

Gender Norms, Sexuality and Sport for Development: Challenges Faced by Adolescent Girls When Participating in a Soccer-Based Life Skills Programme in Khayelitsha, South Africa

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WHY AN ALL-GIRLS SPORT-BASED PROGRAMME?

Adolescent females are less likely to be involved in sports and physical activity compared to males, particularly in urban settings and as they move from childhood into adolescence. The expanding epidemic of non-communicable diseases is in part caused by low levels of physical activity (Kinsman J., Shane, N.A. and Kahn, K., 2015). Since adolescent obesity strongly predicts adult obesity with its associated morbidity, interventions focusing on adolescent girls are essential (Patton, G.C., Sawyer, S.A. and Santelli, J.S., 2016).

In addition, soccer in South Africa (and many parts of the world) is hyper-masculine, resulting in gender imbalances within soccer institutions and the further disempowerment of women. It is precisely for this reason that an all girls soccer-based programme can be gender transformative for both girls and boys.

INTERVENTION OVERVIEW

The Grassroot Soccer South Africa (GRS) SKILLZ Banyana intervention is an after-school soccer-based life skills programme and league, created for girls aged 9-14 from Khayelitsha township in Cape Town, South Africa.

SKILLZ Banyana is run by female mentors (SKILLZ Coaches) over the course of two school terms, to increase pre-adolescent and adolescent girls' participation in soccer. The intervention provides a platform for young girls to develop their soccer skills and participate in a sport seen as a 'male domain' while introducing life skills and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) educational activities. The programme makes use of 'teachable moments' during soccer activities to deliver messaging to girls.

Other outcomes of SKILLZ Banyana are improved physical health, improved academic performance and improved self-esteem amongst participants. Trained female Coaches lead discussions that help girls relate the programme activities to broader issues of gender and rights.



SKILLZ Banyana – participants identify risky behaviours while playing soccer together

METHODS

Preliminary findings of the qualitative study are based on data collected between November 2015 and February 2016, through interviews, focus groups, observations and field notes in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

GRS conducted interviews (n=4) with teachers from four of five implementing schools and one interview with the Project Coordinator, as well as focus group discussions (n=4) with participants (n=14) and GRS Coaches (n=10). Additional data will be gathered through focus group discussions and interviews with parents and peer learners, and secondary data on participants' school results.



SKILLZ Banyana participants at the Football for Hope Centre in Khayelitsha.

FINDINGS

Preliminary results reveal a range of challenges and opportunities faced by young adolescent girls who enroll in a soccer-based life skills programme.

Barriers to access

Although teachers indicated that girls who want to play soccer face no barriers in doing so, one saying that *"nowadays everyone knows that what a boy can do, a girl can do it too."* This sentiment, however, seems disconnected with the reality, in which there remains little resources invested in girls' soccer, limited support from the community and a lack of necessary structures and infrastructure, which would facilitate girls' access to soccer. These barriers to greater participation in soccer amongst adolescent girls seem to reflect harmful stereotypes around gender roles and norms.

Policing Sexuality

The idea that playing a sport 'for males' might have an impact on how girls think of their sexuality is a significant barrier for girls who want to play soccer.

Teachers: Using the word *tomboy* to refer to a lesbian, teachers' biggest concern is that girls who play soccer will feel pressured to change their behaviour, starting with the way they look, how they cut their hair and the clothes they choose to wear. Most teachers did not seem to be aware that this belief in itself might constitute a barrier for girls who want to play soccer.

"They will change [girls into tomboys] if they play soccer. You can't run from that, that's the way I see it." (Teacher, Khayelitsha)

Participants: Discussing reasons for quitting the programme, participants indicated feelings of shame for not playing well, beliefs that they would turn into *tomboys* and beliefs that girls cannot play soccer. Results indicate imposed and self-imposed gender stereotypes, which go beyond the soccer field into other areas of life. This again illustrates the importance of girls both engaging, and remaining engaged, in such a programme.



Adolescent boys and girls play a soccer match together at the Football for Hope Centre in Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Preliminary findings indicate that in order for the SKILLZ Banyana programme to be successful, it is crucial to include other community members (parents, teachers, peer learners) so that harmful gender norms and stereotypes are challenged on multiple levels. It is clear that demand for organised team sports exists amongst pre and early adolescent girls – and is worthy of further consideration by development practitioners, funding partners and government actors, in particular as a way to engage girls in broader developmental issues.

Grassroot Soccer South Africa is using the findings to ensure that its soccer-based programmes are strengthened and refined, to challenge stereotypes about sexuality rather than reinforcing them. Inequality within sport, and soccer in particular, can be a starting point for discussions about gender inequality in other domains. GRS is engaging Local Football Associations, Khayelitsha schools and community leaders, with a view to creating a sustainable all-girls soccer league based off the SKILLZ Banyana programme.

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