



## **The Serious Business of Play**

*Carol Bellamy*

Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I like to start with stories---true ones---if possible.

So, let me tell you a bit about Felicite, who like many of you, labors to bring sports to girls and women often in difficult environments with very little resources. Felicite heads the Football section of the Rwandan National Association of Women's Sport and the Women's Football Section of the National Football Association. In the last two years, Felicite has managed to organize 24 football clubs in all 12 provinces of Rwanda and trained at least 24 coaches to assist the teams. Probing what motivates her to do this, she quips in a feisty manner "if we succeed in women's sports there is no stopping women to claim their rightful and fair share in development."

From the time they are born, before they coo and gurgle, infants begin to explore. They touch and hold, reach and shake, grab and taste—discovering the world not only with their eyes and ears but also with hands, feet and mouths. They play. Children at play are constantly at work—making new observations, asking and responding to questions, making choices and extending their imaginations and creativity. Play gives children the stimulation and physical activity they need to develop their brains for future learning. Through play, children explore, invent and create. They develop social skills and ways of thinking, learn how to deal with emotions, improve their physical abilities, and find out about themselves and their capabilities. A child's play forms a solid foundation for a life of learning.

As children grow, they acquire new skills and build on existing capacities. Climbing, running, hopping, skipping and jumping, they further develop and strengthen their bodies. Increasingly socialized, they master the more formal skills of life. Sport, recreation and play are a fun way to learn values and lessons that will last a lifetime. They promote friendship and fair play. They teach teamwork, discipline, respect and the coping skills necessary to ensure that children develop into caring individuals. They help prepare young people to meet the challenges they will face and to take leadership roles within their communities.

Regular physical activity and play are essential for physical, mental, psychological and social development from early childhood through adolescence.

Involvement in sports can boost children's health, improve academic performance and help reduce crime. Sports has particular benefits for girls by breaking down gender stereotypes. Sport is an effective way to educate families about health issues, to reach children and adolescents who are often excluded and discriminated against, including orphans, children with disabilities, children affected by war (including former child soldiers), refugee and displaced children, sexually exploited children and children from indigenous communities.

Sport activities are being used to create child-friendly spaces and warn about the harmful effects of smoking, alcohol and drug abuse. They are educating young people on the dangers of HIV/aids and empowering them with the life skills necessary to protect themselves.

Sport and recreation programs are creating environments that are safe and promote stable relationships between children and adults, and among children themselves. Sports involves a language that every child understands – and that normalcy in turn sparks improved communication and education – and affirms, through their participation, the vital role of young people as agents of change.

Reaching large numbers of children and adolescents, schools are an ideal place to provide opportunities for sport and play. In turn, sport and play improve the quality of education by developing the whole child, not just their intellectual capacities.

The educational benefits of sport and play are especially important for girls, who in many regions are typically excluded from opportunities to learn sport-related values. Of the over 100 million children out of school, 60 percent of these are girls. In many cases out of school - girls are invisible – either not reported or underreported and frequently concealed in averages that hide serious gender disparities.

Sport can help girls and young women claim their place in society. It can provide girls, who are often under tremendous pressure to begin sexual activity and childbearing early, a chance to exert more control over their lives. It can help girls gain respect for their bodies and develop self-esteem. It allows them to form friendships. It teaches girls

Self-sufficiency, personal autonomy and leadership. Challenging the stereotype that girls are weaker than boys, sport exposes girls to female role models, making goals in other areas of their lives seem attainable.

As this conference has its focus not only on girls, women and sport, but also Africa, let me offer a few examples---though I know you will hear much more over the next two days.

In post-conflict **Rwanda**, schoolchildren who have lost vital years of school during the conflict are currently enrolled in a “catch up school” program. In a visit about two years ago, the boys and girls in the school greeted us with enthusiasm—I was impressed at the vote of confidence they have in their future. Girls wanted to be teachers

and journalist and doctors and the boys wanted to be farmers, teachers, ministers and presidents. One of the young girls said, “ *I want to be a football player and prove to the boys that girls can equally play, if not play better.*” The class applauded her. In that school in Rwanda the sports facilities and equipment were scanty. But while the resources were meager the enthusiasm for sports and play were abundant. The children engaged enthusiastically in play and games, recreation and sports – girls and boys. As children normally do. The children said sports and games make them feel happy in school. They like to play with everyone.

The **Moroccan** government has a policy called *sports pour tous* and are steadily working on its infrastructure and organization to expand access of girls and boys to recreation and sports. In addition, the National Federation of Athletics has multiplied its clubs, increasing the participation of athletes all over the country. About 40 per cent of these participating athletes are girls, well above the global average of 30 per cent. The Federation has also extended its outreach to 35,000 orphans and vulnerable children.

Also in **Morocco**, if you will allow me a UNICEF reference, Hisham Gerrouj, Fatema Aouam and Nawal Moutaouaquil work as UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors and serve as powerful role models for girls across Morocco to believe that they too can become national heroes. We cannot underestimate the power of a role model, particularly a female athlete, on a young girls’ life.

In **Guinea**, where only 28 percent of secondary school students are girls, the National Football Federation, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the UN, has been working to create the first-ever women and girls’ national football league. This new league will allow thousands of young girls not just to play and participate in sports more formally, it will foster their dreams to one day be a national football hero.

While there are many more positive examples from Africa and from around the world, it is clear there are also many challenges to promoting sports for all--particularly in developing countries.

**First**, is children’s time. In many countries, children, particularly girls, must contribute to the survival of their families. It can be difficult to find time to play, yet this must be carefully encouraged as it is not only important for their healthy development, it is their basic right.

**Second**, programs must be inclusive and emphasize sport for *all*. Special focus needs to be placed on gender equality and providing access to sport within marginalized and hard-to-reach communities.

**Third**, physical education programs should be seen as a fundamental part of quality education but they are increasingly marginalized within schools.

**Fourth**, we need to know more on the development impact of sports initiatives. Intuitively, we know sport works. We now need to back these anecdotes with solid evidence. For example, does sport in schools help increase attendance rates?

A **fifth** challenge is that many countries around the world are devastated by conflict and other social divisions. At the same time, sport programs can be a powerful means of bridging these divides.

**Sixth**, infrastructure and equipment costs can be very high, which is of particular concern as the aim is to reach the poorest communities.

As I conclude, let me offer a couple of suggestions for possible follow up to this meeting--“next steps”--if you will.

***Development of a Score Card.*** A global score card should be published annually tracking progress of key indicators in each country of its efforts to make sports accessible to all, with gender desegregation. A scorecard will permit a country to review its progress over time and compare themselves with countries at a similar development level. It can also highlight good practices that permit progress to be achieved and rally countries to adopt and adapt such practices.

***Mainstreaming Sports in Development at country level.*** This recommendation is in line with the Secretary-General’s Report of the UN Task Force on Sports for Development and Peace (of which, unashamedly, I would note, I was co-chair). It is also in line with the 2002 and 2005 Magglingen Declarations on Sports for Development and Peace. The world of sports and UN agencies working with governments must find ways to work together at the country level to integrate sports in development programs and use it as a vehicle for achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the Global Children’s Agenda adopted at the UN in 2002.

***Mainstreaming Development in Sports.*** The influence of the sports world and its athletes on society, particularly the young, cannot be underestimated. The power of sports should be brought to bear to influence value formation of young children. Athletes are role models and should leverage this influence in a dedicated and systematic manner to bring about healthy life styles among the young, as well as encourage tolerance and equal opportunity for girls and boys.

***Ensuring all girls have an education.*** Finally and most importantly, the most effective way to bring girls and women to sports is to assure that children are in school. Education increases girls’ self- esteem, and confidence, improves their social and negotiation skills and develops their aspirations. Education encourages children to dream and aspire to be someone, and harnesses their intellectual and physical energies to achieve whatever they wish to achieve.

I challenge the sports world - global, regional and national levels - to join us in advocating with governments to bring the 100 million children out of school back to where they belong.

Finally, a talk about sports at this juncture would not be complete without reflecting on the Olympics.

Women have come a long way since the first Olympic winter games in 1924 where just four per cent of the participants were female. For Turin, women constituted over 45 per cent of the participants.

Women were also in the spotlight at the opening ceremony on 10 February. A total of 37 of the 80 nations participating in the games chose a woman to act as flag bearer during the athlete's parade. The spot light on women continued as the Olympic flag was brought into the arena by an all-female contingent: actress Sophia Loren; writer Isabel Allende; Olympic gold medalist Nawal el Moutawakel; UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and actress Susan Sarandon, Olympic gold medalists Manuela Di Centa and Maria Mutola; human rights activist Somaly Mam. Rounding out the group---2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner (and World Learning Board member), Wangari Maathai, of Kenya.

Sport has the power to stir imaginations and raise spirits. It is about human striving and achievement. Leaving girls and women out is leaving human potential behind.