



MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATION OF GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN SPORT: OBSERVATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE IN UGANDA

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Introduction

People with disabilities (PWD) are considered as the largest, poorest and most marginalised minority. More than a billion people - corresponding to 15% of the world's population - are living with some form of disability, out of which half are women and girls [1].

1. Girls and women with disabilities (GWWD) face many barriers in their struggle for (basic) human rights including equality in and access to sport. They are subject to multiple instances of discrimination, on the grounds of both gender and disability[2].

2. This briefing paper presents the findings of a small qualitative study aimed at contributing to the limited existing knowledge on the sport experiences of GWWD in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), especially Uganda. 80% of the world's disabled people live in LMICs [3].

3. The observations are based upon interviews with (former) female athletes with different physical disabilities, as well as related stakeholders from Uganda, Kenya, Benin, Nigeria, the Netherlands, and the U.S. The study draws upon a systematic review of existing research on women, sport, disability and Africa.

Barriers of access to sport

Cultural Barriers and Negative Perceptions

4. Cultural factors and negative attitudes are the greatest barriers facing PWDs' to participation in sport in SSA. Research has shown that stigma, bias, myths and misunderstanding contribute to the belief that PWD are marginalised in society[4]. All interviewees indicated that GWWD in SSA experience multiple instances of discrimination based on gender and disability due to "a deeply rooted patriarchal ideology". This supports findings from Hayhurst's (2014)[5] studies of girls in sport in Uganda.

"The complexity of culture and tribal, religion – all these elements make it hard for women." (Interviewee 5, 2019)

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[2] United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs (n.d.). Women and girls with disabilities. Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/issues/women-and-girls-with-disabilities.html> [Accessed 10th May 2019].

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Lack of Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

5. The lack of self-esteem and self-confidence among GWWD is a common barrier that often prevents GWWD from participating in sport and physical activity. Many interviewees shared examples of the positive impact of sport and highlighted the importance of sporting role models. Coaches and other athletes can motivate and facilitate women's and girls' sport participation.

It really helps to bring back that self-confidence and self-esteem. I have also seen a change in that. I've seen females, so many of them, after participating in sport. There is a girl I know, who used to not talk to people, but she became a very good public speaker because she started participating in sports for PWD. Not only that but she also became a role model and an ambassador. So I've seen a very big change because of sports. (Interviewee 6, 2019)

Lack of awareness and visibility

6. The lack of awareness and visibility around disability sport in SSA is a barrier. The importance of educating and sensitising the public, not only to overcome negative perceptions but also to show that GWWD can play sports is strongly emphasised.

7. Sport can be seen as an effective tool to overcome such barriers. Various scholars have noted that sport provides a context to highlight ability rather than disability. This increases the self-confidence of GWWD as well as enabling sports based interventions aimed at challenging and changing negative attitudes of society[6].

8. Through sport:

"we can demonstrate what these girls are capable of and then it opens doors to do other things including employment, access to voting and things like that." (Interviewee 1, 2019)

"It is important to engage different stakeholders in different activities, like awareness creation, like advocacy and lobbying, like showcasing their ability within disability." (Interviewee 2, 2019)

"Sport has contributed a lot to changing the general perception of PWD in this country." (Interviewee 2, 2019)

"It was not easy for me to begin sport. It is after a lot of programmes of awareness raising...like demonstrations or film projections that I decided to practice sport. I'm from the first generation of women doing sport." (Interviewee 4, 2019)

"They need to be educated on the benefits of sports, and on what happens when they participate in sports. And also see that they are responsible of their lives, so it shouldn't be their husband or parents or any other person's fault." (Interviewee 6, 2019)

Sexual Harassment and Abuse

9. The results of this study emphasised the importance of providing safe spaces as well as support systems for GWWD in sport. The voices asserted that participants face a high risk of gender-based violence and sexual harassment by their coaches and/or managers. This has been identified as "one of the biggest problems" faced by GWWD.

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“They are harassed, sexually harassed by their fellow sportsmen or team leaders or coaches or managers. It keeps them away, disabled or not.” (Interviewee 6, 2019)

“If the facility is far away from where they are coming from, because anything can happen between the facility and the home of the athlete. So they need to know that they are safe. They need to know that they won’t be sexually harassed or abused. By probably their coaches, or managers, or anyone in charge. [...] Provision of safe spaces would be good. But sometimes it is not possible. Sometimes men washrooms and female washrooms, they are close to each other.” (Interviewee 6, 2019)

Structural Barriers

10. The lack of money and insufficient implementation of rights and/or legislation regarding PWD, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, are structural barriers that make it more difficult for PWD to claim their right to participate in sport. It was stated that various national legislations and policies regarding PWD in Uganda exist. However, the right of PWD to participate in sport is still not guaranteed. Addressing these issues requires a stronger effort to reduce corruption, which remains a problem in many African countries[7].

“There is just so very little money and there is so much corruption, that often money goes into the pockets of those that are not always the most reliant and so it really depends upon who gets elected and who ended to run these Paralympic Committees.” (Interviewee 1, 2019)

“Most of the women are single mothers. They really focus on how to make money.....or how to parent, or how to make sure they raise their kids they have given birth to.” (Interviewee 6, 2019)

“They are the poorest countries but there are some very, very, very rich bastards. Most of the time they are also in the top and in the governments.” (Interviewee 5, 2019)

11. The integration of GWWD in sport in Uganda and other parts of SSA has yet to be realised because of a number of obstacles and barriers. According to Marshall (2018)[8], gender parity in sports will not be achieved any time soon, especially for GWWD – neither in SSA nor in other parts of the world. However, a number of countries have slowly begun to adopt more transformative measures to advance gender equality in sport.

Sport for change in Uganda

12. This small study is amongst the first to report that such trends and experiences are experienced by GWWD in Uganda. By drawing upon traditionally marginalised voices, the experiences of female athletes with disabilities and related stakeholders, several interventions are being examined and advanced by the Paralympic movement in Uganda as a basis of addressing the discrimination of GWWD in sport.

Quotas and Gender Parity

13. Recently, the Uganda Paralympic Committee (UPC) applied a top-down approach by introducing quotas to increase the number of WWD in sport leadership positions. The most recent approach involved an explicit demand to nominate a female vice president for every male president in office. Quotas have been applied to other levels of sport.

“(...) at least 40 percent of the leadership goes to women. From the Paralympic Committee and the 19 sport organisations. when they are electing their leadership ...40 percent must be women.” (Interviewee 2, 2019)

[7] **Chiweshe, M. K. (2014)**. “The problem with African Football: Corruption, and the (under)development of the game on the continent”. African Sports Law and Business Bulletin.

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[8] **Marshall, A. (2018)**. Addressing the Gender Pay Gap in African Sports. IR Insider. Available at: <https://www.irinsider.org/subsaharan-africa-1/2018/12/13/addressing-the-gender-pay-gap-in-african-sports> [Accessed 8th August 2019].

“If we are sending for example, four athletes, two must be women, two must be men. If we are sending three, then two must be women and one must be a man. It has helped us to address such equality gap issues.” (Interviewee 2, 2019)

14. More of an emphasis is being placed on increasing awareness and visibility. Nationwide sensitisation campaigns involving the media are being conducted to change the public perception of what GWWD are capable of and how sport can be a tool for prosperity. A recent significant development has been the collaboration of the UPC with universities in the form of sport scholarships.

“If a PWD is engaging in sports at any level the competition of entering universities becomes then very easy for those in sports. So that one has opened up the eyes of the public. Oh, let my child go and participate in sports, because there is this opportunity.” (Interviewee 2, 2019)

“We can sensitize these parents by having door-to-door meetings or creating something, like a festival for girls, and we can invite parents to come and see what their children can do.” (Interviewee 8, 2019)

Conclusion and Recommendations

15. This small study has confirmed that GWWD face a great deal of discrimination in SSA. Various contextual and cultural barriers and challenges hinder GWWD in realising and enabling their right to participate in sport. Despite such discrimination remarkable efforts are being made to challenge gender inequality in and through sport for GWWD in Uganda.

Recommendations

16. This briefing paper has provided an insights into some of the many factors that should be taken into account when addressing gender discrimination in disability sport in SSA. The factors are presented through the voices of the GWWD communities.

17. Cultural beliefs, perceptions and points of view about disability and parasport must be understood in context because such views and myths are so influential that in some cases they are more limiting PWD than the impairment itself[9].

18. Raising awareness and providing education about sport opportunities for GWWD is crucial to overcoming cultural barriers and challenging negative limiting perception of society, especially parents. Sport festivals have proven to be a good medium for this purpose. Particular attention should be paid to communities in rural areas, where the rights and opportunities of PWD are less well known.

19. Workshops should be conducted and further measures should be taken to empower GWWD to increase their self-esteem.

20. Safe spaces and (social) support systems for GWWD should be provided to minimise the risk of sexual harassment.

21. Schools are one of main facilitators of inclusive sport opportunities and for many disabled girls, schools are the easiest and first point of contact with sport and PA. For this reason, it is important to ensure that GWD attend school. Furthermore schools need to be educated and supported further in order to deliver inclusive sport and adapted physical activity.

22. Governments should update their commitments to the cause of PWD, and GWWD in particular because most of existing policies and legislation have not been translated into reality[10].

23. Sport has been provided with a world mandate as part of delivering the sustainable development goals. Their needs to be greater policy coherence alignment across sport that can advance both leverage and resource for and on behalf of GWWD in SSA, including Uganda.

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