

# **The Significance of Female Coaches and Leadership in SfD**

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## **Aim**

Adolescent girls' and young women's (AGYW) empowerment through sport has increasingly become a priority for sport for development (SfD) organizations and funders. Yet, it is not always clear how organizations can improve in this area nor which strategies prove most effective. This research explores promising practices through six case studies with organizations from across the world, that differ greatly, but employ some similar strategies in their work. The aim is to understand how female coaches and female leadership impact girls' participation and empowerment. These organizations are: Moving the Goalposts (Kilifi, Kenya); Dancing Grounds and Elevate (New Orleans, Louisiana, USA); Slum Soccer (Nagpur, India); Boxgirls (Nairobi, Kenya); and Active Communities Network (Belfast, Northern Ireland). This research seeks to share insights with organizations that face difficulties in their attempts to engage and support AGYW in SfD. Laureus Sport for Good Foundation identified the need for this research after commissioning a gender review of its grant portfolio in 2016. The review found that very few organizations in the Laureus grantee network reported on gender-related outcomes. Additionally, there was limited information on how organizations create opportunities for girls in sport, achieve an equitable gender balance within their organization, or develop pathways for female leadership. The organisations selected were chosen because of their successes in AGYW's engagement and pathways to empowerment.

## **Theoretical Background and Review of Literature**

The literature review focused on three key areas to understand AGYW's participation and empowerment through sport. These three areas are: barriers for AGYW in sport, the presence of female leaders, mentors and role models, and accessible female coaches. Most of the existing literature in these areas has been carried out in high-income countries (HIC), Europe or USA, although the research actively sought to include studies that were focused on the experiences of AGYW in low-and-middle-income countries (LMIC), not many were found. AGYW in the countries studied in this research face very different barriers to accessing sport and educational opportunities. Yungblut et al. (2012) propose that barriers to AGYW's participation in sport can be broken into three areas: interpersonal, social and environmental. Each of these areas present different barriers to AGYW including negative self-perception, sport viewed as non-feminine, negative community perceptions, family restrictions, lack of comfortable sport spaces, and work burden (Massengale and Lough, 2010 & Slater and Tiggermann, 2011.) In some instances, the research reveals that these barriers can be overcome by emphasizing the importance of female leadership, mentors and sporting role models for AGYW (Bower, 2009 & Megheirkouni, 2017 & Meier, 2015.)

## **Methodology**

The organizations included in this research were chosen in consultation between the lead researcher and Laureus staff. The selection was based on the desire to include both high-income and low-and-middle-income countries. It also intentionally selected organisations that use a variety of sports in SfD programming. Finally, the selection also intentionally included organizations that both work exclusively with girls and organizations who have programs for both boys and girls.

The researchers utilised a qualitative and comparative case study approach to explore, across multiple contexts, the questions of: how and why do female coaches and female leadership matter in SfD programming for girls? The comparative case study approach allowed for reasonable comparisons across six different programs while also allowing for unique contextual factors to be part of the findings and research summaries. The researchers conducted interviews and observation with participants, coaches and staff and then compared common themes across the case studies.

### **Results, Discussion and Implications**

The key finding from this research is that AGYW's empowerment and development is intrinsically linked to female leadership in coaching and in the organization's management. The research proposes four interlinked and necessary conditions (or pillars) for organisations to achieve empowerment for AGYW: strategies to increase girls' participation; community outreach strategies; gender sensitive and adaptable programme model; and female leadership in management and coaching.

The four pillars support and reinforce one another. If an organization has strong female management or coaching staff, then AGYW's participation is more likely to rise and the program model is more likely to be gender-sensitive. Similarly, AGYW will face a more difficult environment in which to challenge gender stereotypes and barriers that have kept them out of sport in the first place if the program does not address the community attitudes that keep girls out of sport, or adapt their program to meet AGYW's needs.

Organizations that take an approach that is both self-reflective and intentional in its design to achieve gender equity and create opportunities for AGYW empowerment in sport have more success. The four pillars may serve as a blueprint for organizations building an SfD program. Female coaches and female leadership are vital, and are more effective when accompanied by a strategy to engage communities and families of AGYW, as well as ensuring that AGYW have access and pathways to participate in sport.

### **References**

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