programs can be viable instruments for advancing gender justice, due to a combination of three components: youth engagement, curriculum, and mentorship & relationship building. Sport can encourage gender equality through youth engagement and can serve as a medium through which gender equity curriculum can be taught. Curriculum specifically tailored to shift gender norms can be an important aspect of sport for gender equity as well as an important avenue for coaches to serve as mentors. Ensuring that coaches, guest speakers, and other peers serve as positive role models may make the gender equity curriculum even more effective in the larger goal of advancing gender justice.

REFERENCES

1. Sportanddev.org. (n.d.). What is sport and development? sportanddev.org/en/learn-more/what-sport-and-development
2. Unicef. (n.d.). Sport for Development. Unicef Office of Research-Innocenti. unicef-irc.org/research/sport-for-development
3. Massey, W. V. & Whitley, M. A. (2016). The role of sport for youth amidst trauma and chaos. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 8(5), 487-504. doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2016.1204351
4. Whitley, M. A., Fraser, A., Dudfield, O., Yarrow, P., & Van der Merwe, N. (2020). Insights on the funding landscape for monitoring, evaluation, and research in sport for development. *Journal of Sport for Development*, 8(14), 21-35.
5. Beaman, L., Herskowitz, S., Keleher, N. & Magruder, J. (2021). Stay in the Game: A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Sports and Life Skills Program for Vulnerable Youth in Liberia. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 70(1), 129-158. doi.org/10.1086/711651
6. Laureus. (2020). Annual Review 2020, Fighting Against The Odds. laureus.com/getmedia/6ef70553-2b24-4f72-b4c8-482086cc3fbb/Laureus-Annual-Review-2020-DIGITAL.pdf
7. Meyer, K. L. & Roche, K. M. (2017). Sports-for-development gender equality impacts from a basketball programme: Shifts in attitudes and stereotyping in Senegalese youth and coaches. *Journal of Sport for Development*, 5(9), 49-57. jsfd.org/2017/10/01/sports-for-development-gender-equality-impacts-from-basketball-programme-shifts-in-attitudes-and-stereotyping-in-senegalese-youth-and-coaches/
8. Shah, M., Seager, J., Montalvao, J., & Goldstein, M. (2022). Two Sides of Gender: Sex, Power, and Adolescence (Working Paper).
9. Whitley, M. A., Wright, E. M., & Gould, D. (2016). Coaches' perspectives on teaching life skills to underserved South African children and youth. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 11(3), 312-326. doi.org/10.1177/1747954116643646