Girls and Sport Participation: Dealing with Matters of Sexism by Adopting Athletic Gender Equity Policies

Emeka Anaza, James Madison University
Jacqueline McDowell (Advisor), University of Illinois

Diversity  
Friday, May 30, 2014  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
(Frick)

Many studies have shown that sport participation enhances overall wellbeing, circulatory health, mental clarity, successful aging, and social interactions (Pollock & Wilmore, 1990; Wankel, 1993; Wann, 2006). Based on the benefits attributed to sport participation, there are a growing number of calls for using sport as a catalyst for change in order to promote gender equity and empower marginalized girls and women (Bloom & Canning, 2011; United Nations Millennium Project, 2006). In fact, the UN’s perspective on sport is that “sport has a crucial role to play in the efforts of the United Nations to improve the lives of people around the world. Sport builds bridges between individuals and across communities, providing a fertile ground for sowing the seeds of development and peace” (United Nations, 2013).

In Nigeria however, institutionalized paternalistic structures continue to restrict girls and women’s access and opportunities to sport (Okonkwor, 2012; Saavedra, 2003). Rather than participating in sport, Nigerian girls are raised to exemplify feminine characteristics at all times, submit to male dominance, and embrace a genuine ethic of care for their family (Ojeme, 1989; Okonkwor, 2012). The deterrence of girls from sport activities in Nigeria is alarming and can be detrimental to their overall wellbeing, particularly given the extensive body of studies that have documented the health and social benefits of sport participation (Pollock & Wilmore, 1990; Wankel, 1993; Wann, 2006).

In spite of constraints inhibiting participation, Anaza and McDowell (2013) reported that females have the desire and passion to participate in sport activities; and that adopting appropriate gender equity legislation may help improve some matters of sex discrimination within Nigerian sport programs. Using Oliver’s (1992) pressures for deinstitutionalization model as a theoretical guide, this study explored conditions under which Title IX’s athletic policy directives may be employed, and outlined factors that may inhibit or encourage its adoption to help deal with sex discrimination in educational institutions. In this presentation, we will highlight research that investigated how a law similar to Title IX could help deal with matters of sex discrimination and inequity in educational sport programs and activities, as well as social and psychological constraints that may impede progress.

Data collection and analysis followed Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) and Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach to grounded theory. Purposeful and expert sampling were used to recruit research participants for a focus group discussion and one-on-one interviews. A focus group discussion was first conducted with 13 participants followed by 17 personal interviews. Eight of the participants in the focus group were women and five were men; whereas, six women and eleven men were interviewed.

Information retrieved from the focus group discussion and earlier interviews were used to guide subsequent interviews. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and NVivo8 was used to streamline data organization. After the focus group discussion and multiple interviews were coded, axial coding began. This allowed the researcher to consolidate analogous first-order concepts into categories or higher-order themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, selective coding was conducted to determine core categories.

The study shows that participants believe a law similar to Title IX may: (1) help breakdown hegemonic masculinity, (2) help establish equitable sport programs and education, and (3) reinforce Nigeria's commitment to invest in women and girls. However, the likelihood of adopting such a law will be difficult because of the presence of social and psychological constraints such as, masculine hegemonic structures, lack of enforcement and accountability, and the perception that women are weak and inferior. For social change to occur, the belief of the law’s utility will have to be high in order to surpass social and psychological constraints. Further, an erosion of social and psychological constraint model will be presented that graphically represents potential factors and moderators that influence social change in sport.
This study reinforces the need for sport administrators, managers and leaders in Nigeria to have a reorientation and a clear understanding of sport and its benefits. Moreover, this study informs practitioners to form collaborations in order to deconstruct discriminatory practices and behaviors that limit girls’ sport activity. If girls and women have better access and opportunities to educational programs as a result of an athletic gender equity policy, an increased number of girls will be able to participate in sport which can subsequently enhance their overall health and wellbeing.