

## Input Paper for the Break-Out Session

# Promoting gender equity through sport

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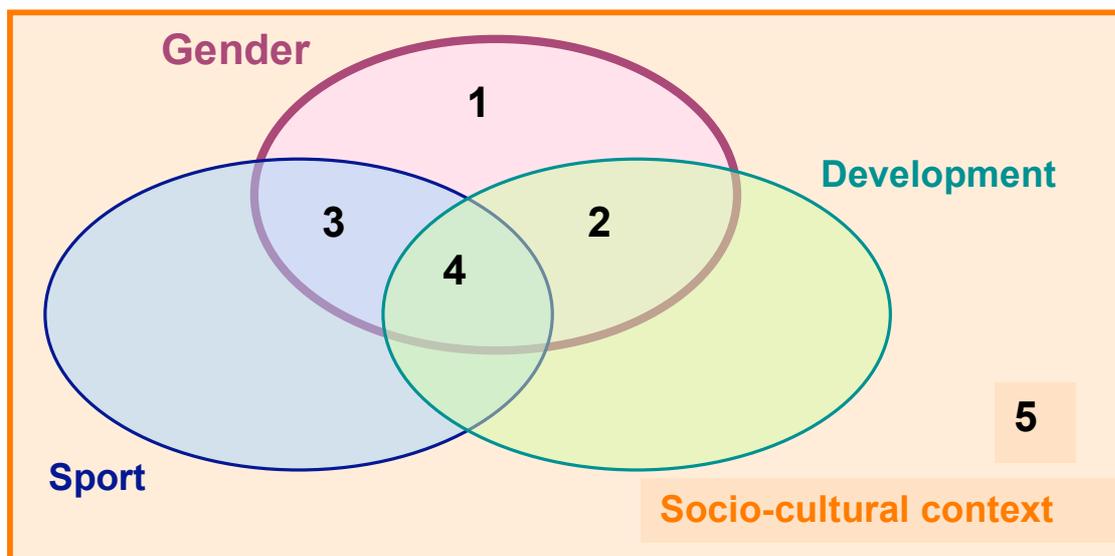
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Time: 18:00 – 19:30  
Room: 203

## I. Starting position

The Magglingen declaration 2003 was founded on the principle of sport as a human right, which has the potential to improve physical and mental health and help overcome trauma. All sections of the recommendations refer to the importance of measures to include women, girls and other marginalised groups in sports initiatives. However, apart from acknowledging the need to eliminate stereotyping, there is still little recognition of the gendered nature of sport in most countries of the world. Sport can contribute tremendously to international development and cooperation work for the benefit of women, men, girls and boys, irrespective of the developing degree of a region. Despite this broadly shared conviction, there is still a lack of substantiated evidence to support this purported potential of sport and its specific impact on gender relationships.

What key factors are preventing women and girls from getting involved in sport activities in developing countries? How could those possible constraints be approached? Are some types of sport more likely to clash with social norms? Could traditional games be a possible access for females in sports or are such patterns even counterproductive, because they consolidate existing patriarchal structures? This paper deals with such questions and provides an analytical framework as well as field experience which should encourage further debates and research in the field of sport, gender and development.

## II. Gender, sport and development



**1 Notion of gender:** Gender studies are not focussing on females only and are not to be confused with the study of women or feminism. Talking about gender mainstreaming for example, means taking into account the perspectives, roles and responsibilities of both males and females (Sancar/Sever, 2005). Lorber defines gender as a “process of social construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state as well as in sexuality, language and culture” (Lorber, 1999). The distinction between “sex” and “gender” led to a fundamental paradigm change and opened the debate to “men and masculinity”.

Indeed, analysis of gender differences and inequalities in most (developing) countries often show a disadvantaged and weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational and physical matters. Therefore, gender discussions and interventions tend and often urgently need to concentrate on those discrepancies at female expense.

However, targeting women and girls for special measures due to particular gender realities does not mean to isolate them completely at the cost of an essential holistic point of view. Besides, talking of women or men as abstract categories bears the risk of depersonalisation and leads to a neglect of crucial characteristics like age, skills, social and marital status, education, profession, etc.

**2 Gender and development:** The UN-Decade for Women (1975-1985) helped to foster a greater awareness of the need to integrate gender analysis not only in policy-making, in programs and projects, but also in research. Much has changed in the past two decades. Scholars, practitioners and politicians have been advancing the concept “women in development” (WID) considerably. Since gender roles and relations are deeply embedded in social structures, the analytical framework of WID gradually changed to GAD meaning “gender and development” (Touwen, 1996). The central message of the 1995 Human Development Report stated that development without specific efforts to empower women for equal participation, warps the process of development for everyone.<sup>1</sup> By the 1995 Beijing conference and its “Platform for Action” international gender policies became mainstreamed and foundations for a serious debate were laid.

**3 Gender and Sport:** The “women in sport” (WIS) movement emerged in the 1990s and did not primarily target developing countries, though some international associations advocated female sports many decades ago.<sup>2</sup> Initially, the WIS movement mainly concentrated on sport-related topics and had a rather elitist European and North American character (Saavedra, 2005a). The World Conferences on Women and Sport led to major progress in the field of feminine sports around the world. Brighton, UK was the beginning in 1994 (“Declaration”) with the establishment of an International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG). Two conferences in Windhoek, Namibia in 1998 (“Call for Action”) and Montreal, Canada in 2002 (“Tool-kit”) followed and the fourth will be held in Kumamoto, Japan in May 2006.

**4 Gender equity, sport and development:** The WID and WIS movements have influenced one another defining the field of gender, sport and development. Even though more and more conferences on this “triad” are taking place in developing countries or in the “North” with Third World participation, people from the grassroots level, especially women, are rarely actively involved. Representatives of developing countries are often still members of a social elite, which enables them to travel, receive education, publish books etc. Therefore, local voices from the “South” have to be sought out and empowered to play an active role in this debate.

In recent years, there has been a notable move in the discourse from requesting “gender equity in sport”, to pushing “sport for gender equity”. This paradigm change goes beyond “including women” in existing projects. This shift defines gender equity as an objective in sport for development initiatives, rather than simply promoting the participation of women and girls (Sancar/Sever, 2005). This means that special needs of a specific target group (adolescent girls, young mothers, orphans, married women, etc.) have to be understood within a cultural context and must be taken into account. For example when the Mathare Youth Sport Association (MYSA) in Kenya started to integrate girls into its program, special measures had to be taken: “MYSA was not simply setting up a girls’ football league; rather, it was embarking on a process of transforming gender norms.” Therefore, staff members had

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<sup>1</sup> Human Development Report, 1995. The Human Development Report is an independent report. It is commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is the product of a selected team of leading scholars, development practitioners and members of the Human Development Report Office of UNDP.

<sup>2</sup> An example is IAPESGW which stands for International Association of Physical Education and Sports for Girls and Women. IAPESGW was founded in 1949 supporting its members working for women’s and girl’s sport and physical education and organizing international networking meetings and scientific congresses on a regular basis. IAPESGW is a member organization of the International Council for Sport and Physical Education (ICSSPE) and of the International Working Group on Women and Sport.

to make considerable efforts negotiating extensively with parents and communities. Time schedules had to be adjusted to accommodate domestic responsibilities in the girls' lives, mobility had to be assured, and strategies had to be implemented to overcome other social constraints (Brady/Khan, 2002).

The "Montreal Tool-kit" (2002) emphasises the fact that the terms equity and equality are often misused. Equity does not necessarily mean that all persons must be treated exactly the same. In other words, nothing is more unjust than treating different subjects equally. The "Montreal Tool-kit" states that "gender equity is the principle and practice of fair and equitable allocation of resources and opportunities for females and males. Gender equity eliminates discriminatory practices that are barriers to full participation of either gender."<sup>3</sup>

This terminological debate is especially gaining momentum in the context of women's sport and Islam. Hargreaves pointed out that Islamic feminists supported the use of the notion "equity" instead of "equality" at the 1995 Beijing conference: "The theory of equity provides spaces for female exercise and female modesty – an essential fundamental for women's sport to advance under Islam." (Hargreaves, 2000). Even though thoughtful terminology can have considerable impact, the terms "equality" and "equity" are often used as synonyms in everyday speech and common debates, or more precisely "equality" is still often used exclusively, but implicitly representing both meanings.

**5 Relevance of socio-cultural contexts:** Any project in any region of the world is embedded within a specific cultural, political, juridical, economic and social setting, which has to be analysed carefully. What makes sense for one district or one target group will not necessarily apply to another place. In addition to this geographical aspect, it is possible for different settings to evolve over time. In fact, they can at times change quite rapidly in response to policy, natural and man-made disaster, or changing socio-economic conditions. Thinking in terms of gender requires a mindset removed from stereotyping male and female roles in society. A complicating factor is that ideas about gender roles and gender relations are often deeply engrained in educational systems and social structures. Within many communities, conforming to typically male or female gender roles were and often still are signs of respectable individuals. Some cultures did recognise and many still do consider sports and physical education as a "vehicle for shaping boys into men who will lead society" (Sadker&Sadker, 1994). Therefore, just by promoting female sport and by encouraging girls and women to be physically active, gender norms are already challenged.

Many Western sociologists claim that sport is a "mirror of society" reflecting cultural values and social norms. Creedon characterised sport even as a "microcosm of gender values" (Creedon, 1994). At this point, an obvious differentiation between the developed world and developing or transitional countries is crucial for analysis. Keeping those considerations in mind, the importance and status of sport in a region or country becomes a focal point of interest: What sports are played in a specific society and by whom? Maybe fitness in one place may mean exercises and games, while in another place it is all about having enough to eat and time to rest from physical exertion. What is considered socially acceptable behaviour in public spaces when being physically active? For example in Iran, on the one hand, girls are not allowed to participate in sport programs outdoors. In Ivory Coast, on the other hand, the community wants to have sport activities for children on a central square open to the public, so that everybody can see what is going on as a safety and control measure.

In order to implement a sustainable sport project promoting gender equity, specific socio-cultural and socio-economic parameters have to be taken into account, including the access to and control over resources, dynamics of power, and different gender roles.

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<sup>3</sup> See "The Montreal Tool Kit": <http://www.canada2002.org/e/toolkit> (31.10.2005).

### III. Benefits focussing on gender

In 2004 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared sport as a universal language, that can bring people together. In his conviction, sport can support the work for peace and help to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>4</sup> Despite this broadly shared international enthusiasm, there is still a considerable entanglement between commonly assumed and expected benefits and evidence-based knowledge of measurable positive outcomes directly linked to sport, development and its specific impact on gender topics. Further research in this field would allow future projects to use the instrument of sport and its added value more specifically, thus minimizing and avoiding potential negative side effects or failures.

Besides the well-known health benefits of being physically active (fitness, motor abilities) and the often visible “fun factor”, sport is said to influence personal and social competencies such as self-confidence, self-discipline, body awareness, accepting rules, fairness, dealing with emotions, learning mutual respect, winning, losing, teamwork and communicative skills. In many ways those benefits of sport, derived mainly from research in Western countries, are gender neutral.

Sporting activities can give women and girls access to public spaces allowing them to gather together, develop a social network, meet with peers, discuss problems, and enjoy freedom of movement on a regular basis. Certainly, those aims could partly be reached by sewing courses or literacy programs as well. But because of its historical association with masculinity, sport can additionally challenge traditional gender structures in a society, thus promoting equity.

One inherent property of sporting activities is the physicality and body expression. Therefore, besides generating individual experiences and well-being, sport programs can tackle such sensitive topics, which are often still hushed up or tabooed in most societies, families and even schools. Sport programs can deliver information about health, body functioning, diseases and hygiene. This knowledge is even more valuable when reaching future mothers. Brady pointed out that in a number of cultures, the “body is working ‘capital’ for many girls and women, particularly those with little education and few economic advantages” (Brady, 1998). Especially adolescent girls should receive information on their bodies (sexuality) and rights in order to have more control over their own lives, in particular regarding pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual harassment or prostitution.

Sport and other recreational activities can also promote education, networking, leadership and negotiation skills and enhance female empowerment. Kabeer defined empowerment as “the power within” which is both an individual as well as a collective process involving all levels of society and structural changes (Kabeer, 1999). ISHRAQ<sup>5</sup> for example, a recreational sports program for adolescent girls in rural Egypt, made a point to include local authorities, parents and boys in order to change common attitudes towards girls (Zibani, 2004).

The direct impact of sport projects on women’s empowerment is still hard to measure. The work has started, but as longitudinal research meaningful results will only be available in a few years.

### IV. Understanding and overcoming barriers

Arguments of female asportism by nature reflect reality just as little as beliefs that women are incapable, and therefore should not be involved e.g. in politics. Both sport and politics are historically largely male-dominated areas. Accordingly, apparent female asportism and

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<sup>4</sup> Declaration of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the Launch of the International Year of Sport and Physical Education 2005, UN Headquarters New York, November 5, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> In August 2001, the Population Council and Save the Children, in collaboration with the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEPDA), and Caritas launched the ISHRAQ project: Safe Spaces for Girls to Learn, Play and Grow.

apoltism are due to a lesser extent to women's lack of interest than to traditionally patriarchal structures, cultures and social systems, and are therefore acquired, not inborn. While contemporary claims for women's political participation are basically recognised around the world (although with some persistent exceptions), women's involvement in sport is still viewed as "unfeminine", and females are largely under-represented at all levels in sport (athletes, coaches, referees, managers, media coverage, etc.). In addition, various issues prevent women and girls from getting involved in sport activities:

**1 Socio-economic barriers:** At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe most female sports were an exclusive privilege for the wealthy upper class having time to spare. Therefore, socio-economic issues and availability of leisure time are directly linked to sport activity and games.

Looking at developing countries today, lack of time and division of labour (responsibilities for production, reproduction, etc.) is a major barrier for women and girls getting involved in sport programs. Where everyday survival (nutrition, shelter, etc.) is the order of business, few are thinking of recreational pursuits. Often women's work at home as providers of food and carers of the family (childcare as well as care of elderly people) is not considered "proper work". Consequently, those obligations which are "innate", regularly delivered and socially engrained do not seem to deserve leisure time. Girls are taught those role patterns from the beginning, thus they are often prevented from meeting peers and playing outside.

**2 Safety concerns:** Keeping girls inside or around the house may also function as an important safety component. Especially female adolescents may be targeted by verbal or physical sexual harassment or even abuse (Fasting, 2004). Besides "external danger", there could also exist "internal hazards". Children and teenagers can form close relationships with teachers and coaches who are often considered as friends or even idols. Besides many mutual benefits, there is a risk of a certain emotional dependency which gives the adults power over the child. Bearing in mind, the large majority of sport coaches and teachers are certainly working with children genuinely and conscientiously. Nevertheless, observing bodies and dealing with "physicality" are peculiarities of sport activities, which may reveal a certain vulnerability of children being exposed to emotional or sexual exploitation. Therefore, in order to prevent possible incidents, specific codes of conduct and reporting systems need to be formulated, institutionalised and of course observed.

Another safety aspect is closely linked to equipment and infrastructure. If poor sport facilities (hygiene), dangerous debris (iron rods, barbwire, etc.), or damaged material bear the risk of or even cause injuries, such deficiencies are preventing children from participating in sport programs. Since injuries still occur despite all precautions, coaches and teachers should be certified in basic first-aid knowledge and there must be adequate equipment at hand. Parents who will have to treat wounds and bruises themselves, are not likely to let their children (especially their daughters) participate in sport activities anymore. "Sport in Action" in Kabwe/Zambia for example provided crutches and paid hospital expenses for a boy who broke his leg playing soccer during its lesson. In poor communities such costly incidents can cause serious trouble to families concerned, damage reputation of sport and eventually wipe out entire programs. Therefore, in order to maintain the credibility of sport endeavours that might cause physical injuries, solidarity should be expressed and immediate aid provided. Especially in reaching development aims, sport has to be considered as an instrument focussing on broad popular activity, not solely on competition or even professionalism. Not every participant has to make it to the Olympics. Therefore, sport coaches and teachers insisting on military drills and physical punishment to boost performance should be prevented from working with youth.

In order to avoid such out-dated practices and the above mentioned adverse effects, selecting and training reliable and dedicated staff is fundamental. It is not sufficient to have coaches and teachers who know everything about a specific sport. Well-trained coaches and

teachers should also be able to do proper warm-ups, show exercises according to participants' age and skill levels, observe overexertion, fatigue, aggressiveness, frailty, progress and difficulties, all of which could be accident sources.

Further evaluations from Iran and Zambia have shown that, especially for orphans or children from shattered families, coaches and teachers often become confidants with whom personal problems are shared. 46% of questioned girls and 40% of questioned boys stated that an "understanding coach who cares about people" should be the most important requirement for such a position.<sup>6</sup> According to this data, besides technical know-how about sport, empathy and psychological skills are pivotal. Consequently, minimal training standards and preventive measures for sport teachers and coaches are key factors to safe sport programs and have to be implemented within a supervised setting in developed and developing countries alike.

**3 Material, infrastructural and technical barriers:** As already mentioned, obstacles hindering children from participating in sport programs heavily depend on different cultural traditions and contexts. Three examples from Bam/Iran<sup>7</sup> and Zambia support this statement especially with regards to infrastructure and clothing: In Bam, sport and play activities for girls were exclusively held inside a warehouse to the exclusion of public eyes. Due to summer heat and because opening doors or windows was culturally impossible, sport programs for girls had to be partly cancelled. Another issue concerning infrastructure was raised by a young male participant who told his coach that he would not allow his sister to come to the sport centre until "proper curtains would be installed so that nobody could watch them from outside".<sup>8</sup>

Besides infrastructure clothing can impede or permit children's involvement in sport activities. Where poverty and the HIV/AIDS pandemic leads to increasing numbers of neglected children and orphans every year, participating in sport and play activities can make an inspiring difference in everyday life. Ragged clothes and often no underwear can prevent children from being physically active, because they feel ashamed of exhibiting certain body parts by moving and running. "Play Soccer", a NGO offering soccer programs for girls and boys in Zambian communities and other African countries, recognised this problem and provided shorts that children (and especially girls wearing dresses) could put on during the sports lesson. Research has shown that in contemporary Zambian culture girls and women should wear dresses. However, the same survey in Lusaka also indicated that it was socially acceptable for girls to wear shorts in public during physical activities.<sup>9</sup> At first glance, this example might appear irrelevant, but it really gets to the heart of the nexus of gender, sport and development: If girls are standing at the sideline of a pitch watching the boys play, this does not necessarily mean they are not interested in participating. In this specific case there is no need to supply shoes or balls, but shorts enabling girls to run, jump, enjoy themselves, and thus become part of a sport program.

As a matter of fact, talking about infrastructural, material or technical barriers linked to girls' participation in sport programs becomes a cross-cutting discussion dealing with mobility (public transportation), clean and sheltered changing rooms and showers, clothing, guaranteed and easy accessibility to facilities, distances between sport sites and residential areas (within the range of parents' vision), adequate lighting, appropriate scheduling of activities (e.g. before dusk). Even though the safety issue is a common denominator, each aspect varies according to socio-cultural circumstances.

**4 Socio-cultural barriers:** In contrast to infrastructural obstacles, possible constraints or conflicts one could encounter within society or specific cultures (including religions) are much harder to identify and to resolve. First, it is important to emphasise that not behaving

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<sup>6</sup> SAD-Evaluation "Gender, sport and development" in Zambia, June 2005 (publication in 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Project of the Swiss Academy for Development (SAD): „Sport and Play for traumatised children in Bam”.

<sup>8</sup> SAD-Evaluation of "Weekly Reports Bam", January-June 2005 (publication in 2006).

<sup>9</sup> SAD-Evaluation "Gender, sport and development" in Zambia, June 2005 (publication in 2006).

according to socially and culturally expected norms can also represent a real safety concern in certain settings, entailing serious consequences for deviant individuals (Saavedra, 2005a). In most cultures and societies (including so-called developed countries), alliances between femininity and sport are often still considered incompatible. "Deviant" females are considered a disgrace to the entire family in many cultures. Research has shown that fathers and brothers primarily tend to defend traditional patriarchal principles and family honour, while mothers predominantly feel responsible for daughters to behave ladylike in order to find a husband and to become ideal wives, mothers and homemakers.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is important to stress that opponents of female sport participation are not only men, but need to be identified in every socio-cultural setting.

Challenging social norms is often considered a public provocation which has to be sanctioned. In many circumstances, girls and women are held responsible for the behaviour of males (Brady, 2005). Not the person watching and teasing is to blame, but the person who is infringing upon a social code by not covering specific body parts for instance.

**5 Ideals of masculinity and femininity:** The acceptance or at least disposition of letting girls and women participate in sport programs, depends heavily on the perception of hegemonic female and male beauty ideals in society. Sport is often celebrated as a sanctuary of heterosexuality and male bravura. A successful male athlete becomes a hero, an idol, a beauty ideal or even a sex symbol. Gay or straight sportswomen, on the other hand, disturb this social order and "put their femininity at risk" (Saavedra, 2005b). According to prevailing perceptions, sportive male homosexuals are deviant individuals as well and often have to face criticism, exposure to ridicule and shame. In sports related to a typically male image like Rugby for instance, active men represent heterosexuality and masculinity whereas active women symbolize homosexuality and unfemininity (Pfister, 1999). Every socio-cultural setting requires an assessment regarding ideals of masculinity and femininity: Is a sportive muscular female body considered attractive and desirable in society? Is it respectable for women to move and sweat in public? Females have to decide between "being a woman" and "being a sportswoman". In most traditional settings, feminine behaviour would be described as being submissive, obedient, weak, tender, emotional, beautiful, and passive, while male characteristics would occupy fields of strength, power, ambition, muscles, self-confidence, activity and aggressiveness. However, a woman who wants to be successful in sport competition has to demonstrate at least some of those "typically male" attributes. Trespassing on those socially and culturally defined boundaries means challenging and in the end transforming well-protected gender norms. Even if sport activities are not taking place on a competitive level, such stereotyped preconceptions exist. Especially in conservative settings, three major obstacles linked to specific types of sports that challenge gender norms can be identified: The first category includes contact team-sports (handball, soccer, etc.) dealing with aggressiveness. Secondly, visible muscles (e.g. weight lifting) can raise opposition towards female participation in sports. Many people still fear that exercising makes women and girls develop "unsightly" muscles and interferes with health and reproductive cycles. The third category comprises "pain and blood" (e.g. boxing and martial arts) which are not considered acceptable female attributes.

**6 Lack of female role models:** Young emphasised that "most girls learn culturally appropriate female styles of movement through imitation" (Young, 1990). In contrast to many boys, girls in developing settings do often not have any female role models regarding sport to look up at. Of course, role models and idols in general can also bear dangers (e.g. drug abuse, violence, eating disorders) and are not inherently positive.

While a survey in Lusaka and Kabwe has shown that 61% of all questioned girls could not think of a sports idol at all, only 19% of those who named a sportive role model were mentioning women athletes. Only 13% of the questioned boys could not think of a favourite

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<sup>10</sup> SAD-Evaluation "Gender, sport and development" in Zambia, June 2005 (publication in 2006).

sportsman and no boy mentioned a female athlete as role model. Interestingly, 26% of the girls who named sports idols chose a person from their personal environment (family, school, neighbourhood and community), whereas no boy mentioned a role model belonging to his private surroundings. As a matter of fact, those results not only stress the virtual non-existence of African female sports idols, but also a difference regarding media access between boys and girls. Furthermore, the clearly imbalanced media coverage of female and male sports in general - in the developed and developing world - needs to be mentioned. The lack of role models does also prevent girls and female teenagers from entering other male territories like politics or science for instance.

Due to the lack of female role models, in 1998 UNICEF South Asia launched a girl cartoon character called Meena. The idea behind the ten-year-old Meena was to create a female idol with whom girls in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan could identify. The stories of Meena and her parrot, which deal with nutrition, health care, school, child marriage, etc. not only do they expose discrimination against girls in her family and community life, but also offer positive, achievable solutions, through an example of the empowerment of girls and women. Not only girls, but also boys and parents are targeted to become aware of gender biases in family behaviour and society.

UNICEF and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) have recently launched a ground breaking campaign using cricket to focus on girls' right to education and sports. The South Asian heroine Meena will lead this initiative playing cricket in videos, on posters and in leaflets.<sup>11</sup> The lack of female role models is a socio-structural and educational problem often forming a vicious circle. Successful and socially accepted or even admired women in historically male-dominated fields are creating visions for girls and opening doors for new opportunities. In order to strive for a change, untiring efforts, unusual aid and measures are needed. Such interventions may last for decades before eventually being successful.

## V. Integrating gender equity in sport and development programs

**1 Claiming space:** Providing a specified space for women's and girls sports activities, not only has practical aspects, but also a deeply symbolic character. In many societies, public spaces often provide access to males exclusively with some exceptions like hospitals, markets or fountains (Brady, 2005). Since constant dripping wears away the stone, claiming sheltered and safe areas for females – even though facing suspicion and resistance – contributes to challenging existing stereotypes of sport being a masculine domain. The soccer final of the “Go Sisters” (Edusport) tournament in Livingstone/Zambia for instance took place on the main field of St. Mary's High School. Live loudspeaker coverage of the game, foreign and national guests of honour, and hundreds of parents, children, and curious spectators were creating a decent framework for those girls to present themselves and their skills. If playing female soccer in public is an unusual picture, constant claims and regularly recurring events will help to overcome awkward feelings and eventually deconstruct and rearticulate gender norms, thus broadening horizons.

**2 Access to resources, structures and leadership:** Besides access to the pivotal infrastructure (equipment, facilities, etc.), sports programs need to be implemented within an organisational setting. Saavedra describes three different kinds of struggles to gain access: First of all, women could seek access to existing (originally) male-orientated structures. Secondly, there is the possibility of creating separate feminine spaces, structures and programs. Thirdly, dominant, often patriarchal structures are transformed to suit both male and female needs and expectations (Saavedra, 2005b). There is no unanimity regarding the right track, but access has to assure active board membership in leading positions, equity, financial means, participation in decision making and strategic planning.

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.unicef.org/meena> and <http://www.awn.com/unicef/meena.html> (17.10.2005).

**3 Types of sport:** How does a particular sport acquire a gender-specific connotation? While basketball as an invasion game, for example, is considered “rather rough” in the United States, Saavedra pointed out that when women play this game in Senegal, it is considered “feminine”, elegant and therefore suitable (Saavedra, 2005b). As a matter of fact, shin guards, balls or mallets are completely gender-neutral objects. Social circumstances, traditions and cultural settings compartmentalise sports, its characteristics and equipment in typically male or female categories. Not every sport or play activity suits every local reality, and a specific type of sport should not be introduced coincidentally. If girls’ soccer in Afghanistan or rural Egypt is encountering too much opposition, it might be advisable to start with table-tennis or archery. There is no use provoking a debate on principles and risking a radical ban of female sports at all. Taking gradual steps does not mean retreating or deviating from a target, quite the contrary. Putting female sports participation on a firm footing is pivotal to obtain a sustainable integration into everyday life of civil societies (associations) and educational systems. Providing this basis does not mean that other types of sport like volleyball or cricket (maybe even boys and girls) or even invasion games are excluded. They can even sneak in through the backdoor, once a certain level of acceptance has been reached. A successful sport program for girls and/or women has to choose and to focus on adequate sport activities considering categories like games and non-games; contact sports, low contact or non-contact sports; mixed or single-sex lessons; team, double or single sports; etc. In addition to that, psychosocial needs of a community have to be assessed to start with. This could be very different in a post-disaster, (post-)conflict or pandemic setting requiring at any one time reliable structures, trust-building efforts, self-esteem, etc. At this point it is important to allude to the danger of ethnocentric perspectives eulogising the Western model (which is heterogenous in itself) or any other paradigm as the ultimate goal to strive for.

**4 Traditional games and competition:** The infinite diversity of cultural settings produces a rich field of traditional or indigenous games. In rather conservative communities, rediscovering and facilitating such practices is likely to be well received. Ancient games do not necessarily mean backwardness and modern sports do not automatically bring along progress and development. Could traditional games represent a possible access for females to sports? Since many indigenous practices derive from male-dominated hunting or war scenes, such patterns might be counterproductive by consolidating existing patriarchal structures and gender roles. Maybe compromises could be found within traditional frameworks. Another factor closely linked to traditional games is competition. Everhart/Pemberton emphasise the “competitive warrior model characteristic of men’s sports” confronting it with “women’s sports which were rooted in philosophies of participation, cooperation and play” (Everhart/Pemberton, 2001). In order to include as many individuals as possible in sports and games, the nature of activity has to be adapted to the needs of targeted participants (e.g. entire families, children, mothers). This might mean to introduce alternative games or to modify certain rules and techniques focussing on participation and fun, rather than on performance and competition.

**5 Didactical considerations:** Coaches and teachers can represent role models who can have a considerable impact on the attitude of girls and boys towards sports. Thereby females coaching or refereeing boys or mixed-sex groups not only get the implicit message across that women do have knowledge and leadership skills, but are also capable and familiar with a male-dominated field. Additionally, sport activities and games are ideal proving grounds to broach the issue of gender roles for children and adults. Besides exercising specifically in single-sex groups, consciously mixing boys and girls for sport activities (if allowed) can offer added values: Boys who are observing talented female players often experience an eye-opening effect (Brady/Khan, 2002), which might influence their future thinking and behaviour as boy-friends, husbands and fathers. Coaches and teachers can tackle gender stereotypes also explicitly by consciously teaching “typically male” or “typically female” sports to both

sexes. Raising this awareness means enabling girls and women to play a “masculine sport” like football and allowing boys or men to pursue participation in “feminine sports” like ballet as well, if those activities suit their self-concepts and bring personal fulfilment.

**6 Providing incentives:** Especially in developing countries sports coaches often work as volunteers. Even though all helping hands are welcome, not everybody is born to be a coach. As already mentioned, recruitment procedures and proper training are pivotal to all sport programs. In order to get more capable people motivated to become actively involved in girls’ and women’s sport, a surplus value (if remuneration is not possible) has to be offered like transferable skills, equipment, education, media exposure, travel opportunities, or access to vital resources (Saavedra, 2005a). In some circumstances the fact of working voluntarily as a coach for children enhances social prestige which for instance could be made even more visible and desirable by equipping those dedicated persons with unique shirts. Such incentives of course are closely related to specific local needs and realities.

**7 Holistic approach:** Due to the fact that sports programs concern entire communities, identifying the “gatekeepers” (elder brothers, mothers, teachers, etc.), lobbying and involving local authorities are a must. If notables for example are strictly opposing sport activities for girls, because it was somehow forced upon them, they will immediately disappear as soon as international development agencies are withdrawing from their mission. Before a program is introduced, a proper communication and information campaign has to be delivered. This might even include sessions with local medical doctors who refute myths connecting girls’ sport participation and reduced child-bearing capacities for instance. Targeting women and girls to get involved in sport activities does not mean to exclude men and boys. Especially among children in poor communities, the fact of running a program just for girls can produce jealous boys causing disturbances, teasing or even manipulation. Empowering girls and women and promoting gender equity through sport has to embrace a holistic point of view.

## VI. Thesis for discussion

1. The hegemonic perception of a **female beauty** ideal in a country is directly linked to the participation opportunities for girls and women in rather untypical “feminine sports”.
2. The mere fact of women and men being equally represented around a table does not guarantee **gender equity**. For example a mixed-sex meeting will not achieve its goal, if females are inhibited not expressing their opinions.
3. In countries and regions where females do have broad access to traditionally **male dominated fields** like e.g. politics and education (science), they encounter less obstacles to be actively involved in sports.
4. Female **role models** like science teachers, successful athletes/coaches or active politicians, play a crucial role in the empowerment of girls and their motivation to enter those formerly male-dominated territories in their future (overcoming vicious circle).
5. Playing **soccer in mixed-sex teams** in every country of the world symbolises female empowerment and is eventually the final goal of sport and development in regard to gender equity.

6. Elling claimed that “on the one hand social dominant groups have more power to (re)construct and convey particular meanings and ideologies (e.g. about sport), but are on the other also more **restricted to cross borders**” (Elling, 2004). Therefore, is it more acceptable for girls and women to engage in dominant “masculine sports” like soccer, than for boys or men to pursue participation in “feminine sports” like synchronised swimming for instance?

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### **VIII. Further reading and sources:**

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International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG)  
<http://www.iwg-gti.org>

International Association for Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW)  
<http://www.iapesgw.org>

International Olympic Committee (IOC) - Women and Sport  
<http://www.olympic.org/uk/organisation/commissions/women/index-uk.asp>

International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education  
<http://www.icsspe.org/>

OSAGI (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women)  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/>

Population Council  
<http://www.popcouncil.org/>

UNESCO  
<http://www.unesco.org/general/eng/about/index.html>

United Nations and the Status of Women  
<http://www.un.org/Conferences/Women/PubInfo/Status/Home.htm>

WomenSport International (WSI)  
<http://www.sportsbiz.bz/womensportinternational>

Women Watch (UN Gateway)  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/>