

## **GENDER EQUALITY IN THE SPORT SECTOR: THE CASE OF SELECTED SOUTHERN AFRICAN COUNTRIES**

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### **—Abstract—**

Africa is a patriarchal society where men dominate those sectors that are considered masculine. Sport is traditionally considered a masculine activity, hence it still creates gender segregation; side-lining women from participating in sport activities and being represented in sport management structures. The aim of this article is to explore the status of gender equality in the sport sector in the Southern African context. The following 10 countries constitute African Union Sports Council (AUSC) Region 5: Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Following a multidisciplinary research perspective, the author conducted a literature survey, document analysis, and desktop review of the challenges and realities of gender equality in the sport sector covering selected AUSC Region 5 countries in Southern Africa. Utilising a qualitative research approach, this article explores the need for gender equality in the sport sector. The findings confirm that although there is a gender-biased approach in the sport sector that can lead to social and economic development of society, it can be a platform to empower girls and women; however, a stereotypical mentality, socioeconomic barriers, and cultural norms still restrict female participation and representation in sport-related activities and processes. This article discusses these challenges and offers solutions for improvement. The article discusses that there are transformative changes in the world that force social inclusion of women in all aspects of life, including sports. These transformative changes require governments and sports organisations to reform their policies to make them more gender inclusive. This is an aspect of ongoing debates in country-specific contexts.

**Key Words:** Gender, Gender equality, Women in development, Sport sector, African Union Sports Council, Southern Africa

**JEL Classification:** Z29

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept “gender”, according to Vyas-Doorgapersad (2017), is “linked to the physiognomy separating male and female, and is physically constructed”. Gender equality can be conceptualised as a problem of achieving equality as sameness (this is linked to the strategy of equal opportunities) (Verloo, 2007). The benefits of sport participation include moral reasoning (caring versus fairness), socialisation, competition, health and fitness, and leadership traits (masculine versus feminine) (Kelinske, Mayer & Chen, 2001). The feminist perspective on sport, according to Hylton and Totten (2001), reinforces patriarchy and traditional masculine and feminine values. In fact, it often tends to promote masculine values over feminine values. It can also, however, act as a site for women, or men, to challenge these traditional values.

Feminist ideologies have various developmental approaches, such as Women in Development (WID), Gender and Development (GAD), and Women and Development (WAD). The WID approach, according to Visvanathan (1997), is based on the modernisation theory that assumes that traditional societies are authoritarian and male-dominated and that modern societies are democratic and egalitarian. The WID perspective, developed in the early 1970s, highlights “the fact that women need to be integrated into development processes as active agents if efficient and effective development is to be achieved” (Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2018:297). The WID is associated with liberal and progressive thought patterns and hence, according to Vyas-Doorgapersad and Surujlal (2018:297), “paved the way towards the WAD school of thought, which considered women as part of the developmental process. This realisation demanded scholars to debate on issues surrounding women’s exploitation, unequal rights, and suppression, therefore demanding implementation of developmental approaches to correct the situation. The GAD approach incorporates both men and women, stating that women are equally responsible to support families at social and economic levels”. This article utilises the WID approach as its theoretical framework. The aim of this approach is to empower women through integration and mainstreaming development processes. This empowerment is imperative to gain personal, social, interpersonal, professional, economic, and political power of disadvantaged

groups in society (in this study, women) for equality and transformation. This resonates with the United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasises sport as a significant contributor of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.

## **2. GENDER IN SPORT: AN OVERVIEW**

The aspects of gender mainstreaming and equality demand gender inclusion in sport, and hence challenge deep-rooted traditional and societal-based gender norms and values. Although men are given financial opportunities and societal approval to play, represent, and participate in sport activities, the role of sport in gender equality needs to be emphasised. According to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2008), there are “ways in which sport can help promote broader gender equality objectives (e.g. rights and empowerment). Sport can give women and girls access to public spaces where they can gather, develop new skills together, gain support from others and enjoy freedom of expression and movement. It can promote education, communication, negotiation skills and leadership, all of which are essential for women's empowerment”. These benefits are clearly stated in a document titled *Sport and the Sustainable Development Goals: An Overview Outlining the Contribution of Sport to the SDGs* (UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace, 2019) as stated in Box 1.

### **Box 1: Sport and SDG 5**

- Sport can be a powerful platform for advocacy and awareness raising for gender equality. It can contribute to abolish all forms of discrimination against women and girls; human rights-based rules of a sport can help to replace culturally discriminative norms that exclude women and girls from sport.
- While the rights of women and girls to participate in sport as athletes or spectators are not respected in many countries, sport can help to foster gender equality in countries and regions where women are discriminated against.
- Addressing current gender inequalities across participation, performance, and leadership in sport can make a valuable contribution to this goal. Sport can be used to address constricting gender norms and to promote equal participation of girls and women in sport.
- Sport and sport-based community programmes in particular can, if designed inclusively, cause positive shifts in gender norms and promote gender equality.
- Sport can foster increased self-esteem and confidence of women and girls, empower them, and develop skills needed to become equal participants and leaders in their communities. Through sport-based programmes, women and girls can be equipped with knowledge and skills on health, on how to live a healthy and active lifestyle, on how to act in case they experience violence, on employability, and with leadership skills needed to progress in society.
- Sport can provide safe and fair environments for women and girls. A safe playing area for girls is especially essential, for instance in refugee camps.
- Sport can raise awareness and address abuse and gender-based violence within sport.
- Men and boys can be engaged in achieving gender equality in and through sport. Sport can promote better gender relations and cooperation.

Source: UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace (2019)

The “positive outcomes of sport for gender equality and women’s empowerment are constrained by gender-based discrimination in all areas and at all levels of sport and physical activity, fuelled by continuing stereotypes of women’s physical abilities and social roles. Women are frequently segregated involuntarily into different types of sports, events, and competitions specifically targeted to women. Women’s access to positions of leadership and decision making is constrained from the local level to the international level” (UN, 2007). The reasons could be the culture of a society where stereotypes do not allow wives to play sports. Don’t have women in elite sports because men don’t allow them to play. Girls are not allowed. It is taboo in some communities (Fasting, Huffman & Sand, 2014). Another aspect of culture that is related to the gender order in society, according to Fasting et al. (2014), is the gender-based violence towards girls and women occurring in sport, and that is experienced as a barrier towards participation and involvement. These barriers are associated with the patriarchal context of a

country. This statement is substantiated by the views of Flintoff and Scraton (2002, cited in Shehu, 2018:9), who emphasise that “the fact that sport has a large male following worldwide has been linked to the patriarchal ideology which divides the social world into dualistic gendered spaces, positions, traits and dispositions that are presumably clear and natural”. This dominant ideology, according to Shehu (2018:9-10), defines “men in opposition to women and therefore declares certain domains such as the home as female and others such as sport and public spaces as male. It goes without saying that this naturalisation of sport as a male territory for nurturing hegemonic masculine qualities tends to exclude from the sport arena other bodies that are marked, gendered, sexed, or classed as female or feminine”. Shodhganga (2008) emphasises that “sport is traditionally associated with masculinity. In many societies, it is considered inappropriate for women to engage in sports, and women who do may be perceived as masculine. Conversely, men who do not engage in sports or who are not talented in sports may be labelled as unmanly. Yet, it is evident that there is no one masculinity or femininity, and sport could provide a space where masculinity and femininity are re-negotiated rather than re-affirmed in their dominant acceptance”. It can therefore be highlighted that regarding gender, women are more restricted and marginalised.

In an African context, the factors that affect women’s participation in the sport sector vary from patriarchy, poverty, conflicts, suppression, and gender-based violence, to state a few. These “issues are embedded in the general social, cultural and political landscape of Africa so are diverse and quite complex. For instance, one of the biggest challenges on the continent is armed conflict which causes displacement, compromised safety and limited access to basic services and resources. In such cases, sport and recreation is the last thing on anyone’s mind” (Mwambwa, 2013). There are factors that cannot be ignored, such as lack of physical education in schools, training facilities, finance and sponsorships, etc. Carol Garos (2000:2), Secretary General of the African Women in Sport Association, adds that “Africa segregates against women and girls in all activities of our societies, including sport. For instance, there is a strict dress code which virtually prevents the participation of women in sport activities, particularly in our rural areas where cultural norms are strictly enforced”. In order to explore these challenging issues, many conferences have been organised worldwide that raised discussions regarding the evolved status of women in sport.

The first World Conference on Women and Sport was organised in 1994 by the British Sports Council, which “endorsed the Brighton Declaration on Women and Sport. The Declaration provides the principles that should guide action intended to increase the involvement of women in sport at all levels and in all functions and roles” (International Working Group on Women and Sport [IWG], 2018a). The second IWG World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1998. The conference discussed how the Brighton Declaration and the Windhoek Call for Action were to be promoted and monitored moving forward from the Windhoek Conference (IWG, 2018b). The third IWG World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Montreal, Canada, in 2002. Following the conference, the Montreal Communiqué was issued to summarise the conference’s outcomes and recommendations for future action (IWG, 2018c). The fourth IWG World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Kumamoto, Japan, in 2006. From Montreal to Kumamoto, progress reports point “to many inspiring and innovative activities taking place, often in the face of subtle and sometimes fierce opposition, but all leading to creating opportunities for women in sport and physical activity” (IWG, 2018d). The fifth World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Sydney, Australia, in 2010. The conference aimed to “build a global community of practice for women, sport and human rights” (IWG, 2018e). The sixth IWG World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Helsinki, Finland, in 2014, where “the participants identified the persistent barriers that impede equal opportunities for women and girls to be involved in sport at all levels and in all functions and roles of sport and physical activity” (IWG, 2018f). The seventh World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Gaborone, Botswana, in 2018. The issues raised and discussed were “girls and women need equitable opportunities, quality coaching and safe facilities, safe and affordable access, and leadership role models at all levels of sport to realise acceptance as athletes and citizens and full inclusion and celebration of their participation” (IWG, 2018g).

The Gender Action Plan was developed as part of the AUSC [African Union Sports Council] Region 5’s (the former Zone VI of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, considered as a case under study) commitment to gender mainstreaming. *Sport for Development* is one of the seven strategic priorities of AUSC Region 5 (Strategic Plan 2013-2018), and a strategic objective under Sport for Development is *Equity and Inclusion*, with emphasis on the importance of involving more girls and women in sport (Fasting et al., 2014). The Strategic Plan

aims, among others (Fasting et al, 2014), to ensure all Member States and Confederations establish policies that promote gender mainstreaming, gender equity and inclusion in sport. Additionally, it also aims to advocate for the implementation of sustainable sport and recreation programmes, and gender empowerment initiatives that will contribute to safe sport and increase participation at all levels by the girl child and women (Fasting et al., 2014).

Despite all these events, conferences, and discussions, “[t]here are still, everywhere in the world, too many highly accomplished women who are refused access to sport, or socially stigmatized when they decide to excel in a sport. Similarly, women face discrimination at all levels, and continue to endure violence and abuse. Gender inequality persists among decision-making bodies, technical occupations, the media, and in the awarding of sponsorships and prizes” (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2018a). “Title IX pioneers in the USA identified gender-minded leaders as the driving force behind legislative redress based on unequal access and opportunity in public sport spheres” (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009, cited in Burnett, 2018). “Individuals or organisations with political power are mainly responsible for the equitable distribution of resources. For change to happen, all dimensions of gender inequality should be addressed at all levels of engagement – from social relationships at the individual, organisational and societal levels” (Burnett, 2018). This article aims to explore the status of gender equality in sport management in selected AUSC Region 5 countries. Future research will discuss the rest of the countries, with the aim of creating a comparative database and analysis.

### **3. THE CASE OF SOUTHERN AFRICA (AUSC REGION 5)**

The information under this section is qualitative in nature and takes an exploratory approach that, according to Morse and Field (1995, cited in Surujlal & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2015:83), is “appropriate to investigate and get a greater understanding regarding a phenomenon” under investigation. The qualitative research approach is significant as it emphasises the careful and detailed description of social practice (Sibanda, 2015; Bangani, 2019). The research entailed desktop analysis, including regional information through official records, articles, and strategy documents. The methodological approach includes specific dimensions of unobtrusive research techniques, such as document analysis, to explore that challenges still exist in the following Southern African countries regarding the segregation of women in the sport sector:

**Botswana:** Women in Botswana, according to the chairperson of Women and Sports Botswana (WASBO), Grace Muzila, “[s]till face challenges in accessing, participating and benefiting from sport and physical activity ... the issue of discrimination against women and girls in sports was a matter of concern, and that inequality between women and men was a growing concern for sports policy makers and organisations” (quoted by Bakang, 2017). To improve the situation, WASBO, which is a national structure, aims to create opportunities to increase the role and participation of women and the girl child in sport through advocacy, awareness, capacity building, and national co-operation. WASBO operates under the umbrella of the Botswana National Sports Council (BNSC), which is the governing body responsible for policy coordination and implementation (Department of Sport and Recreation, 2004, cited in Keaney, 2006). WASBO, as stated by Keaney (2006), is charged with policy coordination and implementation with regard to women’s sporting issues and operates as a gender equity ‘watchdog’ over the thirty national sports associations, whose roles are policy implementation for sport development within their respective sports.

**Lesotho:** Gender representation is a concern in Lesotho because gender inequality still disadvantages women over men in all socioeconomic and political spheres. Patriarchy, cultural norms, customs, religious practices, and both normative and structural discriminatory practices are usually the main factors that perpetuate gender inequality and mitigate empowerment, especially of women and girls (Kali, 2018) in all sectors, including sport. The “Minister of Sports, Mathibeli Mokhothu, launched the Future Olympic Women Leaders’ Development (FOWLD) programme in Maseru as part of empowering women through sport. The programme is aimed at sharpening women’s leadership skills in the administration of sport, and mentoring the country’s young women in areas including communication and sport” (*Lesotho News*, 2015).

**Namibia:** The “Namibian Women in Sports Association (NAWISA) was formed in 1998 through the Ministry of Gender and Equality and aims at promoting gender equality in sport. NAWISA slams sport administrators and federations for their failure to develop sport amongst women” (Ugwanga, 2014). NAWISA president, Pendukeni Iivula-Ithana, emphasised that “poverty, heavy domestic demands and a lack of physical education prevents women’s participation in sports” (quoted by *Namibian Sun*, 2018). Iivula-Ithana further stated that “safety concerns, a lack of accessible transport and inadequate sport and recreational facilities are also among the factors that prevent women’s participation in sport. In



addition to those challenges are cultural norms and constraints which prevent girls and women from being physically active” (quoted by Namibian Sun, 2018). “The Sports for Development project uses sport to provide children and youth with valuable skills and opportunities that they need to succeed in life and contribute to their communities. It was founded in Khayelitsha, a South African township, in 1991 and has been operating in Namibia since 2000. One of the Namibian Sports for Development programme’s strongest legacies is the strong base of local volunteers who are trained in sports coaching and leadership, and organised sport in the target communities and increased involvement of girls and women” (Good Hope Studies, 2018:1).

**South Africa:** In the South African context, the reasons behind the lack of female representation in sport governance could be that “the management styles of female executives in SA sport indicated a perception of non-competency regarding top management skills. Women simply do not regard themselves as competent enough to deal with sports management issues on top level. The lack of female role models in sport decision-making positions” (Goslin, 2006, cited in Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2018:299) “can also be a contributory factor behind the cause of gender inequality in sport governance. In South Africa, culture, traditions, and tribal heritage are considered as obligatory norms to follow”, and hence, according to Vyas-Doorgapersad and Surujlal (2018:299), “women cannot take appropriate decisions regarding their career in sport management and governance. South Africa has also implemented a few initiatives to advance female involvement in the sport sector. These initiatives include the National Strategy for Women and Sport, which focuses on the grassroots level and proposes advanced female participation in sport” (see *The Conversation Africa*, 2018). There is also a National Charter for Women and Sport South Africa (WASSA, 2011, cited in Singh & Naidoo, 2017:1411) that “calls on decision makers (government, non-governmental organisations, all sport organisations, and individuals) to commit to equality and set up policies, structures, and mechanisms to achieve the aim of developing a sporting culture that enables and values the full involvement of women in every aspect of sport and recreation” (also refer to Vyas-Doorgapersad & Surujlal, 2018).

**Swaziland:** As reported by Carnegie (2018), sport for women in Swaziland is not recognised “as employment creation. Culture dictates that women belong in the kitchen, not on the sport field. Women in rural communities are not allowed to wear appropriate sport gear. Social norms, values, and beliefs become a barrier to

women sport. The Swaziland Social Transformation Network (SSTN) submitted an application to the Swaziland government to have the youth-development-through-football approach implemented in cooperation with the National Football Association Swaziland (NFAS)” (Youth Development through Football [YDF] Project, 2018). The “transformation network aims to contribute to the economic and social transformation discourse of governmental and non-governmental institutions by facilitating and increasing effective participation and engagement in development policies that impact on human potential. The network focuses on applied research and knowledge and skills development and is working in the area of public health and health systems reform, governance, gender, socio-economic rights, and social development in Swaziland” (YDF Project, 2018).

All the initiatives in selected AUSC Region 5 countries are aligned with the WID approach as they empower women through integration and mainstreaming development processes.

#### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Internationally, the Women in Sport Commission (WSC) was established “to promote equal opportunities for girls and women to participate in and benefit from sport and physical activity. Some of the responsibilities of the WSC are to advise on advocacy for increased participation of women athletes” (IOC, 2018b) and improved equity in sports governance and leadership positions. Other aims of the WSC are associated with “promoting the rights and well-being of women and girls in and through sport and greater access to sport for girls and women; recognition of achievements of individuals and organisations promoting women in and through sport, including through the Women and Sport Award; promotion of the use of sport as a tool for gender equality and empowerment and raising awareness of harassment and abuse in sport; and supporting the development of women’s skills in management and leadership” (IOC, 2018b). These aims can be achieved through adequate training and capacity-building programmes to enhance sports capabilities for progression. These initiatives are, however, apparently limited to the Olympic Movement, and are hence required to be incorporated in all sports activities.

Another initiative, the IOC Gender Equality Review Project, is a tangible outcome of Olympic Agenda 2020 that emphasises gender balance. This project is a joint initiative of the IOC Women in Sport and Athletes’ Commissions (IOC, 2018c). The project was endorsed in February 2018 hence its impact will only be able to

be assessed in the near future. This nature of initiatives is required to be covered under other sports movements that are far more but are non-Olympic. The Olympic programme caters for fewer than 30 sports. Future research must study the documents of the international governing bodies of non-Olympic sports to investigate the status of gender balance in their charters and policies.

The focus of the article is on AUSC Region 5, which “in 2019 joined forces with the Association for International Sport for All (TAFISA) in embarking on its journey of mentoring and preparing more women to take up leadership positions at various federations and commissions of member states” (*New Era*, 2019:1). A seminar was organised in Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 2019, under this partnership, with the objective to “extensively touch on AUSC Region 5’s Women Leadership Programme (WLP), which is aimed at increasing the number of women occupying leadership positions in the Region from the current 20 percent to 40 percent by 2028 [and] will lead Sport for All and Gender mainstreaming mentorship programmes in their own countries together helping to build a network of women leaders in sport in the Region” (*New Era*, 2019:2). These initiatives further confirm the WID approach of empowering women through development processes.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This article aimed to open scholarly discussions on exploring issues of gender inequality in the sport sector. The article discussed challenges that suppress women in sport-related activities, processes, and structures. The interventions to mainstream gender WID processes in selected Southern African countries were explored. The article argued that the sport sector requires gender balance, gender mainstreaming, and gender-based capacity-building measures for gender equality and women’s empowerment. The article recommends that gender equality must be considered in various aspects of sports, such as the recruitment of female coaches, selection of female athletes, equity in sports governance structures, access to training opportunities, and promotion to sports leadership positions, to suggest a few. The sports organisations also need to develop networking with schools to promote physical education for girls, and create awareness at workplaces regarding the benefits of sports for the enhanced mental, physical, and psychological wellbeing of women. This approach may have a positive impact at a professional level (micro) and societal level (macro). This statement is substantiated by the information published in a report titled *Women, Gender Equality and Sport* (UN, 2000), which highlights that “the participation of women

and girls in sport challenges gender stereotypes and discrimination, and can therefore be a vehicle to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In particular, women in sport leadership can shape attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision makers, especially in traditional male domains. Women's involvement in sport can make a significant contribution to public life and community development". Most importantly, the role of the media in creating a positive image for women in sports is insignificant. This aspect is highlighted by Gender Links (1970), which emphasises that "the media in general tends to be partial towards men, covering women mainly as subjects of sensational stories, for instance as victims of disasters or violence. Moreover, media often excludes women from coverage in traditionally 'male spaces', such as economics, conflict and sport, and tends to focus on their experiences in more traditionally women's spaces, such as in the home or related to social services". This image and scenario need refinement and the media can have slots dedicated to women's sports and women in sports telecasting success stories to motivate young girls to join sports.

This article offers recommendations based on the available literature; however, the information reviewed is still considered limited in its approach due to challenges such as that the desktop study relied heavily on information available via Internet sources. In this regard, it was realised that not all selected countries have well-functioning government pages from which to draw information regarding their ministries of sports. It was a challenge to draw statistics of women in sport governance and leadership, and in the sport sector. The time to compile information of such a wide-ranged nature was also a challenge. Lack of information available on government websites, Internet pages, and country-specific databases for statistics on women in the sport sector hampered the achievement of the overall aim of the article. This also restricted the author from conducting online interviews as websites and web pages are not available to contact the relevant personnel. This is considered a limitation for this study. The article is therefore considered an effort to raise a debate and awareness regarding gender inequality in the sport sector, which is not a widely discussed topic, hence requiring comprehensive and ongoing research, especially in the domain of public management and policy. The author aims to conduct future research on gender equality covering the West, North, Central, and East African regions, thereby developing a comparative database of country-specific public policies, to further contribute to the field of sport management and gender studies. It is also aims to

incorporate varied aspects linking to the topic; for example, the salaries of women in sports governance in comparison to men, gender equality in terms of financial compensation in the sport sector, etc. in African countries.

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