

Increasing female participation in sport: Envisioning the benefits of reaching the top-level

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Ladies and gentlemen, the core theme of this convention is the link between sport and development with respect to the continent of Africa. Within today's session we come together to consider and discuss new sports development strategies for Africa. In my presentation I would like to underscore the importance of women's participation and the potential benefits that it stands to bring to top-level sport, the sports movement and society.

Firstly, I would like to say a few words about the International Working Group on Women and Sport and its commitment to Africa. IWG is an independent coordinating body devoted to empowering women around the world to actively participate in all levels of sport. IWG resulted from the first World Conference on Women and Sport, held in Brighton, UK in 1994. The 1994 conference also resulted in the Brighton Declaration, a document that sets forth key guiding principles to encourage and support the development of a sporting culture that enables and values the full inclusion of women.

Africa has a special place in IWG history as the 2nd IWG World Conference on Women and Sport was held in Windhoek, Namibia in 1998. The conference resulted in both the Windhoek Call for Action (1998) and the Africa Women in Sport Association (AWISA), which is recognized by the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa. Roughly half of the Windhoek conference delegates were from the continent of Africa, which contributed to the ownership felt by African actors in the field and gave a platform for the world to gain insight into the developments taking place in the women sport movement on the continent. It also highlighted the potential that sport has as a development tool. Since the 1998 conference, IWG has made a deliberate effort to include individuals from Africa in its decision-making structure, initiatives and as conference speakers and delegates. IWG World Conferences also offer an invaluable opportunity for those Africans active in the sphere of the women and sport movement to converge and network on a variety of issues.

Empowering women and advancing sport in Africa is of particular concern, and IWG would like to secure a greater presence in Africa and forge closer ties with local, regional and continental bodies as well as African governments. IWG wishes to likewise promote the advances taking place on the continent and shine light on the unique obstacles that the women and sport movement faces within African contexts. In practical terms, IWG would like to hold one of its upcoming annual meetings on the continent of Africa, ideally to coincide with a symposium on the women and sport movement. It is also hoped that IWG's 6th World Conference on Women and Sport; which will take place June 12-15, 2014 in Helsinki, Finland; will draw the largest participation level from the continent of Africa to date. I invite all of you and the entities that you represent to help IWG turn these ambitious aims into realities.



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I would like to now turn our attention to the potential benefits that increased female participation can bring to African top-level sport. These benefits are manifold and wide-reaching, but we could discuss here today just one aspect of these benefits. This is namely the increased competitive advantage that this can bring to African bid applicants competing to host top-level, international sporting events. This is may be a less familiar approach – as issues related to public infrastructure and sports venues are more commonplace considerations. However, I would like to suggest that this perspective also be included and its potential benefits be considered as well. This can include, for example, the embodiment of the values of the Olympic movement and International Sports Federations with respect to equality issues and gender equality specifically, the added-value that is gained from a wider and more diverse pool of talent, and an overall improved international image.

One of the central goals of the Olympic movement is to build a better world through sport, and the IOC sees the importance of providing women and girls with wider access to sport and encouraging them to pursue leadership positions within sports administration to be important aspects of attaining this goal. What better way to embody these Olympic ideals than to take action to increase female participation at all levels. Women's participation in sport and paralympic sport is also of demonstrated importance to international sports federations – a number of which have moved to ratify the Brighton Declaration (1994) and work to implement its principles through action. Promoting the involvement of women and embracing this as a central value of your organization or institution is one definitive way to embody the values of the Olympic, paralympic and the international sports movement as well.

From an organizational management perspective, increasing the number of women makes for a more diverse and well-balanced management team. Research has also shown that groups made up of even proportions of men and women are the most innovative and that group performance goes up with increased female participation. This can ring true when considering the ambitious project of bidding for an international sporting event – increasing the number of women involved makes for a more diverse pool of talent and more innovative results. This increased inclusion of women also sets a powerful precedent to the community at large and other organizations, sending the dual message that women can make valuable contributions to the sports movement and can be effective leaders. These women also serve as important role models and mentors to other women.

In addition, increasing female participation and promoting gender equality in targeted and meaningful ways can help improve the international image of African societies – showing their commitment to values of equality and social inclusion. This commitment can make the host nation more attractive to corporate sponsors and also help present these countries as safe and comfortable places for female athletes and tourists alike – an important consideration when planning to host a large-scale international event. In addition the international visibility that is gained through hosting such an event is great – using the occasion to spotlight the host nation's commitment to equality, and gender equality specifically, can go a long way in improving international perceptions of the host country and Africa as a whole. This has definitely been true for Finland, where I am from. A commitment to gender equality, and equality in general, has had very positive impacts of the Finnish 'brand' and can be seen as one of its competitive advantages when bidding to host international events and international sporting events in particular.



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We can also approach the topic from the point of view of more long-term, wide-ranging benefits. Indeed these are of prime concern when considering bidding for international sporting events – and a prime consideration in the previous theme of this convention – what are the long-term societal impacts of hosting a major sporting event? The benefits of increased female participation in top-level sport and sport administration go beyond the bidding process and even the sports sphere to impact society at large in a variety of positive ways. Seeing female members of society partake in these activities help to shape the norms, values and expectations that society has of its women and girls. It opens up increased possibilities for female self-identification and in turn for the diversity of female contributions to society, further expanding the society's human resource capital.

In terms of elite sport – the promotion of amazing African women athletes provides powerful role models to aspiring African athletes and African women of all ages. I'd like to recognize the honorable Mrs. Nawal El Moutawakel of Morocco as one of these outstanding role models. Supporting female athletes as they transition from careers as top-level competitors to careers and sport administration or other influential fields ensures that this investment is not lost and that these women can continue to contribute their talent and expertise to the African sports movement and society as a whole.

I would like to very briefly offer one inspiring, real life example of an effort to increase female participation in sport. Babac'Ards is a non-profit association created in 2005 by NBA basketball star Boris Diaw-Riffiod and is active in Senegal. The association organizes basketball camps for Senegalese girls and has ambitious plans to found a women's basketball training facility. They have a partnership with Nike to provide the necessary equipment. The training center will serve as a springboard for young women who wish to pursue sports careers. Upon completing the program these young ladies receive guidance on continuing their studies, finding a job or joining a professional team. It's not difficult to imagine the lasting effect that this center would have on the development of women's basketball in Senegal, the community and on the lives of those women involved in the program. It also illustrates the possibilities for synergy between top-level sport, NGOs, the local community and the private sector.

In closing I would like to offer just a few suggestions on how to further promote increased female participation in sport at the elite level. One common starting point is to ratify the Brighton Declaration and work to implement its principles. These can be implemented through targeted initiatives to involve women and to facilitate their participation. These might include, for example, setting up a mentoring program for women or identifying the obstacles to female participation – for example fears of harassment or violence – and carry out campaigns to combat this problem. These efforts might even be very practical, for example ensuring that women have access to safe changing room facilities or that facilities are accessible to the disabled.

Additionally, it's important not to work in a vacuum but rather to forge partnerships with various stakeholders – for example non-governmental and governmental organizations, the private sector, educational institutions, international agencies and international networks such as IWG.

Last but not least, it's so very important to communicate your successes in the field of women and sport. Share this information with stakeholders and society at large so that they are well-aware of your work and can learn from your experiences. On behalf of IWG, I can underscore our commitment to share developments in women and sport in Africa with our network of over 4,500 individuals. Please feel free to consider IWG's global network as a means to



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disseminate information on your initiatives and triumphs and also learn about what is happening in other parts of the world. Please also consider our 2014 World Conference on Women and Sport as a value opportunity to showcase your experiences and network with others interested in promoting gender equality and involved in the sphere of women and sport.

On behalf of the entire International Working Group on Women and Sport, I thank you kindly for your attention.

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