

Opening keynote speech
"Challenging the gender order"

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The 'gender order' could be very simplistically defined as the way society is organized around the roles, responsibilities, activities and contributions of women and men. An important starting point is the fact that the 'gender order' is possible to challenge and change.

I. Achievements, gaps and challenges in challenging the gender order – the broad global context

Achievement of the goal of gender equality and empowerment of women requires systematic and sustained priority attention in all policy areas. Gender mainstreaming was identified in the Beijing Platform for Action as a major strategy. It requires that the contributions, priorities and needs of women as well as men are considered through gender analysis in the beginning of planning processes, in order to influence the direction of development so that both women and men can be involved and benefit. Gender mainstreaming is the means by which policies, strategies, plans and resource allocations in all areas can be influenced from a gender equality perspective, and it is therefore a critical strategy. Gender mainstreaming ensures that the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women is the responsibility of all actors across all sectors, rather than the sole responsibility of gender specialists.

Even though significant gains have been made in many areas, there is still much room for improvement. Policies and strategies on gender equality and empowerment of women are only useful if there is systematic and effective implementation. This requires political will, resources and mechanisms for following-up and securing accountability. The establishment of specific mechanisms to work on gender equality and empowerment of women can only have a positive impact if these mechanisms are provided with clear mandates, adequate resources and appropriate political support.

One important positive development highlighted was the significant increase in women's specific organizations and networks over the past decade. Women have developed a relatively powerful political voice in this manner in many contexts. However, it is important not to accept that women should only be heard through their separate organizations. Women should also be equitably represented in and have access to decision-making within all organizations. Evidence seems to suggest that in many NGOs in all parts of the world, women are under-represented at decision-making levels, and gender equality concerns are often neglected.

Experience has shown that even if leadership in organizations make clear statements about the goal of gender equality and empowerment of women, without changes in attitudes and practices at lower levels, little positive change will result.

Addressing stereotypes will require an explicit focus on men and boys. Women and girls will also need to be specifically targeted since many stereotypes have been internalized through upbringing, education, and the media. Negative attitudes and practices are often accepted as the norm by both women and men. Change will require significant efforts and take time. Media has a critical role to play.

Affirmative action such as quotas, are not accepted by all. Experience nevertheless shows that targets do work; although incentives as well as sanctions for non-compliance, are often needed to ensure their effectiveness.

Training and leadership development are crucial to support women to acquire the necessary skills to reach and retain decision-making positions. Gender-sensitive training is also required for men to introduce them to gender equality issues, and develop their commitment to promoting increased participation of women in decision-making, including through identifying practical ways to support women's candidacies.

II. Women/gender equality and sport

Gender equality perspectives on sport

A women and sport focus remains critical but would be more effective if it was informed by a deeper understanding of the gender perspectives on sport, through systematic gender analysis in all areas. Women's access to, involvement in and benefits from sport can only be fully understood through comparison with men's access, involvement and benefits. Such information and statistics are essential for effective advocacy, awareness raising, policy development, changes in resource allocations required to change the status and situation of women and girls in sport.

Women cannot promote gender equality and empowerment of women in sport by acting alone, and should not be expected to. Men, particularly those in positions of power, have to be involved in the process of change and take on leadership roles.

Benefits for women and girls of increased participation in sport and physical education

Sport today clearly provides benefits for women and girls and can be a powerful tool for women's empowerment and gender equality. Sport promotes the physical and mental well-being of women and girls. Sport offers the opportunity for developing self-knowledge, self-expression, self-fulfillment and self esteem, and for demonstrating ability and skills acquisition and personal achievement, through a process of social interaction.

Given that sport has been traditionally perceived as a male domain, women's and girls' participation in sport also challenges gender stereotypes, and has thus potential for reducing discrimination and breaking down entrenched attitudes. Sport can offer an important space for renegotiation of the gender order and the evolution of constructions of masculinity and femininity to the benefit of both women and men.

The skills and values learned through sport are considered to be especially important for girls, given that they have fewer opportunities than boys for social interaction outside the home and beyond family networks. In such contexts, successful sports programmes can be a potential entry point for reaching girls and young women on a variety of important issues.

Benefits for sports of women's increased involvement

In addition to benefits for women and girls themselves, women's increased involvement can promote positive development in sport - through providing alternative norms, values and attitudes, knowledge, experiences and capabilities. Women's involvement in sport can make a significant contribution to public life, community development and to building a strong and healthy nation.

There are also clear benefits from women's increased participation in decision-making in sport. It diversifies the talent pool among coaches and managers, administrators, and other officials. Increased numbers of women in key positions can, as well, enhance outreach to women and girls by providing positive role models and mentors.

Equitable access and participation

Both horizontal and vertical segregation persist, however, in sporting activities and sporting bodies. Horizontal segregation or discrimination exists because women and girls do not have access to the full range of activities available to men and boys. Vertical segregation is experienced when women and girls do not participate in management and leadership roles to the same extent to men and boys.

Despite progress made, there are still significant gaps and challenges in relation to the access and participation of women and girls in sport which must be clearly identified and addressed.

While both men and women can suffer from a lack of safe and appropriate sport facilities, resources, training opportunities, technical support and access to incentives and rewards, these constraints are often exacerbated for women.

The attitudes of men to women and their roles in sport – including among athletes, coaches, managers and officials, broadcasters, sponsors and the general public - is also a major constraint.

The attitudes of women and girls may also need attention, since women and girls may not have developed adequate understanding of the intrinsic value of sport and its contribution to personal development and well-being, or of their rights and potential in this area. Women and girls may have internalized many negative perceptions.

Also, participation of disabled women and girls in sport has increased in recent years but nevertheless remains lower than participation by able-bodied women and girls.

Access to decision-making

Although women's participation in sporting activities has increased in recent years in local, national and international contexts, women are still significantly under-represented in decision-making and as leaders in sporting bodies and institutions.

While the establishment of targets in the world of sport is very positive, it should be noted that these are lower than the 30 percent target set for all decision-making bodies by 1995, as well as the 60/40 percent targets set for local authorities. It is also critical not to view the targets as “ceilings” for women’s participation, but as minimum requirements for women’s representation.

As more women serve in leadership and decision-making positions, their influence as role models has the potential to encourage women to participate at all levels in the sporting world. Long-term mentorship has also been identified as an important means of providing the encouragement and moral support necessary for developing an enabling environment for women’s and girls’ increased participation in sport and sport-leadership.

Inequality in resources, wages and financial incentives

Women and girls face discrimination in a number of other critical areas. These include access to top quality facilities, training and other resources. Competition opportunities, rewards and incentives, promotion and sponsorship and recognition are also not provided equitably to both women and men. This applies to both contexts involving elite or professional athletes and local contexts involving amateur athletes.

Inequalities between male and female professional athletics also exist in relation to wages and other financial compensation.

Women’s sports and the media

Despite the call for media to positively portray and significantly cover the breadth, depth, quality and benefits of girls' and women’s involvement in sport in the Windhoek Call for Action in 1998, there is still very far to go before women’s sports are given equitable treatment in the media, both general media and sports media. The exclusive promotion of male sports idols in the media can create or exacerbate unequal perceptions of value of male athletes and male-dominated sporting activities compared

with women athletes and women's sport. Media coverage can also disseminate negative gender images and perceptions of women projected by some male sports idols.

Violence against women, exploitation and sexual harassment in the context of sports

Women and girls who engage in sports may face the risk of gender-based violence, exploitation and harassment.

The risk of violence may also stem from resistance to the challenging of gender boundaries and the asserting of independence that women's and girl's participation can represent. Women and girls may face physical and social punishment from family or community members who see their involvement in sport as inappropriate. Women and girls may also risk verbal harassment, including of a sexual nature, from male players or spectators because their participation is seen as a departure from accepted gender roles.

The dominance of men in coaching and management also reinforces traditional patriarchal power hierarchies. The abuse of power by coaches and managers may lead to exploitation and physical and verbal sexual harassment.

Issues of violence, exploitation and abuse of women in the context of male sports are also of increasing concern. Male sports traditionally enhance a notion of masculinity based on men's dominance, physical strength. With this notion comes power and privilege. Sexual violence committed by male athletes has remained unquestioned in some contexts.

III. Conclusions: What more should be done to move forward

Through the inequalities described, a negative cycle can be established: that is, the low level of interest in the participation of women and girls in sporting activities does not stimulate equitable investments in terms of facilities, resources, opportunities, attention in the media and distribution of incentives and rewards, which can in turn lead to lessened interest of women and girls to participate. This negative cycle can only be broken with increased awareness, political commitment to bring about positive change, significantly increased investment of resources, and development of accountability mechanisms for all actors in key positions in the world of sport.

The foundations of a sound action framework for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women in sport are already in place, thanks in large part to the earlier world conferences on women in sport. There are a number of areas in which this framework can be significantly strengthened and expanded.

- The focus on targets for women's participation in decision-making and leadership should be increased and targets raised further where possible. Follow-up of targets should be strengthened. Concrete targets should be set for local levels. Development of databases could be considered for different levels to provide a resource for those seeking women for leadership positions.

- Efforts should be made to move beyond increasing numbers of women participating to enhancing the effectiveness of their participation through increased voice in shaping policy decisions, resource allocations, and programme development, including through strengthened leadership development for women and girls. The types of support mechanisms required should be identified.
- Greater attention should be given to influencing organizational cultures through ensuring appropriate meeting times and provision of child-care facilities for both mothers and fathers.
- Identifying male allies among male athletes, coaches, managers, and other leaders, including in the media, establishing strategic partnerships in promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, will be an important strategy for the future. Men must be encouraged to play a more visible supportive role. Training for men on gender equality issues in sport and practical ways to address them will be an important strategy. Men should also be encouraged to develop positive role models for boys and young men.
- Further developing secure and supportive environments for women and girls in sport should continue to be a high-priority issue. In particular efforts should be made to ensure that men with positions of power in women's sport do not abuse their power and the trust placed in them. Effective accountability mechanisms must be put in place.
- Collaboration in pursuit of the important goals outlined will be essential. The impact of efforts of all actors will be increased through close collaboration, sharing of experiences and lessons learned, and where appropriate coordination of efforts.

The International Year of Sport and Physical Education in 2005 provided potential for increased systematic attention to gender equality and empowerment of women in sport. While gender perspectives were not systematically incorporated into processes, important opportunities have been created. The International Year has generated considerably increased attention to the issue of sport at all levels, and there will be important follow-up processes which should be more systematically and effectively influenced from a gender perspective. Concerted efforts should be made to build on the momentum created by the International Year to move positions forward on women and sport.

The Division for the Advancement of Women, where I work, for example, will collaborate with UN colleagues, including the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport and Development, to ensure that follow-up work incorporates significantly more attention to gender equality and empowerment of women.

In conclusion, as the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, has emphasized time and time again, gender equality is not the responsibility of women, it is the responsibility of us all, men as well as women. Moving forward is dependent on all actors at all levels working consistently to keep attention on the issue. The contributions of individuals are very important. At the very least, we should be clear about the vision of gender equality and empowerment of women in the world of sport. We should also refuse to accept the discrimination and inequalities that we experience ourselves or see around us. These inequalities are often subtle and insidious and it can require considerable courage to confront them, particularly in contexts where taking a stand for gender equality and empowerment of women can lead to ridicule or harassment. Only if individual women and men are prepared to make a stand will real change be possible.

As Ghandi once said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world”.