

Level the Playing Field to Bolster the Boardroom: Sports as a Springboard for Women's Labor Force Advancement in Asia

Barbara KOTSCHWART† and Kevin STAHLER

Peterson Institute for International Economics

We promote women's participation in sports as part of a solution to better integrate women into the labor force of Asian economies. Women in Asia lag other regions in terms of labor force participation and membership in corporate leadership bodies; this is particularly acute in East Asia. Involvement in sport has been found to be associated with long-term economic benefits for women internationally, including enhanced returns to education and labor outcomes. We propose a number of sports program-related policies for Asian countries to consider in order to better integrate women into education, society, labor, and corporate boardrooms.

Key words: corporate gender balance, education, labor, sports, women

JEL codes: I24, J00, J16, M14

1. Introduction

Then-World Bank President Robert Zoellick's proclamation that "the empowerment of women is smart economics" aptly summarizes the growing consensus among economists and policymakers that giving women equal access to education and the workforce will have positive multiplier effects on the economy.¹ This principle is embodied in policies such as US Title IX, which prevents gender discrimination in educational access, Denmark's corporate board gender quota, which seeks to bring more women into corporate leadership positions, and most recently, Japanese Prime Minister Abe's *womenomics* and similar policies in South Korea, as Asian countries work to better enlist women in their quest for economic growth.

Gender equity links to economic growth and development through a number of channels. When girls and boys have the same access to education, skills accrue more evenly across the population. When workforce barriers to participation are eliminated, employers can pick from a larger talent pool, selecting the best candidates based on achievement and merit. Reducing the gender gap can increase labor productivity and improve a country's human capital. As Bill Gates famously stated, "if you're not fully utilizing half the talent in your country, you're not going to get close to the top."²

Across the globe, girls' access to education has improved significantly over the past decades. Many countries have met the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of achieving equal access to education for boys and girls; in many cases, in fact, girls now receive

†Correspondence: Barbara Kotschwar, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 1750 Massachusetts Avenue, Northwest, Washington, DC 20036, USA. Email: kotschwab@georgetown.edu

more education than boys. These gains are being translated into the workforce. Female labor force participation has increased significantly in many countries, and more and more women have joined the managerial ranks. Yet in many countries, female labor participation lags relative to educational attainment. This is particularly true at higher management levels, where women's participation on corporate boards and among the executive ranks remains very low.

Policymakers in Asia and beyond can implement a number of measures to correct this imbalance, from promoting the education of girls to workforce gender equity. We propose one additional measure that – as part of a multiprong approach – can help foster long-term economic growth and societal gender equity: enhancing women and girls' access to participation in sport.

2. How Can Sports Help Women Succeed?

Participation in sports has long been shown to have measurable positive effects on other aspects of life.³ Sport can enhance academic achievement and lead to more positive life outcomes. Researchers have also shown that participation in sport can enhance labor force participation and leadership through a number of direct or indirect causal channels:

- By contributing to enhanced mental and physical health, which in turn feeds into productivity;
- By developing human capital and soft skills (teamwork, confidence, leadership, discipline, etc.), which are desirable to employers;
- By expanding one's social network, which has been widely demonstrated to play an important role in labor markets.

Advocating sports participation to bring about better academic and workplace outcomes may seem counterintuitive. One reasonable concern is that increased participation in sports would crowd out study time essential to academic achievement. Particularly, if women lag in education and skills, should they not spend any additional time they have on their studies? A number of academic papers put this fear to rest. A 1999 study of students in Hong Kong found no evidence that sport participation threatens academic achievement (Lindner, 1999). A Malaysian study found “excessive indulgence” – three or more sports per week – to have a negative impact on academic performance, but moderate participation in sports, two or fewer per week, did not affect students' academic outcomes (Jagdeep *et al.*, 2008). Studies in Germany (Cornelißen and Pfeifer, 2010), Pakistan (Younis Khan *et al.*, 2012), and the USA (Fejgin, 2001; Broh, 2002; Videon, 2002; Miller *et al.*, 2005; Lumpkin & Favor, 2012; Veliz & Shakib, 2014) all find positive academic returns to sport participation: student athletes, on average, earn higher grades, graduate at higher rates, and drop out of school less frequently than non-athletes.

In addition to the ethical value of offering women the same access to these gains as men, a growing body of literature links female involvement in sports to desirable outcomes in sexual health and disease prevention, social development, educational achievement, overall labor force participation, corporate management, and leadership. Some

studies (See Veliz & Shakib, 2014) find that interscholastic sports participation has an even greater boost for female academic results than for males. Participation in high school sports is associated with positive effects on girls' achievements in science, a field traditionally dominated by males (Hanson & Kraus, 1998, 1999). Sport's connection to female development also extends beyond school and into later professional success. Sports provide girls with directly transferable skills often seen as essential for management: the ability to be a team player, to compete, and to win and lose with grace (Curtis *et al.*, 2000; Polachek, 2004; Henderson *et al.*, 2005; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2012). Studies show that on average, former college athletes (male or female) earn a wage premium over others, on average about 7% higher than those of non-athletes. Cornelißen and Pfeifer (2010) find sport's return to marginal productivity to be stronger for females than males.

The USA serves as a testing ground for questions regarding the benefits of sports for girls. Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments Act requires schools to offer female athletic programs on a near equal basis with male programs. Stevenson's (2010) extensive study of Title IX data (2007) finds that "a 10 percentage point rise in the state-level female sports participation generates a 1 percentage point increase in female college attendance and a 1-2 percentage point rise in female labor force participation". The data also show that greater female participation in high school sports leads to a greater female presence in previously male-dominated occupations.

The association between female sports participation and later outcomes in management and corporate leadership is also strong: survey research has found that 96% of women in upper management positions played competitive sports.⁴ This complements earlier surveys of executive women who played organized sports and reported that it increased their self-discipline (86%), teamwork skills (81%), and leadership skills (69%).⁵ Empirical work by Cabane and Clark (2013) reveals that engaging in sporting activities as girls is positively correlated with assuming managerial responsibilities at work as women, even after controlling for variation in education, race, health, and many other factors.⁶ Finally, anecdotal evidence lists a multitude of world leaders, both political and corporate, who played sports as girls.

3. Asia's Gender Gap: Where Are the Sources of Gender Imbalance?

Many countries in Asia are grappling with how to bring more women into the labor force in order to boost economic growth in the face of challenging demographic headwinds. A survey of the region uncovers significant gaps in women's labor participation. Figures 1-3 show that these gaps manifest themselves in different ways. For much of Asia, Figure 1 shows women's and men's educational attainment at or very close to parity. In South Asia, however, where female adult literacy rates average about 50%, the gap is considerably larger, with women's educational attainment at 90% of men's, compared with 98% for East Asia. Another interesting distinction arises when we look at tertiary degree holders. Although the data are limited, women generally make up a higher share of graduates in the areas of social science, business, and law in South-East and South Asia than in East Asia, where women achieve higher overall educational outcomes.

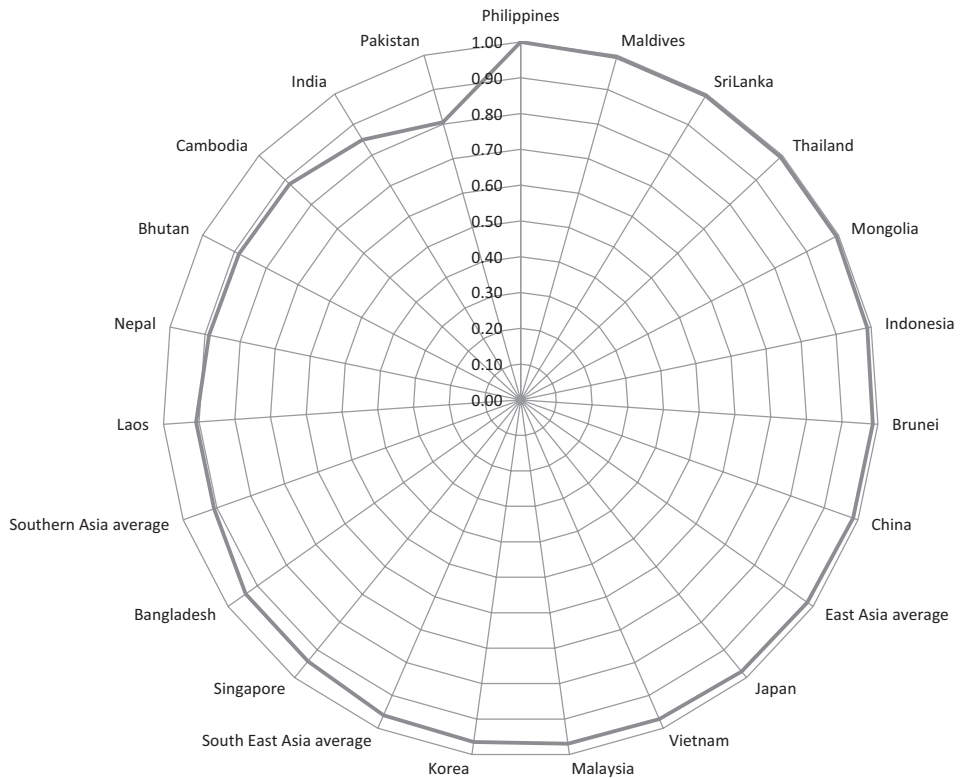


Figure 1 Global gender gap: Educational attainment.

Source: World Economic Forum (WEF).

In Japan, for example, only 39% of the graduates in this field are female, whereas in Laos, Malaysia, Brunei, and Sri Lanka women make up half or more.

Asian female labor force participation is low compared with regions such as Europe or North America, at 79% of that of men in East Asia, 70% in South-East Asia and 61% in South Asia. Looking more specifically at the professional and technical workforce, the group with the skills and opportunities to move up the corporate ladder, women are about on par with men in South-East Asia (97%) and East Asia (90%), whereas only reaching 55% that of men in Southern Asia. By comparison, around 60% of Eastern European and North American women work in a professional or technical capacity. Figure 2 captures women's relative economic participation and opportunity, as measured by the World Economic Forum's gender gap index. Women in South-East Asia are, by and large, closer to men in economic opportunity than in East Asia and far more than South-East Asia.

Figure 3 illustrates women's political empowerment, with the idea that greater political participation and empowerment can lead to greater economic empowerment. Here, South Asia leads. A recent *Economist* article points to the rise of strong female political

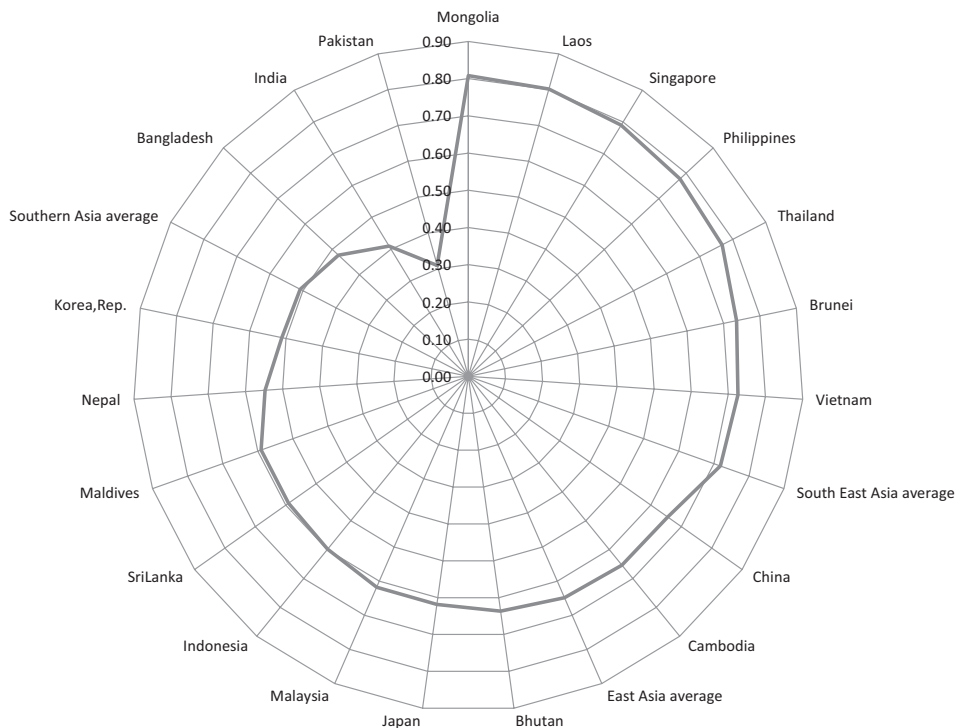


Figure 2 Global gender gap: Economic participation and opportunity.
Source: World Economic Forum (WEF).

leaders in countries where access to opportunity for women on average is still low.⁷ This could indicate that in some countries, the threshold variables, that is, the point of entry requirements for leadership positions, of education and labor force participation remain important for a class of women, whereas in others, the bottleneck is located elsewhere.

Finally, we look at women's opportunities for advancement up the corporate ranks. Table 1 sets out the results of an analysis of gender distribution of top leaders of nearly 22,000 firms headquartered in 90 countries, aggregated by region. While women make up much less than their share of workers or tertiary degree recipients across the board, Asia shows significant variation in corporate leadership gender balance. East Asia ranks dead last in both female representation in executive ranks as well as for females on executive boards.⁸ On average, women represent only 5.4% of East Asian executives and 5.9% of board members. Out of 4000 East Asian firms, we found only 109 female chief executive officers and 59 board chairs. In contrast, South-East Asia ranks among the greater gender-balanced executive ranks in the world, with females making up a quarter of executives and 13% of board members.

This marks a clear disconnection between female education and labor force results and advancement to senior positions. An in-depth survey of Asian firms by McKinsey and Company (2012) found that where women made up 40–55% of entry-level



Figure 3 Global gender gap: Political empowerment.
Source: World Economic Forum (WEF).

professionals in the countries surveyed, these proportions were more than halved by the time women reached mid-to-senior management in China, Singapore, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and cut to less than one fourth in South Korea and Japan. By the level of executive committee, the share of women had been cut to a range of 15% (Singapore) to 1% (Japan). A related McKinsey and Company (2013) report notes that talent leakage along the corporate ladder is particularly pronounced in Asia as opposed to other regions.

This finding is perplexing given that East Asian women are comparatively well educated and possess knowledge capacities similar to their male cohort. 2012 Results from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) found that among the 22 countries surveyed, Japanese women scored highest among all women when testing problem-solving abilities in technology-rich environments, and even well above the average male OECD score.⁹ However, the same survey found that both Japanese and

Table 1 Summary of data on: corporate leadership gender balance by region, percent female

Firms	Board members, female		Chair of board, female		Executives, female		Chief executive officer or equivalent, female	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Region	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
South-East Asia	1973	13	59	5	2992	25	140	8
E. Europe/Central Asia	1042	15	75	8	1424	22	79	8
Sub-Saharan Africa	387	16	25	8	447	18	16	5
Europe	3996	15	180	5	4327	16	154	4
North America	6149	11	128	3	5805	15	274	4
Oceania	1426	8	32	2	782	14	48	4
Middle East and North Africa	952	12	34	4	1123	16	57	7
Southern Asia	1486	8	51	5	624	12	59	5
Latin America	551	8	15	3	553	12	16	3
East Asia	3992	6	59	3	1910	5	109	3

Source: Compiled on the basis of Peterson Institute for International Economics corporate leadership gender balance database.

South Korean women (who scored around the OECD average) used problem-solving skills at work far less than their male co-workers, as well as relative to men in most other nations. This implies a significant underutilization of human capital.

Thus, Asian gender gaps occur at different points along the labor force ladder. For some, educational outcomes are still unequal. Policies that focus on how to help girls have access to and excel in school are key. In some, general labor force participation is the issue. A complementary factor is the quality of the jobs into which women select: policies to bolster professional workforce participation by women, and particularly in previously male-dominated areas such as science and engineering and, in many Asian countries, business and management, would have an effect. Finally, cultural and societal barriers to promoting women along the corporate ranks and empowering them as leaders need to be considered. Considering the evidence connecting sports participation to better outcomes in education, careers, and leadership policies that expand girls' access to sport could be an effective supplement to targeted policies aimed at improving long-term economic gender equity.

3.1 Consequences and opportunities

Bringing women into Asia's labor force is an imperative, especially for Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China. A significant literature expounds upon the potentially devastating economic effects of the rapid demographic shifts in these countries.¹⁰ With a population set to shrink by 30% and a rapidly aging labor force, Japan, which even now faces acute labor shortages in many sectors, has a strong incentive to bolster women's role in the economy (Matsui *et al.*, 2014). And, with a population of only 23 million, Taiwan's premier recently warned that the country's workforce could drop by 1.8 million in 10 years.¹¹

Bringing Asian women more squarely into the labor force can have major implications for nations in terms of corporate performance and overall growth. Using Japan as an example, an International Monetary Fund study estimates that raising the country's female labor participation ratio to the level of the G7 (excluding Italy and Japan) would increase gross domestic product (GDP) per capita by approximately 4% (Steinberg & Nakane, 2012). Raising rates to the level of northern Europe could promote an additional 4% increase in GDP per capita. McKinsey and Company (2012) estimates that raising Malaysia's female participation rates to match the levels of Singapore or South Korea could yield an extra RM6 billion to RM9 billion in GDP growth.

At the firm level, a growing body of literature demonstrates the positive impact of gender balance on corporate performance. Studies find that corporate boards containing women performed better in challenging markets – such as during the post-2008 global economic crisis – than all-male boards (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2012). Similarly, research shows that women on Fortune 500 companies with the highest proportion of females on their boards boasted significantly better financial performance than those with the lowest female board representation (Catalyst, 2011). Erhardt *et al.* (2003) find that increases in gender diversity lead to higher stock values and greater profitability.

3.2 Should sports have a place on Asia's policy menu?

Both the root causes of Asia's labor force gender gap and the consequences of inaction have not been lost on policymakers. Greater incorporation of women into the workforce is one of the cornerstones of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's economic policy, sometimes termed *Womenomics*. Neighboring South Korea faces a similar challenge, and President Park Geun Hye has also pledged to boost women's workforce participation, earmarking public funds to encourage companies to offer more flexible schedules and subsidize child care and has set a target of increasing women's labor participation. Taiwan, Malaysia, and many other countries in Asia have embarked on similar policy responses, whether it be through setting quotas on women in the workforce, corporate leadership boards, or in political office, or through expanding maternal and paternal care and other family-focused policies.¹²

In addition to the range of policies already considered, we believe that introducing sports-based policy into the mix can be both relevant and effective for Asian countries. First, although it is true that the empirical literature cited, linking participation in sport to positive educational and labor force outcomes, is concentrated in Western countries, notably the USA, comparable international studies tend to exhibit similar findings. Research in Germany finds similar gains to educational attainment as the US literature, noting that both the education and youth sport systems are very differently organized in both countries (Cornelißen & Pfeifer, 2010). Moreover, a Japanese study of twin-pair data finds that participation in sports is positively associated with the probability that an individual ends up a full-time worker (Nakamuro *et al.*, 2015). Studies in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Pakistan find that sports is either non-detrimental or positively associated with academic achievement, which echoes the larger Western literature (Lindner, 1999; Jagdeep *et al.*, 2008; Younis Khan *et al.*, 2012).

Second, the perceived benefit of sport as a way to develop human capital, transferable leadership skills, and social networks do not apply only in Western contexts. A survey in Singapore found that a strong majority of those who participated in sport agreed that it strengthens mental health (87%), develops character (84%), and develops leaders "on and off the court" (73%) (Sport Singapore, 2014). Regarding social development, the stated goals of many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) running sports-based programs for girls in developing Africa, Latin America, and Asia are to create safe public spaces for girls to expand their social networks, as well as improve physical and mental health (United Nations, 2008). Even the signaling effect of sport in a professional context appears to apply to some Asian countries. A recent survey by the Japan Association of Corporate Executives found that when choosing which job applicants advanced in both initial screening and interview stages, human resources professionals placed the most emphasis on an applicant's experiences in sports and/or club activity over any other extracurricular activities (Keizaidokuyukai, 2014).¹³

Third, as is the case in many Western countries including the USA, girls in Asia participate in sport and general physical activity less than boys (see a summary of this literature in Bailey *et al.*, 2005). The Governor General of Australia, in a speech to the International Working Group on Women and Sport emphasized this, noting that

“despite the fact that women constituted more than half of the world’s population, and although the percentage of their participation in sport varied between countries, in every case it was less than that of men and boys.” The reasons for this vary, from resource allocation to recognized and unrecognized biases. It is extremely difficult to find comparable female sports participation data for individual countries, but a 2012 Global Habit survey of 14 Asian cities found that males participated in sports more than females in all cases, especially in the 15–29 age range (Global Habit 2012).¹⁴ Japan’s Cabinet Ministry found that the participation rate in sports clubs in both middle school and high school is more than 20% higher for boys than girls. Moreover, there are more secondary and high school sports clubs for boys than there are for girls (Japan Cabinet Office, 2009). Clearly, there is much more room to increase the opportunities for participation in sports for girls in Asia, which could theoretically lead to the higher marginal returns to education and workforce outcomes evidenced in some empirical literature.

Finally, Asian policymakers have acknowledged the sports participation gap, and have demonstrated an understanding that expanding sports access for girls is a worthwhile pursuit. Multiple countries are implementing measures to equalize girls’ access to sports. In Japan, for example, a Basic Plan for Gender Equality was added to the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sport, and Japan hosted the 2006 World Conference on Women and Sport. In Singapore, the government added a women’s department to the High Participation Group of its Sports Commission, and worked with the Sports Council and various NGOs to increase girls’ sports activities. According to Claussen (2008), this resulted in increased physical activity by women. Taiwan passed the Gender Equity Education Act in 2004, which includes provisions mandating that girls have the same opportunities as boys to participate in sports and physical education in schools.¹⁵

4. How to Apply Sports-Related Policy to Boost Female Labor Force Participation in Asia

Taken together, it is by no means a stretch to conclude that the benefit of sport for girls is universal, rather than a product of Western cultural or organizational idiosyncrasies. However, the extent of effectiveness and channel by which sports participation can enhance developmental outcomes for girls will be unique to each country, and for Asia, this body of research is still nascent.

The benefits are clear for countries that better integrate their female population into the labor force, corporate leadership, and political decision-making bodies. In this section, we provide multiple recommendations designed to promote sport participation opportunities for girls, which in turn develops the human capital and gender-equitable environments necessary to propel women into the labor force and top decision-making bodies. These recommendations not only apply to governments; there is also ample room for the participation by foreign and domestic NGOs, corporations, and academic institutions.

4.1 Expand girls' opportunity to play sports inside and outside of school

First, countries should increase opportunities for girls to participate in sports, such as providing a safe place for girls to play, funding programs to encourage them to play, and enacting initiatives that will change attitudes towards their participation in sports. Although the US program Title IX provides the best evidence of the benefits of increasing girls' participation in sports, other nonlegislative steps can also work to bolster girls' access to sports.

One way of providing a safe place to play and encouraging girls to do so is by incorporating physical education programs into the primary and secondary school curriculums and training teachers in gender sensitivity. By mainstreaming sports into schools, policymakers will reach a large segment of the target population. Teachers should be trained to treat boys and girls equally, to encourage girls to participate and to treat athletic participation as part of the school requirements. Educators in developing countries are often already overstretched, but the opportunity cost of not involving girls in sports is too high.

There is encouraging evidence that policymakers in Asia are connecting sport with broader educational goals. In March 2015, the governments of the USA and Japan announced a joint collaboration project to advance girls' education across the globe, including in Cambodia. In addition to facilitating girls' participation in primary and secondary education, the partnership explicitly includes measures to enhance sports and physical education programs.¹⁶

A number of Asian countries have implemented gender equity legislation, and some of these explicitly encourage gender equity in sports opportunities. According to Taiwan's Ministry of Education, over \$3 billion is allocated annually to gender equity education, including access to sports programs for girls. In July 2015, Korea's Framework Act on Gender Equality took effect. This act strengthens previous gender equity legislation, adding protections for motherhood and fatherhood, and setting quotas for female senior and executive positions. We would recommend that in its implementation, Korean policymakers follow Taiwan's lead by also providing access to equal sports programs for girls and boys.

Another important element is to equalize access to facilities, equipment, and mentors. This will help reduce the time cost for girls, particularly as they continue to shoulder much more nonwork obligations, particularly in the household, in many parts of the world, thereby making it much more difficult to engage in extra activities. The Title IX experience in the USA predicts that any short-term resentment at re-balancing sports' budgets to give girls opportunities equal to those for men will be compensated by the benefits of elevating the perceived prestige – and acceptance – of female athletics. In the Indian case, world-class women athletes have noted their frustrations that resources are always first channeled to men's sports, with girls receiving the men's cast-offs, and facilities and equipment for women's sports have always been of lower quality. This has been compounded by a lack of leadership and a proper motivating system. It is important to invest in sport facilities, equipment, and spaces that girls and women feel comfortable accessing. As gender equity programs are introduced into sports, it is important

to take into account the situation in developing countries. Some countries have much farther to go than others. It is also important to recognize that one size does not fit all. What makes sense for one region or one group will not necessarily bear out in another place or time. How gender operates in a community should always be part of a preliminary assessment.

4.2 Implement government legislation that enhances women's access to sport and physical activity

Reforming physical education practices in public and private schools is another way to bring girls into the fold. In the USA, Title IX, which required an equal opportunity for girls to be involved in sport, significantly raised female participation in high school sports and has increased the salaries of coaches on women's teams (UN, 2007). Spain issued seven Presidential Decrees since 2003 supporting women's access to sports activities (UN, 2008). Enhanced access to sport and its clear connection to education and labor force outcomes should be incorporated into broad policy proposals such as Japan's "*Womenomics*" initiative.

4.3 Use frameworks designed by multilateral bodies to anchor policy reforms

Multigovernmental organizations such as the United Nations have increased emphasis on crafting agreements designed to empower women and girls through sport. The equal right to sport is explicitly contained in international human rights documents like article 10 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (of which all Asian countries are signatories), the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action at the 4th World Conference for Women, and the Asian Women and Sport Action Plan. These agreements contain detailed policy recommendations for countries to implement. Moreover, the UN's Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group designed specific policy recommendations for countries to follow in enhancing female access to sport and physical activity, including in respect to capacity building, government policymaking, and research, monitoring, and evaluation work (UN, 2008). All countries should take stock of their participation in existing agreed frameworks and actively benchmark stated goals against current progress. We also recommend that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) incorporate programs aimed at bolstering women's access to sports in their economic development programs.

4.4 Expand nongovernmental sports programs, promoting gender equality as an engine of social change

Nongovernment organizations and even corporations can play a role in expanding access to sport and physical activity for girls. There is an array of NGOs that specifically use extracurricular sporting programs to engage women in developing country contexts. In Indonesia, Women without Borders gave free swimming lessons to girls and women in the South Indian coastal regions after the 2004 tsunami – not only helping develop survival skills (many women and girls perished in the 2004 tsunami as they were reportedly unable to swim or not capable of climbing out of harm's way) but also self-confidence

and solidarity. In Malaysia, the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation was established in 1995 to foster women's empowerment through sport. In Cambodia, the Mighty Girls soccer team, part of the Sports and Leadership Training (SALT) Academy, established by Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) coach Samuel Schweingruber, aims to develop academic and safety skills for girls through soccer to help them avoid human traffickers. The Mighty Girls now serves as a training ground for the Cambodian Women's National team.¹⁷ Companies have also begun to show an interest in this burgeoning market. Nike, for example, through its girls effect program, has invested in programs to increase sports among Japanese and Chinese girls.¹⁸

Both NGOs and major corporations operating in developing Asia should evaluate the efficacy of creating women-based sporting initiatives to positively affect communities.

4.5 Promote the achievements of Asian female Olympians and other elite women athletes in campaigns connecting achievement in sports to achievement in professional life

The accomplishments of Asia's women athletes are more visible than ever before on the international stage. Asian women have done astoundingly well relative not only to other regions, but relative to their male counterparts at both the Olympic Games and other international mega-sporting events.¹⁹ At the individual level, names like Se-Ri Park and Yani Tseng, Fu Minxia, Li Na, and Kim Yuna are prominent in golf, diving, tennis, and skating, respectively, commanding great respect, media attention, and even celebrity status not only in their respective countries, but also globally.

Asia's wealth of high-profile female athletes can play a vital part in challenging gender stereotypes by serving as public role models, mentors, and coaches. This has already been exhibited in examples from Brazil, Ethiopia, and India, pointing to the impact of recognized athletes on girls' interest in and confidence with sports. Derartu Tulu, who started running in her elementary school, has been a strong advocate of keeping girls in school. Marta Vieira da Silva, who played on the boys' team at her school as there were no teams for girls, has increased the profile of the sport in Brazil and helped make soccer an acceptable and desirable pursuit for girls.

Asian countries can feature this talent prominently in public campaigns designed to get more girls involved in physical activity and/or sport, as well as tie their work into broader issues facing women and highlight the value of women in society. In connecting sports to labor outcomes, public campaigns could showcase elite female athletes that have successfully transitioned from the world of sports to the professional world, or former athletes that now serve as executive members on corporate boards. NGOs could also look to increase the number of former elite athletes to work or volunteer in sports organizations as coaches. This would not only draw girls to participate in sport under these women's guidance, but provide strong and directly accessible adult role models.

The timing for such campaigns is particularly apt considering that Asian cities will host the Olympic Games multiple times in the next decade. Moreover, in 2013, Singapore became the first Asia-Pacific country to win the rights to host the Women's Tennis

Association Championships for the next 5 years, ensuring a brighter spotlight for Asian tennis players going forward. Planners should use the excitement and publicity surrounding hosting the games to specifically highlight female talent in all spheres of society: athletic, academic, corporate, political, and artistic.

4.6 Fund research projects that evaluate the country-specific effect of sports on educational/professional outcomes

It is important to note the wide heterogeneity of culture, politics, and economic development levels in Asia. Moreover, the most effective areas to target to greater empower women also depends on the country: in South and Southeast Asia, girls' expanded access to sport could help close the educational gender gap, whereas in Japan and Korea, tapping into the connection between sport and corporate leadership would be more pertinent.

Therefore, although enhancing girls' access to sport can be beneficial for all countries, it is important to acknowledge that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for these policy prescriptions, and the study of sport's role in gender-equitable economic development is not comprehensively understood. There is still much room to conduct surveys or empirical studies on how participation in sport affects both men and women's educational and professional success in an Asia-specific context.

At the international level, more data need to be collected on girls' participation in sports. Little data exist on participation rates in countries outside of the USA, which makes it difficult to conduct rigorous analysis on the impact of girls' participation in sports. In order to justify adding girls' sports programs to their education or sports budget, policymakers need to be able to quantify the benefits. International organizations could help: tools such as the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index, the United Nations Development Programme Gender Inequality Index, and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index explicitly recognize the impact of discriminatory social institutions on gender inequality and social outcomes. These tools could add to their explanatory value by adding access to opportunities in sports in their toolkit.

5. Conclusion

Better integrating women into the labor force and into the corporate boardrooms of Asia enhances diversity, encourages economic growth, and alleviates the harmful effects of an aging workforce. Perhaps more so than ever before, leaders in government, the private sector, and NGOs across the region are aware of this important issue and are taking measures to address it. Enhancing women and girls' access to sport through the range of channels that we have outlined is a promising component to a problem that requires a multifaceted policy response.

In a March 19, 2015 speech in Tokyo, First Lady Michelle Obama emphasized the importance of support to women and the importance of these women's achievements to the nation – and to the world: “I mean, just think about what we would be missing here in Japan if women were not educated. Just imagine if Sadako Ogata was never able to

attend school and become one of the greatest diplomats of our time. Imagine the loss of her moral leadership at the United Nations. And what if the great violinist, Midori, never had the chance to discover her talent. Think about all the music we would never have heard. Think of all the beauty our world would have lost. And how about Chiaki Mukai. Without her education, she never could have become the first woman astronaut in Japan, inspiring so many young girls to reach for the stars.”²⁰

It is time for Asian countries to take the steps to allow Se-Ri Park, Yani Tseng, Fu Minxia, Li Na, and Kim Yuna to play similar roles in encouraging girls to maximize their leadership potential through the power of sport.

Notes

- 1 Robert Zoellick, World Bank Spring Meetings, April 2008, quoted in OECD.
- 2 Bill Gates, quoted in Becraft, Michael, *Bill Gates: A Biography*, p. 137.
- 3 We use the term “sport” to refer to organized sports, such as interscholastic or club teams, rather than to the more general aspect of physical activity. The benefits of physical activity are well-documented (see, e.g. WHO 2010), but our recommendations focus on more guided and organized sports activities, which combine the benefits of physical activity with social and competition aspects.
- 4 See Kelly Whiteside, “Survey ties female athletes to executive roles” in *USA Today*, 3 July 2013. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/2013/07/03/survey-ties-female-athletes-executive-leadership-roles/2487665/>. According to this survey of 400 female executives, 75% considered sports background a positive factor when hiring female candidates.
- 5 Mass Mutual Financial Group. 2002. “From the Locker Room to the Boardroom: A Survey on Sports in the Lives of Women Business Executives” quoted in Kuersten (2003).
- 6 Interestingly, the authors conclude that individual sporting activity provides a higher return to girls, whereas team sports provide higher returns to boys.
- 7 “Despite being a woman: South Asia is one of the worst places in the world to be female,” *The Economist*, June 13, 2015.
- 8 This excludes the 26 firms which could not be linked to any specific country.
- 9 The OECD’s Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) assessed 166,000 adults in 22 OECD member countries and two partner countries between August 2011 and March 2012 in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. In addition to skill assessments, the study surveyed respondent’s use of said skills at home and in work environments. Key findings can be found in OECD (2013).
- 10 See for example, Eggleston and Tuljapurkar (2012), Steinberg and Nakane (2012), and Elborgh-Woytek *et al.* (2013).
- 11 See Katherine Wei, “Drastic workforce drop in next decade: Mao” in *The China Post*, 27 February 2015. <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/business/asia-taiwan/2015/02/27/429810/Drastic-workforce.htm>
- 12 See Kotschwar and Stahler (2015) for a detailed accounting of Asia’s policy response, as well as region and country-specific factors that may be contributing to lower female labor force participation and leadership.
- 13 Unfortunately, we cannot distinguish here between sports clubs/activities and nonsports clubs.
- 14 The survey also considers activities like walking, jogging, hiking, and mountain climbing as a leisure sport.

- 15 Taiwan Gender Equity Education Act. Accessed March 11, 2015. <https://www.wcwoonline.org/pdf/lawcompilation/TaiwanGenderEquityEducation%20Act.pdf>
- 16 The White House, Office of the First Lady. "Facts on U.S. – Japan Collaboration to Advance Girls' Education." 18 March 2015. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2015/03/20150319314070.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3UqU3CAOX>
- 17 More information about these programs can be found in UN Women 2000 and Beyond and at individual websites: Malaysia (<http://www.wsffm.com>); Mighty Girls soccer team in Cambodia (<http://viaprograms.org/sports-for-social-change>); One world Futbol in Cambodia (<http://streetfootballworld.org/es/latest/blog/one-world-futbol-project-empowers-mighty-girls-cambodia>).
- 18 NIKE. The Girl Effect. <http://www.nikeresponsibility.com/report/content/chapter/community>
- 19 For example, in football, the women's teams for Japan (4th), North Korea (7th), China (13th), and South Korea (17th) all sit on the top-20 FIFA leader boards, leagues better than any of their men's teams. The same goes for international competitive volleyball.
- 20 White House. Remarks by the First Lady at "Let Girls Learn" event, Iikura Guest House Tokyo, Japan, March 19, 2015.

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