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^a Social Positioning of Sport

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Government intervention needed to improve status of women in Sport

Letter addressed to the Portfolio Committee on Sports and Recreation by Cheryl Roberts

Amidst the euphoria, nationalism and strong positive feelings for South Africa's beautiful new stadiums and our hosting of Africa's first football World Cup are the hopes, dreams, ambitions of thousands of girls and women in sport, at most times, left shattered, broken and in pieces.

And there's no ways I am being dramatic about this state of affairs, I am just being real, honest and feeling hard done by a system of power which controls financial allocation and hence the progress and development of women in sport. These are no ordinary dreams like when we sleep: these are real, human dreams from the hearts of girls, of all colours and all communities, who want to have that one chance just to participate in sport, of talented teenage girls who expectantly believe in a larger presence on the sports stage and our elite sportswomen who struggle to participate in the sports pyramid.

I am definitely not against money and infrastructure being given in support of boys and men in sport, I am just as happy and proud when they excel in the sports arenas. But there is no way I can accept or be quiet about the fact that in our country, where a government apparently exists in the interests of the socially and economically disadvantaged, the allocation or provision of financial help to women in sport is meagre or very little.

So, Mr Butana Komphela, I am asking you,

as chairperson of parliament's committee of sport and recreation, to please intervene, and come to the assistance and rescue and, not only investigate, but come up with concrete, positive, sustainable action.

South Africa's sports and government officials go on numerous study tours out of South Africa, attend international sports events, we applaud the sports prowess of international sportswomen, we give a bit of help here and there to events for girls to participate in sport but we have no sustained action when it comes to improving the position of women in sport.

We cannot and should not leave the future of South Africa's sportswomen at the mercy of anyone who does not act responsibly in the interest of eliminating gender inequalities in sport. Major government intervention and support is needed! And may I add we are not afraid of government intervention, but demand it, if it is going to assist the development, progress and advancement of a discriminated gender in sport.

South Africa's post-94 Ministers of Sport, parliamentary committees on sport and governing sports bodies, whilst being strong on transformation of sport, have sadly not been as vocal or demanding when it comes to the elimination of gender inequalities in sport. These gender inequalities are massive, glaring and inhuman. I am not asking, I am saying that it is

a human rights abuse when so much money is given to sportsmen without allocating assistance to sportswomen.

South Africa's women in sport, including mothers of girls who play sport, players, spectators, football fans, officials, coaches, have given unconditional support to our hosting of the 2010 World Cup and to all international men's sports events. Our support, enthusiasm, passion is there whenever it's called upon. But sadly, the same support is not forthcoming to women in sport. We are wheeled in and out of the dramatic events propositioned by the male stranglehold on sport.

Mr Komphela, I don't know if you are aware that South Africa's champion women weightlifters survive on R2,000 a month as professional, full-time sportswomen, our national women's softball team have to each pay R25,000 to represent SA in an international event, the SA women's handball team gets left out of an international event but not the men's team and Bafana Bafana gets an allocation of R20 million from Lotto for training camps in Brazil and Germany.

So, Mr Komphela, I am not approaching you to please give women in sport a hearing. Mr Khompela, we need and want government to do this. You know I have raised this with you over the past three years, whenever I see you at some function or whatever, and you have promised to do so.

Mr Komphela, you and the portfolio committee must surely be aware that South Africa's sportswomen face many challenges and much of our female sports talent is wasted. We must review how we are assisting or being detrimental to South African sport, be it with media

exposure or financial allocation. Our sportswomen are not asking too much if they ask not to be discriminated against and is it in our interest as a unified, democratic nation that we assist and celebrate the sporting success of both genders

Sportswomen find themselves battling to hold onto the little that we have been given by the male-dominated sports network. As conscious, socially aware South Africans we have a responsibility to continually challenge a system which pays lip service to the disadvantaged position of women in sport.

You and I would both agree that much more opportunities have been created for girls and women to participate in sport but South African women in sport still struggle to proceed beyond national participation let alone achieve world class status, that being precisely because of their gender.

I have said this and written it several times: Government and corporates are well aware of the financial inequalities when it comes to sports spend. Millions in financial resources are made available by both government and corporates to support and maintain men's participation in sport but a much smaller percentage is allocated to women in sport. How can we, as a non-racial, unified, democratic country, applaud and celebrate the successes of our men and then allow our girls and women to struggle, literally with chains around them, and still expect sporting glory from them?

Cheryl Roberts is a gender activist, sportswomen and commentator on the social positioning of sport