

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN SPORT UNDER THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I am a South African. I have lived in South Africa for all my life, have experienced the impact of the previous political system of Apartheid as well as the new democratic political system in my personal as well as my professional life, am married to a South African and we have raised two talented daughters under both systems of government. I speak the world's youngest language (Afrikaans) – a language that originated on the continent of Africa and is indigenous to Africa. I therefore regard myself qualified to speak about some of the issues and challenges facing South African women in specifically the field of sport.

Sport, in whatever form or shape, has always been an integral part of the social fabric of the South African society. During the Apartheid system that was in effect between 1948 and 1994, social life, including sport and recreation, was divided and delivered in an advantaged, establishment sector (whites) and a disadvantaged, non-establishment sector for non-whites. 1994 saw the end of the globally despised and rejected system of Apartheid and the dawn of the new democratic South Africa. This brought a complex process of positive social change due to the transition from one society to another. Transition in any society is inevitably a time of great change for institutions, organizations and persons. Positive social change brings hope, but it also brings challenging socio-economic conditions and opportunities.

### **CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC REALITY**

Although South Africa is now a democratic society, it does present challenges to all sectors of society, including sport.

#### **TODAY:**

- SA has 46 million citizens representing a galaxy of cultural groups and 11 official languages.
- The mean age of a South African is 22 years with an average life expectancy of 48 years (due to HIV/AIDS), about 25% of schools do not have access to clean, running water within walking distance and about 80% have no access to basic sport facilities.

- A substantial number of households are labeled as child-headed households where the parents are absent due to HIV/AIDS.
- Women constitute 52% of the SA population, but are seriously marginalized in governing structures (including sport).
- The majority of the population lives in rural areas, often without proper infrastructure.
- Tribal law and customs still govern the rural areas.
- Although we have an economic growth rate of about 4%, there is also a high level of unemployment (25%).
- The average annual income per capita is about \$1,500 and about 60% of South Africans are living below the Minimum Living Level (the majority of those living in rural areas are women).
- The health situation doesn't look too good: high levels of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, smoking, HIV/AIDS.
- About 12% of the South African population takes part in regular, organized physical activity and/or sport with about 40,000 sports clubs, but has an incredible sports culture in terms of spectators (75% of South Africans watch sports on TV and 33% regularly attend events).
- The majority of the national budget for sport and recreation goes towards elite sport and not towards mass participation.
- Primary priority sports are soccer, cricket, rugby, track and field, netball, swimming, boxing and golf. Secondary priority sports are baseball, handball, basketball, field hockey, lawn bowls, karate, gymnastics, table tennis and volleyball. (Prioritization criteria include % PDI's and % women participation).

The social reality therefore indicates a diverse cultural and language diversity: a relatively young population living in a non-urbanized society plagued by poverty, crime and unemployment with women are marginalized especially in rural areas. South Africans however have demonstrated a strong sport culture and that could be a powerful social change instrument given challenges are recognized and addressed.

### **CRITICAL CONSIDERATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH AND IN SPORT**

Initiatives to address challenges and facilitate positive social change are guided and influenced by a given framework of national policies, programs and philosophies. It can therefore be argued that social change in and through sport are executed against the framework of the following:

- National sport and recreation policy priorities
- Reconstruction and Development plan
- African Renaissance Philosophy
- UBUNTU Philosophy

A concise clarification regarding the key issues in the above framework becomes necessary for a meaningful understanding and discussion of the challenges that face women in sport in the current South African context.

### **National Sport and Recreation Policy**

In this policy, eight priorities are identified that should guide sport towards contributing towards positive social change:

- Unifying sport federations
- Creating opportunities for active lifestyles
- Constructing and upgrading sport and recreation facilities in relevant areas
- Meeting affirmative action objectives relating especially to women, disabled and marginalized youth.
- Developing human resources to support sport
- Identifying talent and channeling it towards programs of excellence.
- Developing a code of ethic for delivering and participating in sport and recreation.
- Developing an international relations policy in concert with existing national government policy.

Assessing these priorities indicates:

- An awareness of key challenges facing the sport industry e.g. shortage in infrastructure, lack of management skills, lack of coordination and fragmentation, unclear strategy for talent identification and development, poor racial representation within industry.

### **The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP)**

The RDP is an integrated, coherent socio-economic policy framework that seeks to mobilize all South Africans and the country's resources towards building and maintaining a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future through the key programs of:

- Meeting basic needs of the population
- Developing human resources through and in all sectors of society (including sport and recreation)
- Building the economy
- Democratizing the state and society

### **The African Renaissance Philosophy**

The phrase "African Renaissance" is idealistically interpreted as *referring to the best of all possible futures fro Africa – a glorious world where all economic, political and social shackles have been shrugged off and Africa has confidently taken control of her own future, on equal terms with the rest of the world.*

Accordingly ways have to be found to:

- Establish and maintain democratic systems to ensure that “the people shall govern”
- Ensure that all sectors (including sport) take into account African specifics and address the competing interests of different social and cultural groups
- Create sustainable development programs that result in the continuous improvement of the quality of life of all South Africans
- Ensure the emancipation of the women of Africa
- Successfully confronting the scourge of HIV/AIDS
- Rediscover Africa’s creative past and recapture the indigenous cultures (also sport and games culture)

### **UBUNTU – the African spirit**

UBUNTU is an age-old African concept for *humaneness* – for caring, sharing and being self-centered. It promotes cooperation between individuals, cultures and nations. UBUNTU thus empowers all to be valued, to reach their full potential in accord with all around them. It supports the principle of equity.

## **CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN IN THE CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT CONTEXT**

Within a broad analysis of the foregoing framework, a number of simple yet powerful principles run through these philosophies and policies:

- Access and equity
- Africanization and nation building
- Empowerment and development of human resources
- Networking and collective use of resources

To superimpose these principles on the current socio-economic realities of South Africa results in challenges and opportunities for women in and through sport.

### **Access and Equity**

The South African Constitution is widely recognized as one of the most progressive constitutions in modern history. The constitution guarantees equity (no discrimination) to all its citizens. The legacy of the past South African government system therefore necessitated corrective processes such as Employment Equity and the Affirmative Action Act. Designated groups within the South African society were identified for corrective action, women being one such a significant grouping. In spite of government putting considerable emphasis on promoting gender equality throughout South African society and national emphasis on women’s rights also reflected in a Gender Commission and several relevant acts, gender inequality is still prevalent. In the general business arena,

women only represent 19.8% of executive management positions while in sport, only 23% of women are in top level management positions. Women are mostly present in larger numbers than their male counterparts but mainly as personal assistants, event organizers, administrators, receptionists and cleaners.

On paper therefore, the ideal situation exists for equity, but in reality women are still not receiving a fair deal. Many reasons are cited for this and recent research (Goslin, 2006) on the management styles of female executives in SA sport indicated a perception of non-competency regarding top management skills. Women simply don't regard themselves as competent enough to deal with sport management issues on top level. The lack of female role models in sport decision making positions and the SA printed media may contribute to this situation.

### **Africanization**

The African Renaissance Policy and the UBUNTU philosophy are critical documents that guide the South African social change strategy and process. In South Africa with the majority of its population living in rural areas, Tribal Law and Customs still form the foundation of day to day governing strategies. According to the tribal law and customs of the different ethnic groups, women are subordinate to men and cannot hold leadership positions outside the immediate household. So, although our modern westernized constitution guarantees equal rights to men and women, in reality a discrepancy exists between tribal law and national laws. Sport is projected as a mirror of society's values and norms and is often described as the training ground for life. Women in rural areas involved in sport are therefore severely disadvantaged and marginalized in terms of leadership positions on the basis of their cultural values. Tribal laws and customs also impacts on the priority of access and equity as stated in the national sport and recreation policy. Girls in rural areas simply do not have time or opportunity to participate in sport due to the demands of their household chores. Some women aspiring for leadership positions in sport are clearly caught in this juxtaposition between African values and Western values. Sport participation by South African population group (Black, White, Colored, and Indian) clearly indicates this tendency: Of the 10 top sports, only soccer, netball and track and field show desired racial representation. In tennis, aerobics, swimming, golf, cycling, cricket and rugby, participation representation is skewed towards the white population.

### **Empowerment and Development**

Poverty is the single greatest burden of South Africa's people and the direst result of high unemployment levels as well as the lack of relevant training and empowerment. Training programs in sport and recreation for the development of human resources as specified in the national sport and recreation policy, are therefore aimed at empowering communities with the capacity to participate and lead in sport on the basis of knowledge, skill and creativity – thus impacting on our (often negative) health indicators. The role of women within sport and recreation requires special emphasis, not only because of their marginalized position in South Africa, but also as contributors to early childhood

development. The challenge to expose and orientate the youth to positive lifestyles at an early age is linked to access to affordable and meaning opportunities in close proximity to home. This obviously necessitates a decentralized, sustainable delivery system through existing and future inter-sectoral units on areas such as community health, pre-school education, social welfare and organized sport.

### **Networking and Collective Use of Resources**

Maybe the greatest challenge for sport and recreation in South Africa, and possibly also in the greater context of Africa, lies in the ability to think laterally as well as the ability to sell the potential impact and real value of our product (sport and recreation) to allied disciplines. Local and international networks and collective use of often limited resources are therefore crucial if the women of SA strive to successfully address the challenges.

## **THE WAY FORWARD?**

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN SPORT AND RECREATION**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been labeled in some circles as the “African Century”. The people of Africa are struggling for their place in the global village. This call for the rebirth of Africa’s potential is echoed and strengthened in South African sport through the 2010 Soccer World Cup to be hosted for the first time on the African continent.

Should the women of South Africa want to be part of this social rebirth, focused strategies and sustainable direction are imperative. It should be more than words on paper – it needs critical performance indicators to evaluate our progress. In my opinion, the following issues could be of value:

**Recognize** the value, role and contribution of women in the human capital of sport and recreation. South African women have demonstrated their strength in bringing about social change in the past – we have the ability provided we are given the opportunity. Recognize that there are cultural barriers that have to be addressed to enable women to take their rightful place and actively seek solutions so that it becomes more than mere words on paper.

**Networking is essential.** International exchange programs and opportunities for the women of SA and institutions willing and able to reach out to the women of SA and Africa will make a difference. Such opportunities will provide much needed *womentors* and role models to the women of SA. The wonder of networking in sport is not what it has already achieved, but the potential of what it can still achieve as we are at the beginning of the third millennium. Therefore initiatives like these taken by the *Global Center for Social Change through Women’s Leadership and Sport* are welcomed and timely to benefit the women of SA and Africa.

**Education and empowerment** drive social change. Ways and means appropriate for the conditions and demands of SA and African women must be found if we want to increase our human sport capital. Joint ventures such as International Leadership Development Programs could provide opportunities to women to grow in terms of management skills and competencies. Maybe the *Global Center for Social Change through Women's Leadership and Sport* and the University of Pretoria could take the lead in this regard. The key issue in developing such programs should however be that content is locally (SA) relevant and internationally competitive. Design content that recognize, acknowledge and build on our indigenous cultural values – Innovate, don't imitate!

**Interconnectedness** between sport and allied disciplines like education, social welfare, community health, arts and culture, environmental affairs and tourism is crucial to ensure that the contribution of women adds value to the broader social fabric. Social change will never be brought about using a piecemeal approach and regarding sport as an island within a society. Involvement in the collective South African society will indicate how individual behavior in sport can lead to improved quality of life, but also how this in turn will lead to the achievement of the larger goal – a positive change in socio-economic conditions.

**Sustainability** ensures the development and internalizing of new desired behavior patterns. Skills, competence and opportunities needed to create desirable behavior are not an overnight miracle. Desirable social change cannot be created as an event. It is a process that requires time, effort and sustained resources. We therefore urge the *Global Center for Social Change through Women's Leadership and Sport* to stay connected with the women of SA through sport over an extended period of time.

## CONCLUSION

The most important thing about social change through women's leadership and social change is to believe that it can happen. If we have no vision of the future or we do not believe that we have the potential and courage to turn socio-economic challenges into opportunities – how is it then going to happen? The future is a figment of our imagination. It is what we believe it to be. The only thing that limits the potential of women in sport is the limits we place on our imagination.

The *Global Center for Social Change through Women's Leadership and Sport* has demonstrated that it is committed to the development of women on all continents and we are grateful for the role model and guidance they provide in attempting to make the world a better place through sport and leadership development.

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