



# Sport and Gender Equality. Girls in Focus

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## ARTICLE

**In spite of the well-documented benefits of physical activity, numerous campaigns advocating the adoption of a healthy lifestyle and the endless stream of advice on how to become active and healthy, a considerable percentage of the population -more girls and women than boys and men- lead a sedentary life.**

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### Introduction and questions

"The King was no longer pleased that his daughter had left the straight and narrow paths of his kingdom and dallied in the by-ways, so he let her have a horse-drawn carriage.

- 'Now you don't have to walk anymore,' he said.
  - 'Now you ought not to walk anymore,' is what he meant.
- And now she couldn't walk anymore is what he achieved"
- (Anders 1956, 96).

Günther Anders's metaphorical commentary on modern life is today even more appropriate than in 1956. Currently it seems that large parts of the population in Western countries use "carriages" instead of their feet.

In spite of the well-documented benefits of physical activity, numerous campaigns advocating the adoption of a healthy lifestyle and the endless stream of advice on how to become active and healthy, a considerable percentage of the population -more girls and women than boys and men- lead a sedentary life.

In this article I will provide information about the physical activities and sport of girls, reasons for their low participation rates in sport (for all) and recommendations for measures and programmes which encourage and enable girls to become physically active. The focus on childhood and adolescence (10-15 years of age) was chosen because in this phase of life future habits and tastes are adopted and/or consolidated. In addition, worldwide studies with similar designs are available for this age group.

However, we must be aware that there are major differences between girls depending on the circumstances of their lives, including social class, ethnic origin, religion, culture, material environment and where they live. Muslim girls have, for example, in many ways, similar opportunities for being physically active, but they also face specific challenges (Pfister 2010). Although the situation of girls with an ethnic minority background is a growing concern in many countries, for reasons of

space this article will focus on the girls of the mainstream population. I will refer mainly to the situation in European countries, although the information and recommendations can be easily applied to other countries and cultures.

In this article the term "sport" is used in the broad sense of "sport for all", similar to the term "(recreational) physical activities".

### Sports Participation

Several representative surveys in the EU provide an excellent insight into the amount, duration and intensity of physical activities of various groups of the population, including adolescents. In addition, in-depth studies conducted in many countries, regions and cities give a good picture of the participation of the inhabitants in sport, e.g. the types of sport, performance levels, motives, etc.<sup>1</sup>

However, most of the available data are based on self-reports, which have benefits and disadvantages. Comparisons between studies conducted with accelerometers and those based on surveys show that the respondents to questionnaires tend to overestimate the amount and intensity of their activities. Even so, the sports participation rates reported in surveys are rather low, as indicated, for example, in a report published by the Willibald-Gebhard-Institute (based in Germany): "European sports clubs have enjoyed constant participation rates for years. So the degree of organisation in Western European and Scandinavian countries ... lies between 50-70% among children and between 30-50% among young people. However the high degree of participation in sport is not able to compensate for the increasing inactivity in everyday life. About half of Europe's young people does not get the recommended amount of physical activity needed for good health (controlled moderate physical activity per day)."<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe presented even worse figures in a press release

in December 2006: "Only 34% of European young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years reported enough physical activity to meet current guidelines."<sup>3</sup>

This statement is based on a study of "Health Behaviour in School-aged Children" (HBSC) that provides comprehensive data on activity patterns among children and adolescents across Europe.<sup>4</sup>

The 2006 HBSC study conducted in 41 European countries revealed that 25% of the boys and 19% of the girls (13 years) and 19% of the boys and 12% of the girls (15 years) were at least vigorously active for 60 minutes for five or more days per week (as required in health recommendations).<sup>5</sup> There are large differences between countries: 46% of Slovakian boys (age 15) but only 11% of Swedish boys and 29% of Slovakian girls but only 5% of girls in France and Portugal met the demands of the health experts.<sup>6</sup>

Surveys conducted in various countries revealed a similar picture and showed a dramatic decline in physical activities among 13 to 15-year-old girls. The following statement issued by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation in the UK reflects the situation in many countries: "There is a crisis in women's sport and fitness in the UK. More than 80% of women and girls are not doing enough physical activity to benefit their health. Young women are now half as active as young men. The situation is forecast to get even worse over the next ten years."<sup>7</sup>

But girls are affected by this trend in different ways and to different degrees. As studies in various Western countries have revealed, a high percentage of adolescent girls with a middle or upper-class background engage in sport, whereas girls with a working-class or an immigrant background are over-represented among the physically inactive population.

The Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS), developed by the WHO and conducted in numerous countries all over the world, confirms the European data and shows large gender differences with regard to physical activities among young people (aged 13-15), differences which are even more significant in Islamic and/or low-income countries.<sup>8</sup>

### Types of activity

Some recreational activities such as swimming, cycling or inline skating are "gender neutral" and popular among both sexes. Other sports and exercises are dominated by the one or the other sex.<sup>9</sup> In spite of culture-specific sports preferences, similar trends of gendered sports practices can be observed in many countries and regions. Boys prefer ball games (football in particular) and risk sports whereas girls opt for expressive/aesthetic activities such as gymnastics, aerobics and dance. Skateboard parks are boys' domains; horse stables are "girls only" places. For numerous girls in Western countries horse riding is an



Source: Fotoquelle: LaufReport.de

-often unrealistic- dream (Pfister 1993).

Boys "appropriate" the environment; they use and enjoy the outdoors whereas girls prefer to stay inside or near their homes. Research shows that boys explore larger spaces than girls and that they use parks or streets for their sporting activities such as kicking around, bmx cycling or parkour, a new form of exercise where the traceurs move through the city overcoming the obstacles on their way (Pfister 1993).

The sports choices of girls, particularly their focus on





organised and relatively expensive activities, clearly contribute to their relatively low activity rate.

#### Physical activities - why are they important?

In the current discourses about public health the drop-out rate of girls from sport and physical activities is considered problematic. Health officials and experts are concerned about the prevalence of so-called “lifestyle” diseases among the population; politicians are worried about the increasing expenditure on health care. Current

Danish research shows that not only the activity rates but also the fitness of 16 to 19-year-old girls has decreased considerably in the last few decades. Only 47% of 16-year-old and 35% of 18-year-old girls have a good degree of fitness. 46% are not satisfied with their weight.<sup>10</sup>

A number of studies have been able to identify numerous positive effects of an active lifestyle.<sup>11</sup> According to the World Health Organisation, women seem to draw specific benefits: many women suffer from “disease processes that are associated with inadequate



participation in physical activity", such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, osteoporosis and breast cancer. WHO also notes that physical activity is associated with improved psychological health "by reducing levels of stress, anxiety and depression and can contribute to building self-esteem and confidence."<sup>12</sup>

The health benefits of physical activities are not so clear for children and youth, not least because potential diseases are still years away. However, among other leading experts and organisations, the European Heart Network came to the conclusion that the physical inactivity of children "harms current and future health" (European Heart Network 2001).

Together with the debates on the "obesity epidemic"

and the decrease in children's motor skills, the growing concern about inactivity rates contribute to public discourses which are coined "healthism", i.e. the problematic notion of health as a moral imperative. A "healthism" perspective regards not only body shape and weight but also participation in physical activities as the measure of both one's health and one's "well behaviour" and "political correctness". Research indicates that the increasing pressure to comply with social norms and rules relating to weight and activity rates can be counterproductive (Dworkin and Wachs 2009).

Therefore, it is important to focus on the numerous benefits of physical activities for one's quality of life.



Source: Right To Play

Sport and exercise can have positive effects on social, emotional and mental well-being; they may provide experiences of satisfaction and joy; they foster social networks; and they contribute to empowerment.

### How can we explain gendered sports interests and practices?

#### *Socialisation processes*

In lifelong processes of socialisation individuals acquire "female" and "male" identities in accordance with the prevailing gender arrangements in a particular society. Gender is one of the main structuring principles of a society which distributes rights and obligations as well as responsibilities and tasks according to the main

allocation criteria of gender, age, social class and ethnic background. This allocation is controlled and legitimised by norms and values and by institutions such as religion, science, law, administration, education and the media (Pfister 2008).

Boys and girls are identified, mostly long before birth, as male and female and confronted with the gender order of their society. They learn how to deal with gendered rules, norms, values and paradigms as well as with gendered regimes and scripts which provide the guidelines for "appropriate" behaviour, including gendered body and movement discourses and practices. They grow up in and into a gendered world.

Socio-ecological approaches, as proposed by Hurrelmann (2008) among others, emphasise the interactive dimension and the dialectical relations between individuals and their social and ecological/material environment. According to Bilden (1991), socialisation is self-training in and through cultural practices; Connell (2002) uses the term "active learning". He suggests interpreting the appropriation of gender as the result of numerous "projects" in which children learn gendered scripts, acquire gender competence and develop individual, but at the same time typical, patterns of practices. In encounters with the constraints and possibilities of the gender order, children (and adults) improvise, copy, create and thus develop characteristic strategies. "Over time, especially if the strategies are successful, they become settled, crystallizing as specific patterns of femininity and masculinity" (Connell 2002, p. 82). Sports tastes, rules and activities are likewise appropriated in socialisation processes, in "self-training in and through social practices". Socialisation into sport and physical activities can be described and interpreted as (gendered) projects which are influenced by various factors and processes as well as persons and institutions, among them the family and school.

Several studies indicate that participation in sport is socially "inherited" and that parents have a decisive influence on the interest of their children in sport and games. They provide (gender-specific) toys such as balls for sons and Barbie dolls for daughters. Currently a huge industry successfully indoctrinates girls to ask for pink clothes and Disney princesses. The parents support "appropriate" behaviour, sending their sons to soccer lessons and the girls to ballet. In addition, fathers and mothers serve as male and female role models.

Sport and games are important projects in boys' peer groups; playing together and competing with each other strengthens their relations and teaches competition and cooperation. Sports skills provide prestige among their peers and popularity in male sporting subcultures such as the street ball or skateboard scenes. Girls tend to play (and talk on the phone) with their best girlfriends.





For them fashionable clothes and the right appearance counts more than sporting skills. Peer relations contribute decisively to the construction of gendered sports cultures.

Physical Education (PE) in school should be an important ingredient in the "sports projects" of children and youth. In most countries PE is an obligatory subject in all schools, and children with a working-class and/or immigrant background must participate. However, PE seems to benefit in particular athletic students whereas pupils without any interest in sporting activities and without any skills are often marginalised.

Qualitative research in a Danish high school revealed, for example, that the mixed-sex physical education lessons consisted predominately of ball games that attracted the male students, whilst most girls were either unable or unwilling to become involved. As a consequence, girls participate less intensively in physical education, avoid exertion and physical contests or even refuse to participate at all (Jørgensen 2006; With-Nielsen and Pfister 2010 in press). There are numerous other studies which show that teachers treat male and female

students differently, that girls and boys behave differently and that they learn different skills even in countries where the PE syllabus is not differentiated according to gender.

For large parts of the population sport is "media sport" and the mass media provide similar messages across the globe about the roles of women and men in the world of sport. Sports coverage focuses mostly on men's sport and largely ignores female athletes and women's sporting endeavours. Sport, especially sport in the media, "constructs men's bodies to be powerful, women's bodies to be sexual" (Lorber 1994, p. 43).

The media provide the role models for boys and girls, in sport as well as elsewhere. Power and strength, risk-taking and aggressive body contact are male domains, whereas femininity is connected mostly with slimness and attractiveness.

In this way girls learn that they are not expected to be athletic, and they underestimate their sporting skills (see Pfister 1996, p. 51). Whereas boys judge their bodies more from a functional point of view (however, this is changing),





the female body is a medium of social and sexual attraction. The aesthetic styling of the body is therefore of major importance to girls and women. On account of the discrepancy between ideals and reality girls and women frequently sense a “deficit” with regard to their own bodies. Adornment and various “body projects”, from using make-up and dieting to body styling, are thus an important part of everyday life for girls and women (cf. Degele 2004).

Sport is embedded and embodied in habitus (according to Bourdieu 1984); it is a practice of doing gender, and it has to fit the “taste” of an individual as well as his/her lifestyle. Sporting practices are inseparably intertwined with other life lines and contribute to the construction of men’s and women’s biographies. Sport is part of “doing gender” and integrated into the gender projects of individuals which again support the gendering of sports cultures.

Sports discourses and practices, however, are constantly changing, and these changes also affect the sporting activities of adolescents. The propagation of computer

games may result in a decrease of physical activities among boys whereas the increasing popularity of soccer among girls may entice them to adopt a more physically active lifestyle.

### Opportunities and barriers

Participation in sport depends to a large degree on the environment and the opportunities for being physically active.

The WHO highlights a number of reasons for physical inactivity among women: “Women often have lower income than men, which may represent a barrier to access to physical activities (PA). Women’s workload in the home may limit the time available for leisure and thus for PA. Women may have limited mobility to travel to PA facilities. Cultural expectations may restrict their participation in some form of PA.”<sup>13</sup> These barriers also have an impact on the opportunities of girls to participate in sport and exercise.

Even in Europe people report widely differing opportunities of being able to participate in sport or physical activities. Whereas in Scandinavian countries more than 80% of the respondents agreed that the area where they lived offered many opportunities for being physically active, less than 50% of the respondents from Portugal were of the same opinion. Similarly, the answers referring to the availability of sports centres or sports clubs in the neighbourhood showed “North-South” differences.<sup>14</sup> Based on the comments of the WHO, quoted above, it may be assumed that the lack of a sports-friendly environment affects girls and women to a higher degree than the male population.

As far as we know from available statistics, sports clubs have a much larger drop-out rate among adolescent girls than among boys. This raises the question whether the lack of attractive sports programmes contributes to the decrease in sports interest among girls. The same is true for the sports and physical activity programmes of other sports providers, among them churches or cities. Often sport, such as street ball, is used as a means to solve problems with violent groups of boys and young men. Girls who do not cause visible problems are often ignored.

### Educating cities - what can be done?

There are numerous opportunities of influencing the physical activity patterns of girls (and boys as well). Some of these interventions will need financial and manpower resources. On the other hand, men’s sport –for example, the construction and maintenance of football stadia or the organisation of matches (police, security!!)- costs large amounts of money and resources, and nobody complains about this. Some of this money could, and should, be invested in physical activities for girls and “sport for all”





for the population. In many cities this may already be a reality.

Intervention strategies might include:

- Information about opportunities for physical activities and their benefits in places where people gather (schools, workplaces, shopping centres, doctors' surgeries).
- Creation of a movement-friendly environment, a safe opportunity for jogging, hiking, cycling, playing ball. Children's playgrounds can be converted into "sports arenas". If no spaces are available, streets can be closed for cars at weekends.
- Encouragement of the integration of physical activities into everyday life, e.g. as a means of transport. Campaigns such as "we cycle to work" could be an incentive.
- Establishment of sports facilities at a short distance from residential quarters (research shows that sports facilities are used if they are in walking distance).
- Provision of safe and easy access to existing sports facilities and programmes (e.g. lights on the ways).
- Establishment of "sports groups" which meet regularly, walk together to a gym hall or a sports ground, phone and remind each other, etc.
- Organisation of "sport for all" events, e.g. hiking afternoons, jogging hours or inline skate nights, or relay runs where members of sports clubs, students of schools or employees of a factory or office with at least as many female as male participants compete.
- Adaptation of sports facilities to the needs and wishes of girls and women (e.g. separate shower facilities if Muslim girls and women are active there).
- Promotion of inclusive and "girl-friendly" physical

activities such as rope skipping, skating, climbing on climbing walls which allows the participation of larger groups with different skills.

- Creation of incentives for existing sports providers for recruiting girls and women.
- Information about the barriers and opportunities for being physically active and education of parents, teachers, sport providers, etc. about the benefits of an active lifestyle.
- Changes in the PE curricula and of PE teacher training with the aim of enabling girls to participate in various sports and physical activities (including those which are labelled male sports).
- Availability of school yards and gyms for physical activities, games, skating, biking, etc. after school hours.
- Organisation of courses, programmes and/or events for girls, e.g. skating nights, street ball, girls and women's runs.
- Campaigns, e.g. competitions between schools, for the best sports programmes for girls, or between clubs with the most female participants in a 10km run.
- Promotion of female sports stars and/or fit women as role models for girls and women.

I am aware that many cities are already engaged in promoting sport and physical activities for girls and women and that they are using these, and more and maybe totally different, "best practices". I am also aware that my analyses and proposals are not taking the diversity of girls and women all over the world into account but are heavily influenced by my Western perspective. But I hope that this article is a point of departure for increasing efforts and combining forces in order to improve gender equality in sport as well as in other areas of life. ●

1. Naul, R. and Hoffmann, D.: Healthy Children in Sound Communities: a European community setting project. [http://www.wgi.de/media/Pdf/HealthyChildreninSoundCommunity-pic\\_47434.pdf](http://www.wgi.de/media/Pdf/HealthyChildreninSoundCommunity-pic_47434.pdf);  
See also Sallis et al. 2000; Vilhjalmsson and Kristjansdottir, 2003; Ringgaard and Nielsen 2004; Seabra et al. 2008  
2. [http://www.wgi.de/media/Pdf/lifestyle\\_sedentariness\\_english\\_819279.pdf](http://www.wgi.de/media/Pdf/lifestyle_sedentariness_english_819279.pdf)  
3. [http://www.euro.who.int/mediacentre/PR/2006/20061117\\_1](http://www.euro.who.int/mediacentre/PR/2006/20061117_1)  
4. The HBSC was initiated in 1982; the first cross-national survey in five countries was conducted in 1983/84; see [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org)  
5. Since the last survey in 2002, the percentage of active children has decreased. The HBSC data provide information about trends, but have to be interpreted with caution. Country-specific conditions may not have been satisfactorily taken into consideration.  
6. A snapshot of the health of young people in Europe, a report prepared for the European Commission Conference on Youth Health, Brussels, Belgium,

9-10 July 2009. <http://94.23.50.42/youth/documents/A%20snapshot%20of%20the%20health%20of%20young%20people%20in%20Europe.pdf>; see also European Commission 2006.

7. <http://www.womeninsportconference.com/homepage.asp>  
8. Global school-based student health survey (GSHS), initiated by the WHO and conducted in numerous countries, shows the same gender-specific patterns of physical activities. <http://www.cdc.gov/GSHS/de>  
9. Skolebørns deltagelse i idræt og andre fysiske aktiviteter i Rudersdal [www.cisc.sdu.dk/Publikationer/qKL2006\\_4.pdf](http://www.cisc.sdu.dk/Publikationer/qKL2006_4.pdf)  
10. <http://www.dgi.dk/redaktionen/dui/14-2003/piger.aspx> MULD survey  
11. There is an abundance of literature, see e.g. Sundhedsstyrelsen 2006.  
12. <http://www.euractiv.com/en/sports/women-sport/article-137664>  
13. <http://www.euractiv.com/en/sports/women-sport/article-137664>  
14. Eurobarometer "Physical Activity"; [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_183\\_6\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_183_6_en.pdf)



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