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# Empowering Girls and Women through Physical Education and Sport

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Advocacy Brief

# **Empowering Girls and Women through Physical Education and Sport**

# C o n t e n t s

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Why Should We be Concerned about Gender, Girls and Physical Education?.....	1
What Are the Issues?.....	2
What Are the Initiatives to Date to Tackle These Issues?.....	5
What Are the Options for Alternative and Innovative Practices?.....	9
Principles for Programme Development.....	10
A Models-based Approach to Physical Education Programme Design.....	11
Recommendations.....	12
References.....	13

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# Why Should We be Concerned about Gender, Girls and Physical Education?

We should be concerned about gender, girls and physical education because access and regular participation is a fundamental human right. It is a fundamental human right because regular participation in physical activity is an essential component of a healthy lifestyle (Beutler, 2008; Biddle, Gorely and Stensel, 2004; UNESCO, 1978). Programmes that prepare children for lifelong physical activity must be formally organised, well designed and professionally led. Quality, school physical education programmes provide young people with opportunities to develop the values, knowledge and skills they need to lead physically active lives, build self-esteem, and to promote and facilitate physical activity in the lives of others.

In addition to their role in contributing to public health, and consistent with Articles 2 and 3 of the UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport (UNESCO, 1978), physical education and sport can also provide a universal language to bridge social, racial, gender and religious divides. In so doing, physical education has the potential to promote peace, develop personal qualities essential to democracy such as leadership, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation and respect, and provide a means of inclusion for marginalised individuals and groups. Beutler (2008, p. 365) believes that physical education bestows the “experience (of) equality, freedom and a dignifying means for empowerment, particularly for girls and women”.

Supporting this position, well designed physical education and sport programmes can contribute to the achievement of all eight Millennium Development Goals, in particular as a tool for child and youth development and as a means of promoting gender equality and empowerment for girls and women (Right To Play, 2008; de Vries, 2008).

In Asia and the Pacific, less than half the countries with data available achieve gender parity at primary school level, a ratio that worsens at secondary and tertiary levels of education (UNESCO, 2009). Girls make up the majority of out-of-school children. Of the adult illiterates worldwide, two-thirds live in Asia and the Pacific, of which the majority are adult women. There is, moreover, a strong relationship between poverty and gender inequality in education, which is particularly pronounced for girls born into the poorest communities. Donnelly (2008, p. 389) notes that, in the context of sport for development and peace, “poverty is the single greatest barrier to participation”, while Right To Play (2008, p. 129) argue “education is the single most powerful means for families to escape poverty over the longer term”.

For girls who are able to attend school, physical education is thus of central importance. Because of its emphasis on developmentally appropriate and carefully sequenced physical activities, physical education makes a unique contribution to their education in ways that ad hoc physical activity, manual work and informal leisure participation cannot. Widespread, regular, beneficial and sustainable participation by girls in physical education is only possible, however, when programmes are well designed, appropriate to specific groups of girls, led by trained and competent teachers, and are well resourced.

Despite the strong claims for the benefits of physical education and sport, the research literature suggests that they are not easily achieved. There exist serious challenges to girls benefiting from participation in physical education and sport.

## What Are the Issues?

The topic of gender and physical education with a particular focus on girls has been widely researched and reported in the English language literature. The issues influencing girls' participation in physical education and sport and the potential benefits they derive from their experiences are well known. Table 1 draws on a sample of the literature published over the past decade to show the issues influencing girls' participation. Table 2 also lists some barriers to girls' and women's participation in sport in two Middle Eastern and four Asian countries. As these tables demonstrate, "the problem" is complex, manifesting itself at policy and strategy (macro), professional and institutional (meso), and personal and social (micro) levels.

A number of issues noted in Table 1 are worth highlighting.

First, while girls and women as a group experience inequality in relation to boys and men, not all females experience inequality to the same degree (Flintoff, 2008; Right To Play, 2008). This crucial insight suggests that strategies for change need to be targeted at specific groups of girls and women and significant others such as fathers, husbands and sons, taking into account their particular circumstances (Hills, 2007). Failure to recognize this key point may explain why so many initiatives in the past have been ineffective in bringing about real and sustainable change (Kirk, Fitzgerald, Wang and Biddle, 2000).

Second, the closely related issues of gender, gender norms, and the sex/gender distinction remind us that biological determinism continues to be a strong though often unspoken influence working against girls' participation in physical education. Biological determinism rests on an assumption that girls and women are physically and physiologically inferior to men and are thus incapable of participating in some physical activities (e.g. running for a long distance; playing a contact sport like football). Advocates for girls leading physically active lives need to be constantly vigilant in relation to this issue and its adverse consequences, and to be ready to use facts to challenge sexist attitudes.

Third, we need to be aware of the difficulties created by delayed motor development, which is particularly prevalent in poorer communities regardless of the national average income. Research conducted in the United States and Hong Kong (Goodway and Branta, 2003; Goodway, Robinson, and Crowe, 2010; Pang and Fond, 2009), for example, shows that of children aged 3 to 5 years in the lowest quartile of motor competence, girls are already behind boys in crucial skills such as object control, consisting of throwing, catching and kicking a ball. Children who have immature motor competencies are unable to benefit from regular physical education programmes later in life, suggesting that it is of vital importance to focus on quality movement education programmes in the early years.

Fourth, as scholars have noted (Flintoff and Scraton, 2006), physical education itself can act as a barrier to girls' participation. This is particularly so in its so-called "traditional", sport-based, multi-activity form, where lessons focus on sports techniques taken out of the context of the real game or sport, and the predominantly masculine values of over-competitiveness and aggression override alternative, more universal values such as fair play and co-operation. Physical education programmes are typically short and offer few opportunities to progress children's learning and develop other educational benefits such as personal and social skills. Such programmes, it is argued, cater only for a minority of already sport-competent children, the majority of whom are typically boys, and offer little more than confirmation of incompetence and failure for the majority. Given the wide range of educational and other outcomes often claimed for physical education, it is argued here that traditional programmes take a "one size fits all" approach and in so doing fail to achieve any of these outcomes (Metzler, 2005). This traditional approach has been subjected to a sustained critique by scholars worldwide and is frequently viewed as a sexist form of physical education (Kirk, 2003; Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; Williams and Bedward, 2001).

Fifth, while much of what we know about this problem derives from English language research, it can nevertheless assist us to understand the challenges facing advocates and activists in Asia and the Pacific. Countries in the region have diverse histories, religious beliefs, cultural values and ways of life as well as socio-economic contexts which may in some cases amplify the issues identified in this literature. Returning to the first point of note, it is therefore crucial to be sensitive to the specific circumstances of girls and women individually and collectively and to tailor programmes to meet their particular needs.

In summary, we can argue that while the issues surrounding girls' participation in physical education and sport are clearly identified in the research literature, the problem is multifaceted and complex. The issues range from policy and strategy through professional and institutional issues to personal and social issues. This range of interdependent and interacting factors contributes to the complexity of this issue and presents challenges for change.



**Table 1: Issues affecting girls' participation in physical education and sport identified by a sample of literature published between 2000 and 2011**

Author	Policy and Strategy (Macro)	Professional and Institutional (Meso)	Personal and Social (Micro)
Bailey et al., 2004	Culture.	Type of school. Access. Physical education curriculum (see also Xiaoan et al., 2008, Manzenrieter, in press). Family (see also Arar & Rigbi, 2009; Shahzadi, n.d.).	Heredity. Age. Motivation. Perceived competence. Peer group. Family.
Beutler, 2008	Lack of resources (material and human). (see also Claussen, 2006). Insufficient research and lack of understanding. (see also Donnelly et al, 2011; Coalter, 2010).	Lack of capacity among teachers and managers.  (see also de Vries, 2008, Hoe, 2008; Arar & Rigbi, 2009).	
Goodway & Branta, 2003	Poverty (see also Donnelly, 2010; UNESCO, 2009; Right To Play, 2008).		Delayed motor development.
Kirk et al., 2001	Social construction of gender (see also Flintoff and Scraton, 2006; UNESCO, 2009; Right To Play, 2008).	Physical education curriculum. Teacher professional development.	Fun, enjoyment and motivation.
Flintoff & Scraton, 2006	Sex/gender. Difference and diversity (see also Right To Play, 2008). Gender power relations (see also Manzenrieter, in press).	Physical education curriculum. Teachers, teaching styles and teacher education.	Girls' perceptions and experiences.
Right To Play, 2008	Gender norms. Cultural and religious values.	Harassment and abuse by coaches.	The Female Athlete Triad a combination of three conditions: disordered eating, amenorrhea (loss of a girl's period), and osteoporosis (a weakening of the bones).

## What Are the Initiatives to Date to Tackle These Issues?

It is unsurprising, given the complexity of the problem, that the literature reports only limited success of attempts to address girls and women's participation in physical education and sport (Kirk et al., 2000; Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore, 2004; Flintoff and Scraton, 2006; Flintoff, 2008). Despite this limited success, promoters of girls and women's participation now have a number of useful examples to learn from, in particular from projects conducted in Asia and Africa. Tables 2 and 3 provide some examples of initiatives and projects.

Table 2 summarizes initiatives reported to an International Conference on Physical Activity and Physical Fitness Promotion Strategy for Women and Girls, (Claussen, 2008) held in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2006. The conference received reports from Egypt, Qatar, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan. Table 2 reviews barriers, actions and outcomes in the pursuit of gender equity in physical education and sport. A number of actions are noteworthy, including:

- activism by women's organisations (e.g. Qatar, the Philippines, Taiwan);
- research and dissemination of information (e.g. Egypt, the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan);
- use of international declarations to leverage support (e.g. Japan);
- use of legislation (e.g. the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan);
- forming strategic partnerships (e.g. Singapore);
- development of resources and toolkits for advocates;
- securing facilities, and expertise such as female teachers and coaches (e.g. the Philippines, Singapore).

**Table 2: The pursuit of gender equity in physical education and sport in six countries: barriers, actions and outcomes**

Country	Barriers	Actions	Outcomes
Egypt	Religious and cultural practices that discourage or forbid female participation, hence little or no female participation in sport or physical activity.	Compilation of data on female performance and physical activity. Dissemination of findings at conferences in the region.	Relaxation of clothing rules in basketball to permit girls to participate fully clothed in accordance with religious belief.
Qatar	Religious and cultural practices that discourage or forbid female participation, hence little or no female participation in sport or physical activity.	Activism by members of the Qatar Women's Sports Committee.	Relaxation of clothing requirements in a range of sports. Participation in the Asian Games hosted by Qatar in 2006.
The Philippines	Not specified (but see Jucio, 2008).	Activism by members of the Women's Sports Foundation of the Philippines, in particular, use of legal instruments. Targeting schools to increase participation by girls. Ensuring appropriate facilities are available, female teachers and coaches in place. Compiling and disseminating data about the health benefits of physical activity for females. Implementing inclusive and anti-harassment policies. Providing public and media recognition for the contributions of women.	Not specified.
Japan	Spiritual beliefs centred on Sumo, 'good wife, wise mother' ( <i>ryosai kenbo</i> ).	Research by the Japanese Association for Women in Sport. Use of international agreements (e.g. Brighton Declaration) to leverage support from government. Host 2006 World Conference on Women and Sport	Gender equity law, 1995. <i>Basic Plan for Gender Equality</i> added to the <i>Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sport</i> , MEXT, 2006. Development of a website <a href="http://jws.or.jp/eng">http://jws.or.jp/eng</a>

Country	Barriers	Actions	Outcomes
Singapore	Not specified (but see Ye and Chia, 2008)	<p>Women and Sport Group worked with Singapore Sports Council and various NGOs to develop collaborative partnerships to generate the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sports/play day camps for children ages 6-14;</li> <li>• a bowling league and bowling instruction for girls and women;</li> <li>• support dragon boat rowing activities, culminating in the first international dragon boat world championship in October 2006;</li> <li>• a set of aerobic exercises known as <i>kebayarobics</i> for female students in the madrasas;</li> <li>• “Be an Active Woman” campaign 2005;</li> <li>• Leadership workshops for women sport administrators and athletes.</li> </ul>	<p>Women’s participation in weekly physical activity increased from 28% to 42%.</p> <p>The government officially added a women’s department to the High Participation Group of the Singapore Sports Commission, 2005.</p>
Taiwan	<p>The rate of participation in physical activity for females in Taiwan is lower than for females in the United States and other industrialized nations.</p> <p>Thirty-eight percent of females in Taiwan are sedentary, 33% engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week, and 24% in at least 60 minutes of vigorous activity.</p> <p>People of working age, housewives, and unemployed people, have the lowest rates of participation in physical activity.</p>	<p>Compilation of data on the epidemiology of physical activity of women and girls in Taiwan.</p> <p>Advocacy of a Title IX-like law (landmark legislation that bans sex discrimination in schools, whether it be in academics or athletics).</p> <p>Hosted the 2006 International Conference on Physical Activity and Physical Fitness Promotion Strategy for Women and Girls.</p>	Not specified.

Source: Claussen (2008)

There are several examples from Asia and Africa of innovative projects that have sought to facilitate girls' and women's participation in physical education and sport. There are several important features to note in the examples outlined in Table 3 below. The first is that some of the projects were initiated either by local communities (India) or by girls themselves (Afghanistan). Grassroots ownership of programmes may be important both to meeting the specific needs of particular communities of girls and women, and to the sustainability of innovation.

The second is that in almost all of the examples, physical education was viewed as a means of achieving additional goals such as leadership training (Right To Play, 2008), health knowledge (Shahzadi, n.d.), and improving the prevalence of literacy (Bailey, Wellard, and Dismore, 2004). Critics of traditional physical education programmes claim that they may be limited in terms of their effectiveness in achieving diverse goals (Jewett, Bain, and Ennis, 1995; Metzler, 2011; Lund and Tannehill, 2005) due to the dominance of their "one-size-fits-all" approach, which prompts consideration of an alternative approach to programme design.

Third, while the sources of these examples claim that many of the projects have met with success, it has also been argued that "sport and physical education programmes directed at achieving development goals tended to be used in an ad hoc, informal and isolated manner" (Beutler, 2008, p.359). When considering policy options, it is important to bear this point in mind since it suggests a level of alignment and co-ordination across different levels of action that is, to date, uncommon when tackling the problem of girls' and women's participation in physical education.

**Table 3: Examples from Asia and Africa of innovative interventions to promote girls' and women's participation in physical education and sport**

Source	Country & Organisation	Project	Focus
Right To Play, 2008	Zambia, EduSport Foundation.	GoSisters.	Leadership training for adolescent girls.
	Kenya, Kilifi District.	Moving the Goalposts.	Football as an outreach tool.
	Pakistan, Right To Play & Insan Foundation.	SportsWorks.	Leadership and participation for Afghan refugees.
	South Africa, Sports Coaches' Outreach.	U-Go-Girl.	Assertiveness and leadership training.
Shahzadi, n.d.	Afghanistan, UNICEF.	Girls' Sports Forum.	Peer leadership & mentoring and dissemination of health information.
de Vries, 2008	ICHPER.SD Asia.	Guidelines.	Enabling participation in countries where there are prescribed boundaries on behaviour.
Bailey et al., 2004	India, Maslandapur Sarada Sevashram.	Child-girl education through sport.	Comprehensive basic education of illiterates through sport.
	Kenya, Mathare Youth Association.	Girls' Football Programme.	Sport and community service participation in poor urban areas.
	Japan, MEXT.	Survey.	Identified barriers to women's participation in sport.

## What Are the Options for Alternative and Innovative Practices?

Given the complexity of the problem of girls' participation in physical education and sport, and what we have learned from recent and current innovations, it would appear that action is required at the three broad levels of policy and strategy, on the professional and institutional, and on the personal and social levels.

*Actions at the policy and strategy level* (see Table 1, column 1) include, for example, the development of guidelines and in some cases legislation, investment in physical and human resources, and use of international agreements and declarations. Government education and sport ministries have an important role to play in making policy, providing funding, monitoring implementation of initiatives and, in some cases, making or changing laws. NGOs have played an important role at this level and should continue to do so. The collection and dissemination of information has proved effective in overcoming resistance to girls' participation. Universities' potential to play a key role in this process has to date remained underdeveloped. Since they possess the capacity for knowledge generation and transmission, and also exist within international networks and communities, they are well suited to engage in policy and strategy level action. Co-ordinated action among organisations at the policy level is vitally important to increase influence and sustainability of initiatives.

*Actions at the professional and institutional level* (see Table 1, column 2) relate particularly to the professional development of teachers, coaches and other sports leaders and the construction of high quality physical education programmes in schools and related community sport programmes. The co-ordination of actions within this level is of crucial importance, in particular between professional development of teachers, coaches and leaders, and curricula, as well as alignment with actions at policy and strategy and personal and social levels.

*Actions at the personal and social level* (see Table 1, column 3) include personal and social spheres, which are strongly interdependent. Research suggests that the most important personal psychological factors are motivation, perceived competence and self-identity and biological factors of motor competence and physical fitness. In the social sphere, social relationships within the family, the peer group and between teachers and pupils in the classroom establish the climate in which personal factors are nurtured. While the quality of teachers and of physical education and sport programmes are considered at the professional and institutional level, it may be relevant in some circumstances to inform families through education programmes at the personal and social level, because research shows family support is crucial to girls' successful participation in physical education and sport.

As we already noted, developments in sport and physical education programmes tend to be one-off and ad hoc. Thus, action at all three levels is important. No level can be omitted if widespread, regular, beneficial and sustainable participation is to result. A significant challenge is to align actions across each of these levels as well as co-ordinate actions within levels.

# Principles for Programme Development

We noted that sexist forms of physical education themselves can act as a barrier to girls' participation, particularly in its traditional multi-activity, sport-based form. This form of physical education has been criticised by scholars on two noteworthy counts: for reproducing traditional gender roles, and for failing to achieve the wide range of educational benefits often claimed for it. Too often, when calls are made to use physical education as a vehicle for the achievement of important individual and social goals, the actual form of programmes and flexibility in their provision are given little consideration (Lawson, 2009).

Developing an alternative approach to traditional physical education, three broad principles can be outlined for programme development relating to equality of opportunity, the celebration of difference, and the possibilities of social transformation (Flintoff, 2008).

Action that seeks to secure *equality of opportunity* for girls to be free to participate in activities of their own choice, including all activities currently regarded as only for boys, is a necessary condition for the empowerment of girls in physical education and sport. Such a principle asserts, against the biological determinist position, that there are no uniquely female biological deficits which prevent girls from participating. At the same time, as a plethora of research has shown, equality of opportunity is not sufficient in itself since it will not automatically bring about equitable benefits for boys and girls.

Research by Flintoff and Scraton (2006) suggests that it is also appropriate to take action aimed at acknowledging and celebrating *difference*, promoting separate forms of physical education and sport for girls such as indigenous movement forms, aerobics and dance, where this is deemed to be appropriate to specific cultural and religious values. One implication of such an approach is that it will sometimes be more beneficial to offer single-sex programmes, and on other occasions and in other circumstances to offer co-educational programmes. The research on this issue, when conducted on an either/or basis, has been unable to show that one approach is better than the other (Hatten, Hannon, Holt, and Ratliffe, 2006; Naim, 2006; Whitlock, 2006). At the same time it is important, according to Kidd and Donnelly (2000), that girl-only programmes have parity of esteem, even if this means the unequal distribution of resources to establish equitable circumstances (in terms of facilities, equipment, teachers and coaches, and other infrastructure).

Arguably, a further type of action is required, in addition to the two already discussed, in order to ensure widespread, regular, beneficial and sustainable participation by girls. Action aimed at social *transformation* seeks to reform current versions of physical education and sport in ways that provide the best quality experience for both girls and boys. It is highly likely, as some recent innovations listed in Table 3 have shown, that local initiative through grassroots and girl-led action will be part of this approach. For social transformation to occur, the gender order is itself openly addressed through, for example, a critical pedagogy of physical education (Oliver and Lalik, 2001; Oliver, Hamzeh, and McCaughy, 2009).

# A Models-based Approach to Physical Education Programme Design

At the professional and institutional level, the sustained critique of “traditional”, sport-based, multi-activity forms of physical education suggests the need for alternative approaches that are better suited to meeting the needs of all children, both boys and girls of all ability levels, rather than the already sport-competent minority. Recently it has been argued that if physical education programmes are to deliver the wide range of benefits required of them, an approach is required that targets specific sets of learning outcomes (Kirk, 2010). In this alternative approach, particular learning outcomes are identified, and then teaching strategies and subject matter are brought into close alignment with them.

This so-called models-based approach conceptualizes physical education as consisting of a number of pedagogical models, each with its own specific focus. Existing, well known and researched pedagogical models include Sport Education (Hastie, de Ojeda, and Luquin, 2011), Teaching Games for Understanding (Oslin and Mitchell, 2006), Cooperative Learning (Dyson, Linehan, and Hastie, 2010), and Personal and Social Responsibility (Hellison, 1995).

Each pedagogical model is a *design specification* that provides the basis for the development of context-appropriate and flexible programmes at local levels. An example of the development of a new pedagogical model for Health-Based Physical Education can be found in Haerens, Kirk, Cardon, and Bourdeauhuji, (2011).

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## ecommendations

Advocates should understand and be able to explain that physical education makes a unique contribution to girls' education in ways that ad hoc physical activity, manual work and informal leisure participation cannot because of its emphasis on professionally led and organised, developmentally appropriate and carefully sequenced physical activities.

The complexity and multifaceted nature of the problem of girls' participation in physical education should be recognized and fully understood.

Strategies for change need to be targeted at specific groups of girls and women and significant others such as fathers, husbands and brothers, taking account of their particular circumstances.

Local ownership of programmes is crucial to their effectiveness and sustainability and thus should be facilitated and encouraged by policy makers.

Advocates for girls' participation need to be constantly vigilant of biological determinism and its adverse consequences, and to be ready to use facts to challenge such attitudes.

The quality of early movement learning experiences is an urgent priority in order to minimize delays in the development of motor competence.

Agents working at the policy and strategy level should seek to ensure actions are aligned across and co-ordinated within macro, meso and micro levels.

Since research is needed to provide evidence of the benefits of girls' and women's participation in physical education and sport, universities should play a more prominent role as research and dissemination agencies.

A models-based approach to physical education could be adopted since it provides a sharper focus on specific sets of learning outcomes. Models also act as design specifications to guide the development of programmes suited to local needs and values.

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