

Empowerment, Equality, Action

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UNESCO Special Event: Maximizing the Power of Sport

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Mr. Deputy Director-General, distinguished speakers, and ladies and gentleman in attendance here today,

Firstly, please allow me to kindly thank UNESCO for organizing this special event and for likewise choosing to include gender equality and female empowerment into our discussion here today on maximizing the power of sport. The inclusion of gender equality issues onto formal agendas is a first crucial step towards enacting positive social change. I would likewise wish to commend UNESCO for selecting gender equality as one of the two priorities of its Medium-Term Strategy for 2008-2013.

On behalf of the International Working Group on Women and Sport, I would like to express our enthusiasm in participating in this event and contributing to the heightened the importance of gender equality on the global sport agenda. As you might already know, this dovetails well with the mission of the International Working Group on Women and Sport: empowering women – advancing sport.

I have been requested to speak briefly here today on the topic of Empowerment, Equality and Action on behalf of the **International Working Group on Women and Sport** for which I serve as co-chair. Our working group serves as an independent coordinating body made up of representatives of key governmental and non-governmental organizations from various regions of the world who work towards realizing the IWG's vision – a sustainable sporting culture based on gender equality that enables and values the full involvement of girls and women in every aspect of sport and physical activity. At the IWG's core is the Brighton Declaration, the legacy of the first World Conference of Women and Sport held in 1994 which sets forth ten key principles to support a gender inclusive sporting culture. Along with ongoing efforts to make meaningful contributions to the advancement of the women and sport movement, our working group also organizes a quadrennial world conference on women and sport, which will be held in June 2014 in Helsinki, Finland.

In today's short presentation, I would like to highlight a variety of reasons why gender issues deserve a higher place on the agenda of the sporting world. If first we approach the issue **from the point of view of the individual**, we can appreciate from a variety of perspectives the importance that sport and physical activity can play throughout the life stages of girls and women. Whether through formal education structures or extracurricular activities, participation in sport and physical activity is a crucial aspect of early childhood development. It serves as an important means for fostering self-knowledge, healthy body image and positive self-esteem. The fact that girls the world over have fewer opportunities for and lower participation rates in sport and physical activity, signifies an early diversion point from

where the possibilities for boys and those for girls often progress unequally and persist into adolescence and adulthood.

Young girls who are sportive are also more likely than their male counterparts to give up these beneficial activities as they progress through puberty and into adulthood. Those young women who do choose to remain active in sports and perhaps even pursue sports-related careers are in real need of targeted support and visible role models to help them make the professional progressions needed to reach the top of their chosen field and navigate the challenges of being both leader in the field and a family caregiver. The fact that women world-wide remain so clearly underrepresented in leadership positions within sport and physical activity demonstrates that support is acutely needed, for example, in the form of work-place policies, professional guidance counseling and mentoring.

From the point of view of **health and wellbeing**, sport and physical activity promote healthy lifestyles that support physical and emotional wellbeing throughout the entire lifespan. In practical terms, for girls who are members of a sports team, this nurturing environment can represent an excellent setting to receive education on important public health issues, for example reproductive health or sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV-AIDS. Preliminary studies have also shown that girls who participate in sport and physical activity tend to become sexually active later in life, have fewer sexual partners, and make greater use of contraception than non-sporting girls.

Physical activity and sport can also help combat obesity, a global epidemic that is increasingly affecting both the developed and the developing world. Obesity is known to contribute to a host of debilitating and costly diseases such as cardiovascular disease, high-blood pressure and diabetes. In fact, women suffer higher rates of obesity than their male counterparts ([WHO](#)). In addition, osteoporosis is also of particular concern for women. The active promotion of sport and physical activity to women is a key component to combating these illnesses.

If we now turn to look at issues of empowerment and gender equality from a **societal perspective**, studies suggest that women's participation in sport and physical activity also contributes to more broad-based feelings of female empowerment. Involvement in sport and physical activity opens up a positive means for female self-identification, one that often serves to breakdown limiting gender-based stereotypes. Thus, involvement in these often male-associated activities can establish new community roles and affiliations for female members of society. This in turn helps to challenge a whole host of societal restrictions on female contributions. This is also significant for marginalized members of societies: the physically and mentally disabled, ethnic or religious minorities, immigrants and refugees, and those of a different sexual orientation, for example.

Seeing female members of society partake in sport and physical activity helps to shape the norms, values and expectations that society has of women and girls. This works to expand not only the possibilities for these individual girls and women but the entire society's human resource capital. This has the potential for important economic advantages. For example, having more girls and women engaged and interested in sport can boast the economic potential of sport within the economy. Or, these individuals might then choose contribute their time and energy to the volunteer sports economy. In addition, increasing women's capacity to pursue sports-related careers can result in novel career tracks for women, more successful professional female athletes, more medals, an increased competitive advantage in the hosting of sporting events, and even a higher standing for the nation as a whole within the sports world.

I hope I have convinced you of the importance that sport and physically activity can play in the individual lives of girls and women and also its powerful societal significance. Action, rightly so, must then follow this appreciation.

In brief, **action towards facilitating change** takes place within the areas of education, facilities, access, training and mentoring, resource allocation and policy-making, and also with respect to research and data collection. Here I might also mention that for many women across the world, there firstly exists the need to just feel safe from gender-based violence and harassment when attending sporting events, training, competing and in the workplace.

While action needs to take place at the local, state, regional and international levels, the role of national governments is particularly worth emphasizing – especially with respect to the role of public education systems, public health, sports institutions and national policies.

Inter-institutional collaboration is also highly important, especially at the international level. Entities concerned with the empowerment of women need to appreciate the power of sport and physical activity, and, likewise, those devoted to advancing sport should appreciate the meaningful contributions that women can and do make. Coordinated action between stakeholders and between men and women are needed in order to capitalize on the powerful role sport can play in empowering women and increasing gender equality.

In conclusion, some possible recommendations for action could include, for example: the promotion of the social significance of sport and physical activity, especially from a gender perspective; advances in the existing knowledge base through additional research and data collection; the inaction of strategies, policies, action plans or roadmaps, especially by national governments; concrete actions including cooperation; monitoring of the impact of policies and projects; as well as the renewal of policies and previous action plans.

It is my hope that we will have further opportunities to delve deeper into these important issues and find mutually beneficial areas of cooperation. The International Working Group on Women and Sport is an eager partner in such efforts.

On behalf of the IWG, I wish to thank you kindly for your attention.