

Sport for development and body image for girls

Sport for Development

Sport participation is often thought to provide positive benefits on education attainment, gender equality, self-efficacy and health in developed and developing societies (Levermore and Beacom, 2009). The United Nations Office of Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) recognizes that sport participation can have dramatic effects on young peoples' lives and support development initiatives. Sport also has the capacity to reduce gender-based stereotyping and discrimination by challenging gender expectations and empowering females to independence and success (Darnell, 2011; Saavedra, 2009; Brady, 2005; Meir, 2005; Hartmann-Tews and Pfister, 2003). In sum, sport often serves as a "social good" or tool for social and economic development.

However, social science scholars have been reluctant to accept sport as an effective mechanism for development (Jarvie, 2012; Coalter and Taylor, 2010; Levermore and Beacom, 2009). In particular, sport for development and peace (SDP) research has been criticized for its lack of in-depth research and evaluation. Claims that sport can address social and economic ills are often "vague and lack theoretical and policy coherence," and may be "overly romanticized," (Coalter and Taylor, 2010 p. 1374).

This case study critically examines sport as a tool for youth development among at risk adolescent girls in the small Eastern Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The sport programme facilitators at a girls' rehabilitation centre are faced with a challenge. How can they construct sport activities that promote healthy body image and encourage participation from their students?



The Upton Garden Girls Centre

In the bustling capital city of Castries, the Upton Garden Girls Centre (UGGC) serves many young women caught up in the cycle of poverty and abuse in St. Lucia. These girls between the ages of 12-17 come to Upton Gardens due to behavioural problems at mainstream public schools or cases of neglect or abuse in the home. Upton Gardens is the only such rehabilitation and counselling service available to young women on the island and has been in operation since 1980. They offer a two-year 'rehabilitation' programme that focuses on continuing education (math, literacy, health), life skills and job training. Students attend daily classes on these subjects, although they are not required to attend or complete the programme. Additionally, Upton Gardens provides counselling services to students and families. Supported by government and corporate funding, the mission of the Centre as posted on their website is to "provide a quality day care rehabilitation service in a conducive environment to abused, disadvantaged and neglected young girls through high community involvement, timely and appropriate interventions and effective case management," ("Introducing Upton Garden Girls' Centre," 2009).

Physical education and sport are supplemental programmes offered at least once per week. A FIFA certified (male) coach conducts weekly football sessions. Various other sporting activities are offered less regularly; including dance, swimming and netball. These additional sport activities are sponsored in collaboration with a Girls2Women SDP programme through the Australian Sports Outreach Programme (ASOP) and a St. Lucian SDP organization called the Sacred Sports Foundation (Alexander, 2012). Prior to this research, many of the participants had completed a salsa dance programme at UGCC. However, that programme had been cancelled because the instructor left. Several participants also engaged in sporting activity, both organized and casual, outside of UGCC.

According to the programme director, Lucy Granger, the sport activities are included in their programme offerings primarily to foster 'social and life skills' such as working in groups and overcoming challenges (building self-efficacy). Additionally, the sport elements provide an opportunity for exercise and offer a fun outlet that keeps the participants interested in returning to the programme. Sport is considered an important aspect in challenging gender norms and expectations, especially for young women who often feel marginalized and stigmatized because of poverty, abuse, and exclusion from school (Personal communication, 2014).

The emphasis on sport was a part of a larger effort toward health goals. The Eastern Caribbean suffers from rising rates of overweight and obesity amongst youth, especially amongst girls (Sutherland, 2012). Furthermore, caring for one's health through physical activity was framed as a larger part of the life skills goals of the UGCC. But Mrs. Granger and her staff were facing a problem. They wanted to use sport to encourage health and positive body image. However, some of the girls were worried that playing too much sport would make them overly masculine or muscled. They wanted to find types of sport activities that helped overcome old-fashioned gender roles and notions of body image. But they also wanted to be sure that the girls would be interested and excited to participate. They had to find a way to fit the sport activities into the health programmes whilst challenging gender roles and keeping the girls interested.

Gender, Sport and Body Image

Cultural perspectives on body image vary and gender plays an important role in understanding how people relate to their physical bodies. At a basic level, male body image is centred on how bodies *act*, while female body images are focused on how bodies *look*. The Western ideal male bodies should be strong and muscular, demonstrating physical prowess and ability. Female body ideals are framed aesthetically, with emphasis on thinness and conformity to feminine attractiveness (Cash and Pruzinsky, 2002).

Within the sport context, the inherent emphasis on physical movement of the body reframes the conversation on female bodies. The focus is shifted from aesthetic to kinetic. In this study, adolescent girls expressed concern over developing overly muscular bodies through sport participation. This concern can discourage young women from sport participation (Slater et al., 2011). Body image worries marginalize girls in sport and may prevent them from gaining the stated benefits of sport on personal development. This problem may be of particular concern among Caribbean adolescent girls, who have been shown to display low levels of body image satisfaction. In particular, Caribbean girls tend to perceive their bodies in an aesthetic frame. Female bodies in this region tend to be lauded as *objects*, with little emphasis on how bodies work as *actors* (Barrow 2007).

At Upton Gardens Girls’ Centre, discussions regarding body image fluctuated from empowering, progressive views on strength, fitness and health for women (i.e. it was good for girls/women to have fit and strong bodies) to restrictive and hegemonic perspectives (i.e. muscular legs look bad on girls). However, even when discussing fitness, health and the body of females in a progressive sense, the context for the conversation tended to revolve around appearances and attractiveness. It seemed that their relationship with their bodies was rooted in an aesthetics rather than kinetics, as commonly seen in the literature discussed above on body image (Barrow, 2007; Murnen, 2004). In contrast to prior studies on body image among Caribbean adolescent females, these girls demonstrated high levels of body satisfaction.

Body image as related to sport and physical activity was also discussed. The responses regarding gender, sport and the body were mixed. ‘If you play sports, your calves are getting hard. That’s bad. Getting muscles is good for men, but not for girls,’ stated a girl named “Cora.” She then called muscular calves “Tina Turner calves” and laughed about it. Several other girls agreed, and voiced concern about getting too muscular through sport. They thought that girls with too much muscle would be considered manly or masculine.

Others disagreed and argued that girls needed to be strong, especially in St. Lucia. When asked if playing sports was attractive, they said boys would like a girl who played sports and had a fit body. (They did not discuss same-sex attractions). Cora, herself, contradicted her earlier statement. She stated that, “the girls get muscles, they have the body . . . it make them (boyfriend) feel proud or good that she can have what she want. So even a girl that is really strong and weight training, a guy would feel like she could protect herself.”

Some girls nodded in agreement while others did not demonstrate support nor disagreement. When asked if perhaps guys would want to feel like they are the protector instead, she replied “Sometimes. But it’s ok to have some of both.” The others voiced agreement and continued referencing the

importance for women to be strong in order to “protect” themselves. One can conclude that these girls felt that self-protection was important. Based on their own life experiences, particularly those girls who have been victims of abuse, defending themselves against physical harm and violence was clearly important.

Essentially, these girls are caught between the ideal body for performing (actor) and the ideal body for being a girl (object). A girl may experience strong leg muscles as good and useful on the football pitch and strong arms as a tool to protect herself in the streets. In a different context, she may find those same leg muscles unsightly, unfeminine and unwelcome at a school dance or social outing. The context of their bodies is extremely important. Through sporting programmes, they have the opportunity to use their bodies as actors in physical activity, strengthening their relationship with their bodies in a kinetic sense. However, such a relationship does not necessarily translate to a positive body image or a kinetic focus outside of sport.

General Discussion Questions / discussion points

- 1) How can Mrs. Granger and her staff help encourage girls to participate in the sport activities?
- 2) What types of sports should they offer at UGGC that would interest all the girls?
- 3) What does it mean to frame body image as aesthetic or kinetic?
- 4) Why do people with a kinetically-focused relationship with their bodies tend to have a more positive body image?
- 5) What cultural elements are at play in the development of body image for the girls at Upton Gardens Girls' Centre?

Sport Management Questions / discussion points

- 1) Do you think sport can help foster positive body image amongst these girls?
- 2) What types of sports might best support the goal of building positive body image?
- 3) What risks are involved in using sport to address these body image concerns?
- 4) How can the programme directors help transfer concepts of kinetically-focused body image to the lives of these girls outside of the UGGC sport programmes?

Sport for Development specific Questions

- 1) What are the overall benefits of sport-based programming for at risk adolescents and youth?
- 2) How does sport for development differ for girls, boys or mixed gender groups?
- 3) What are the risks and opportunity costs for doing international development through sport?
- 4) Can you think of another “at-risk” group that sport can be used to address issues of healthy body image?

Additional Resources

Cash, T., & Pruzinsky, T. (Eds.). (2002). *Body image: A handbook of theory, research, and clinical practice* (1st ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Chawansky, M. (2011). New social movements, old gender games? Locating girls in the sport for development and peace movement. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 32, 121-134.

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Jarvie, G. (2013). *Sport, culture and society: An introduction*. Routledge.

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International Platform on Sport for Development. (n.d.). www.sportanddev.org.

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Right to Play. (2008). *Harnessing the power of sport for development and peace: Recommendations to governments*. United Nations Office of Sport for Development and Peace.

Sherry, E., Schulenkorf, N., & Chalip, L. (2015). Managing sport for social change: The state of play. *Sport Management Review*, 18(1), 1-5.

Slater, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2011). Gender differences in adolescent sport participation, teasing, self-objectification and body image concerns. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34(3), 455-463.

Sutherland, S. (2012). Gender and sport, Latin America and the Caribbean. In J. Nauright, & C. Parrish (Eds.), *Sports around the world: History, culture and practice*. ABL-CLIO.

Why sport? (n.d.). *United Nations Office of Sport for Development and Peace*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/sport/home/sport>

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Teaching notes / advice for Instructors

Advantages of teaching with case studies:

- Allows students to rehearse problem solving and critical thinking rather than just memorize facts.
- Models sound scientific decision-making processes for students, including problem identification, situational analysis, solution generation and evaluation, and decision making.
- Bridges the gap between theory and practice in the industry.
- Creates a dynamic, interactive learning environment with active student involvement.
- Enhances vital skills such as oral and written communication, persuasion, and working with groups and teams.

How to work with a case study

- Give the students the case study at least one week prior to the class.
- Advise the students that they need to have at least read the case prior to class and that if they want to prepare themselves further for the session they can make notes on the questions presented and access the additional resources.
- Realize that your role as instructor is different in a case discussion than in traditional lecturing. The primary task with the case method is not to teach but rather to encourage learning. You are a facilitator of learning as the discussion leader rather than merely a disseminator of knowledge in a lecture.
- You can choose to work with only one group of questions or a combination of groups, with the entire group or smaller groups. For example you could work with the entire class and progress from the **General Questions** to the **Sport Management** questions to the **Sport for Development** questions. Or you could work with the entire class but only focus on the **General Questions** and **Sport for Development** questions. Or you could ask the entire group to address the **General Questions** and then break the class into smaller groups and get each group to focus on what of the specific groups of questions. Whichever method you choose, plan in time to conclude the case and allow students time to discuss their answers.
- Plan in advance what key concepts you want to capture during the case discussion, this will help you lead the discussion and help you achieve the learning outcomes of the session. Brainstorm for potential solutions / answers to questions, lists of advantages and disadvantages of potential solutions, and so on.
- Be flexible. While lecturing provides you with extensive control over what will be said during class, the nature of case discussions is more fluid. An effective case facilitator has the ability to adapt a plan to accommodate the flow of discussion and weave together these discussions toward important concepts, yet reign in and shape the discussion when necessary.
- Create an interactive environment where ALL students participate in the case discussion. Be prepared to encourage more introverted students to join the discussion and sometimes prevent more extroverted ones from dominating.