

## Empowering Women Through Sport

**Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**, United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women, offers her perspective on how sport can help advance gender equality around the world.

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As a South African, I continue to be moved by the words of Nelson Mandela, who said: *“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair”*.

We have an opportunity to put these ideals into action for the realization of gender equality and women’s empowerment—both in sport itself and in the wider world, through sport. Sport can be one of the great drivers of gender equality, by teaching women and girls the values of teamwork, self-reliance and resilience. It can provide girls with social connections and a refuge from violence in their homes and communities, and help them to understand their bodies and build confidence and the ability to speak up, particularly during adolescence, when the pressure to conform to traditionally “feminine” stereotypes leads many girls to abandon sport entirely.

### One Win Leads to Another

The power of sport to change the lives of the most marginalized girls and young women can be seen in the success of *One Win Leads to Another (OWLA)*, a joint partnership between UN Women and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that is a legacy of the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. It combines sport practice with life-skills education for girls in the most vulnerable, and often violent, communities. And thanks to the generous support of the IOC and additional funding partners, it continues to grow and deliver real results (see graphic, opposite).

## ONE WIN LEADS TO ANOTHER

### - FACTS AND FIGURES -

By the time they left the programme in Brazil, participants had an improved understanding of sexual health and rights, and increased self confidence, as these figures highlight:

<b>89%</b>	of girls said they were a leader, compared to <b>46%</b> before the programme
<b>93%</b>	of girls knew where to report violence
<b>79%</b>	of girls knew how to prevent pregnancy, compared to <b>25%</b> before
<b>77%</b>	of girls knew how to prevent sexually transmitted infections, compared to <b>21%</b> before
<b>99%</b>	of girls believed that they would one day get a job

Beneficiaries include girls like 19-year-old Dayane Santos who dropped out of school after her daughter was born. After one year in the programme, Dayane has been able to finish high school, land a full-time job and better negotiate time spent on childcare and housework with her partner. She also plays volleyball twice a week in a community centre. Raphaela Barbosa Lacerda, a 2016 graduate, was recently hired by the research and innovation team of an international cosmetics company. “Participating in the *One Win Leads to Another* programme gave me maturity to face my problems, knowledge to express my ideas, and courage to fight for my dreams,” she said. “It was one of the things that most helped me achieve what I want.”

In October 2018, we launched a new phase of the programme in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the context of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG). With the help of the sports community we aim to continue expanding, so that *One Win Leads to Another* becomes a legacy for all Olympic Games and major sporting events going forward, and contributes to building an international movement of girls in sport.

## Tackling wider inequalities

At the same time, the world of sport remains plagued by many of the same gender inequalities that we see more broadly; issues such as unequal pay, gender-based violence, a lack of targeted investment and negative stereotypes and social norms.

In workplaces around the world, women earn an average of 77 per cent of men's salaries, for work of equal value. Similarly, in the sports arena, we see massive gaps in the prize money, sponsorships, facilities and equipment allocated to women athletes. International Federations play a vital role in reversing this trend, and I applaud FIFA for launching a global strategy for women's football in October 2018. It makes a strong public commitment to invest in and improve the women's game—not only as the right thing to do, but from the very practical standpoint of tapping into its massive revenue-generating potential. We need to see more efforts like this resulting in salaries and prize money for female athletes that are equal to what the men get. Match scheduling is also a form of investment. Where women's matches conflict with men's, competition for viewership can create a vicious cycle of ratings being used to justify lower prize money, lower pay for female athletes and feed into the narrative of women's sport being of lesser value. It's time to turn this around and see how investing in women's sport overall, from community to professional levels, can improve girls'

athletic opportunities, build the status of women's sport and reap the wider benefits to society.

It's not only women who benefit from a more gender equal approach to sport and efforts to change outdated stereotypes of "locker room" masculinity. In November 2018, Fenerbahçe Sports Club, one of the oldest and most popular multi-sports clubs in Turkey, joined forces with HeForShe in an 'Equal together' initiative involving its male football players, and seen by its global fan base of 25 million. They aim to achieve gender equality transformation through sport, with women- and children-friendly stadium practices, and a zero-tolerance approach to all sorts of discrimination against women and girls.

In many communities, it's not just discrimination, but gender-based violence that keeps girls off the playing field. It's only recently that instances of violence and other forms of abuse have been more systematically brought to light within the sports community. All too frequently in the past, athletes, coaches and officials have turned a blind eye to sexual harassment and abuse. This has led to a culture of victim-blaming for those who come forward and the reinforcement of a "boys will be boys" culture that normalises, and therefore perpetuates, abuse.

In some instances, complicity and cover-ups have led to decades of abuse that affected hundreds of women, as was the case with USA Gymnastics, where young female athletes were sexually assaulted by gym owners, coaches and staff working for gymnastics programmes.

Other incidents have involved male abusers who are shielded from consequences to protect their athletic status. And recently, there has been investigation into a series of cases of physical, sexual and verbal abuse in the Republic of Korea, following brave testimony from a short track speed skater and other female athletes. The National Olympic Committee President

has commented on the revelation of the systemic flaws and power imbalances between coach and young athlete that have perpetuated such abuse; this is a lesson for all.

The sporting world must catch up with the #MeToo era and take action to end the culture of sexism, abuse of power, harmful stereotypes—including toxic masculinities—and impunity that perpetuates violence against women and girls within its ranks. I applaud the IOC for taking significant steps to develop tools and guidelines to prevent and respond to harassment and abuse, many of which I saw in practice when I was in Rio de Janeiro for the 2016 Olympic Games.

The IOC has also taken measures to safeguard athletes during the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games, and at the Olympic Winter Games in PyeongChang 2018, where a clear structure was in place for participants to report any incident of harassment or abuse via the IOC Safeguarding Officer. By communicating the expectations of its membership and the availability of its resources to end violence against women and girls in sport, and exploring incentives to strengthen accountability for action, the IOC can go even further to ensure that abuse and harassment have no place in the Olympic Movement.

## **Female athletes as role models and advocates**

Stereotypes, discriminatory social norms and a lack of representation remain some of the most pervasive barriers to gender equality around the world. Even when laws and policies are in place, deep-seated attitudes about gender roles can hold back substantive change. We need visible role models of female athletes excelling on the field of play and reaching the Olympic podium, so that girls see, and believe in their own capabilities.

That is why it is essential overall to feature women's champions more prominently, to show girls, boys, women and men alike what female athletes can achieve. This requires concerted efforts to work with the media to increase their coverage of women in sport, as well as boosting the number and visibility of female sport reporters and analysts at major events, and to call out sexist portrayals and double standards for women athletes' behaviour and attire. We also need more male athletes to step up with us, and model a culture that reflects equality, respect for diversity and non-violence, within and beyond sport.

Not only are successful sportswomen showing girls that they can excel on the field; many are using their status to start important conversations about gender equality and to advocate for women's rights more widely. For example, tennis players like Serena Williams and Victoria Azarenka spoke up about losing their rankings after they took time off to have children. The issue garnered major media attention and in December 2018 the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) announced that it was changing its special ranking rule so that a player's rank would be frozen in the event of pregnancy, injury or illness.

The WTA also said that it would not penalize women for wearing leggings or compression shorts in lieu of a skirt at their tournaments, something for which Williams was admonished after opting for a compression outfit to manage blood clots following childbirth. More visible female athletes means more platforms to advocate for issues that affect a multitude of women, both on and off the court. And more vocal female athletes bring change.

In 2018, UN Women proudly welcomed one of the most celebrated women in sport, Marta Vieira da Silva, as our Goodwill Ambassador for Gender Equality and Sport. As a six-time FIFA Player of the Year, widely regarded as the best

female football (soccer) player of all time, Marta is an inspiration to millions of girls around the world. Her life story illustrates many of the barriers that women still face in sport, the sheer determination that it takes to overcome these, and how sport can change women's and girls' lives completely. Marta will support UN Women's efforts by working to inspire women and girls to challenge stereotypes, overcome barriers and follow their ambitions.

Most importantly, let us support all of those who are using sport as a force to advance equality and opportunity; female athletes like Marta who will ensure that the next generation of girls grow up knowing that they can excel at the highest levels; male athletes who present a new model of masculinity; and sports organisations who are taking action to level the playing field, so that sport not only creates more opportunities for women and girls on the field, but leads the way in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment across all of society.