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Women's health and empowerment - Girls & Football make the link

Sonia Bianchi and Jos Dirx

Introduction

Girls & Football SA is an award-winning initiative focused on the empowerment of girls and young women through sport, education and media. Mindful of the unequal opportunities available to women, the organisation was started in March 2010 as a way to address the serious lack of sport programming available to girls and young women, and to attract media attention to the women's side of the popular sport. With the aim to empower young girls, inspire young women and educate communities on the important role sport plays in the development of girls as well as boys, the organisation began by interviewing several prominent female athletes around the country. As a feminist initiative it highlighted discrimination against women and the sexism implicit in the unequal development of girls and women's potential in South African sport.

As a result of these interviews, Girls & Football SA produced a documentary entitled "Can I Kick It?" – which related the untold story of women's football in South Africa, and developed the first 'girls-only' soccer curriculum to be used in South Africa, piloted in schools around the Stellenbosch area.

Physical activity, organised sport and health go hand-in-hand with positive development for communities, and therefore, of South Africa as a whole. In South Africa, girls and women remain one of the most underserved demographic groups in relation to both sports programming in schools as well as targeted gender-specific health information and services. Information regarding sexual health, birth control, healthy lifestyles, nutrition and many other

gender-specific issues (such as menstruation) remains dated, insensitive to gender differences and is delivered and distributed irregularly. Although South Africa has a high rate of non-communicable diseases that are related to a lack of exercise, various institutions in South Africa whose primary focus is on health lack the resources and capacity needed to deliver health information across the country, leaving non-profit groups and community development projects to provide accurate health information. This creates gaps in education and contributes to a trend of inadequate education regarding health, particularly around issues of women's health. Girls & Football SA's programming uses football as a tool for disseminating this information and it teaches young girls about health and the rights they have over their own bodies.

Health issues facing girls

Sport, and specifically football, is a rallying point for communities in South Africa. However, issues of women's health require a safe space to discuss what can sometimes be culturally sensitive topics. Female sports have been significantly under-funded, throughout the apartheid regime and since the start of the democratically elected government. In her 2003 article, Saavedra highlights the issues surrounding the withholding of funding for the development of women's sport in Africa. The very basic issues preventing women from participating in sport include a lack of resources allocated towards female sport (which includes financial resources), a lack of expertise (in the form of coaches, sport therapists and sport nutritionists), and a lack of social understanding towards female participation

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in sport. As such, it becomes significantly harder for health information to be delivered through this medium or for women to reap the same health benefits from sport as men do. A study carried out by Girls & Football SA in March 2012 at a major company in Cape Town (which requested to remain unnamed) produced worrying results; out of every 10 women employees, only one exercises regularly.

Women's sport is underfunded, reflected against the financial contributions that are allocated solely towards women's football (Saavedra, 2003; Pelak 2009; Naidoo and Muholi, 2010). As Saavedra (2003) emphasises, the unequal role of women in football in Africa is part of the broader social inequality experienced by women - unequal representation in the realms of politics and economics, social development and equality.

In March 2012, Girls & Football SA carried out a short base line survey with 200 participants in the life skills based workshops, aged between 12 and 19 years, regarding health and the way they felt about their health. Most of the girls claimed that they were unsure of what a healthy life style entails, nor were they sure if they were healthy themselves.

Stigmatisation of female athletes

The politics of women's bodies has played a significant role in the representation and analysis of women as stereotypically 'feminine' sexual beings, rather than as strong athletes. This often deters young girls from participating in sport, as they are afraid of losing their sexual appeal or being targeted for their supposed sexual orientation. As a result, they will often partake in sports until they reach a certain age, most often around 13 and then stop.

Particularly in South Africa, female athletes have been targeted for their supposed sexual orientation, as apparent through the so-called 'corrective' rape attacks on South African lesbian football players (Kelly, 2010). The case of Eudy Simelane, one of the players on the South African national women's team, who was raped and stabbed to death in her township, made international news headlines, but garnered little attention on the African continent (Kelly, 2010). Girls & Football SA decided to contribute to raise awareness about so-called 'corrective' rape

and has produced a video which it hopes will encourage more people to stand-up against sexism, homophobia and condemn violence against women, particularly against sports-women (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8O6D6pkhQE>).

Sports programming and women's health

The benefits of women and girls participation in fitness and sport development are physical health and improved self-esteem, body ownership and confidence. We see these as integral aspects of encouraging girls to participate in sports activities, and we also attempt to tailor these needs in their development in an environment which is non-threatening. The pervasive, dominant gender stereotypes create barriers for female athletes that need to be overcome to advance equal participation by girls in sports.

Girls & Football SA established the first 'girls only' space available to young female athletes. The concept grew out of the need to question patriarchal tendencies that place limits on women's participation because sports may be considered 'masculine'. The coaches, volunteers, supervisors and participants during the workshops are all female - male spectators are asked to leave the area during our sessions. This ensures that all participants of any skill level are able to learn without external pressures and bring up any issues they may want to discuss (such as menstruation, sexual health, abuse). Encouraging a safe space for girls' sport development has made it possible to start creating a change in the mentality that currently keeps many girls and women from participating in sport.

After a one-year programme, from August 2010 until July 2011, at Ikaya Primary and Lyndoch Primary schools, Girls & Football SA's programmes were evaluated by two students from the University of Amsterdam researching the impact of women's sports development programmes, and the importance of girls-only spaces for the development of girls through sport. Their research showed that 93.1% of workshop participants felt more confident as a result of their participation in workshops, 96.9% indicated that they had learned about how to work together as a team and teachers identified a clear increase

in participants' assertiveness outside the programme. The positive impact of participating in the programme on the perception of gender roles and sport was also significant - participants overwhelmingly believed at the end of the programme that all women should play sports (93.1%). Prior to the programme, the girls said they had identified more closely with male players than with female players, and did not consider that football could be a girls' sport. To the question of whether a woman would make a good president, 79.3% answered in the affirmative. However, the results also reflect that traditional gender roles remain well established as only 58.6% of the girls who participated believed that men could do domestic tasks and 79.3% still believed that men are more capable at playing football. These responses and outcomes show the positive impact such sports programmes can have on young girls and that there are areas that are still in need of addressing. Gender roles and women's equality in society is one, role models from outside of the sports realm in addition to strong female athletes are another that could help young girls to see their potential off the field as well as on.

In conclusion, women-directed sports programmes have the potential to address the low participation in sports by girls and at the same time build girl's health. The programme is proof of the advances that

can be made in physical and mental health as well as understanding of gender roles and recognition of women's potential. With proper funding and support, education sports development programmes are an important key to engaging younger generations of women in activities that benefit their physical health as well as contribute to progress in the cause of professional women's athletics in the country.

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