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## **Sport, an Empowering Force for Women: Reflection of Barriers to Participation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study sought to analyze the experiences among women both in elite sport and those in casual sport in different strata of communities drawn from Marondera urban district and Wedza rural district in Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe. The analysis focused on women's perceptions on economic opportunities and social benefits that women realize when participating in sport activities. A sample of 75 women was used. The findings were that some economic and social benefits that women were not aware of were major factors. Barriers to women empowerment through participating in sport included hegemonic masculinity, lack of education, poverty and poor media coverage.

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### **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

The world population statistics indicate that women are more than men, [13], but women in sport both active and non active are still less in number than men. Women faced several challenges that retarded them from actively participating in sport. Some researches by [1] have identified the barriers, but these have not come up with strategies to remove the barriers that disturb women from fully taking part in sport whether at community level, club level or elite level.

Furthermore, women have ever been marginalized in education for a long time; thereby leading women to submit to reproductive work at home, socializing women to accept male dominance and female subordination. [7] observes that African culture proponents regard a complete woman as one who is marriageable because of her gentleness, caring to husband and children (the family) and if she does not possess these attributes, she is a social disgrace and a shame to the family. These cultural expectations are among other barriers that retard females to participate in sport activities where gentleness and beauty are at times impossible by the nature of the games.

Women have been overshadowed by oppressive patriarchal beliefs to an extent that they have accepted men as leaders in every sector of life until 2005 onwards when several women pressure groups emerged fighting for women empowerment. Rowlands, [10] posits that women could be the chief drivers of economies in developing nations. Women advocacy groups (FAWE, CAMFED, MSASA etc) promulgate the vision that if you educate women; you have educated the nation. The governments in Africa have included sport in their school curricular after realizing the vitality of sport in the lives of people. Numerous sport games like female soccer, cricket, volleyball and basket (to name a few), were introduced to recognize women and sport.

Unfortunately, the world has not yet been furnished with empirical evidence of the knowledge among women on the socio-economic opportunities that they could realize through participating in sport activities at any level in their countries. Probably, that could have motivated more women into participating in sport once they were made aware of such economic and social benefits. However, this research focused on revealing the economic and social benefits which when achieved by women through sport they could be empowered. Women in African developing nations are not yet empowered, despite the formation of various pressure groups that fight for female empowerment. It was the focus of this study to bring awareness of the opportunities and benefits that when women know them they become motivated to participate in sport and join the wagon to their empowerment.

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## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Despite numerous policies by governments to promote equality in all forms of life, it was noted by these researchers that women were still fewer who participate in sport activities. That was attributed to lack of knowledge on economic and social opportunities that could be exploited by women through sport participation. It was the focus of this study to find out what socio-economic opportunities women could enjoy if they participate in sport activities, and to what extent do women understand the opportunities in sport participation.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

How does sport participation empower women economically and socially?

## **SUB-QUESTIONS**

1. Which economic opportunities in sport could women exploit in participating in sport?
2. Which social opportunities women could realize through participating in sport?
3. How could sport empower women in developing countries?
4. Which are the barriers that retard women from sport participation?

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To identify the economic and social opportunities women could exploit through sport.
2. To explain how sport could be an empowering force to women in communities.
3. To identify the barriers that retard women from participating in sport.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

The study focused on reaching a solution to barriers that retard women from free participation in sport, with a liberated mind-set, so that they realize and enjoy the economic and social opportunities that open up as they participate in sport activities. The findings of this study could be made available to women advocacy groups and sport development bodies so that as they plan sport programmes they do with an informed mind.

## **ASSUMPTION OF THE STUDY**

The researchers had these assumptions:

1. Married women have no time for sport activities.
2. It is only an empowered woman who participates in leisure activities like sport.
3. Women are not aware of the economic and social opportunities in sport.
4. Sport barriers against women are culturally biased.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The study had the following limiting factors: soliciting information needed patience as the women participants were at times reluctant to cooperate in the research work. This consumed much time of the research than expected. Involving the whole province demanded travelling from district to district and this required transport which was all-terrains friendly. During telephone interviews network problems interrupted conversations at times, but researchers were patient. However, the researchers had to use vehicles with high clearance to access certain communities.

## **DELIMITATIONS**

The study literature focused on economic and social opportunities that were available to women in sport. The study participants were those people involved in sports as athletes, female District Physical Education teachers, Women Affirmative groups and female school Heads in two district of Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe. These districts were selected on the basis that they are well known as the champion districts in implementing the Community Sport Project sponsored by the United Nations to develop sport for all ages.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Economic Opportunities in Sport**

[14] statistics show that women population is greater than men population. The awkward scenario is that women are still economically disadvantaged as men continue to hold positions of relative privilege, [4]. This inequality has strong roots on cultural socialization which taught men to be owners of means of production while women were made to accept reproductive roles at home.

Evidence is abound that women sport elites like Zimbabwean Kirsty Coventry, (a medallist swimmer), Cara Black, (a tennis player) are earning a living through sport participation. It is a common sight that women sell fruits and other prepared food-stuff like sweets, drinks, baked foods and those from shops and realize profits during sports tournaments in both rural and urban communities. In Zimbabwe, women are able to support their families through this informal trade.

Some women have taken sport as their professional career. Those women had graduated with diplomas and degrees, majoring in Physical Education and Sport from various tertiary colleges and universities. For instance, Zimbabwe government has employed those female teachers in schools and sport academies where these women are earning a living. Furthermore, there are several women in positions of school headship and managing sport development through their National Associations of Primary and Secondary Heads, [11]. Two recent studies in the New York Times of 2010 by Stevenson, and Kaestner concluded that there is a direct correlation between participating in sports and several long-term benefits like increase in education achievement and increase of about 40% employment for women.

Sport England, 2007 indicates that from 1985 to 2003 the United Kingdom economy was estimated to have grown by 59 percent in real terms because of sport. Furthermore, according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2003 consumer expenditure on sport in England was estimated to be 13.969 million pounds, [16]. Given that background, it suffices to say sport has a great impact in employing women whose population globally is larger than men. Once women realize the potential economic benefits in sport participation, they become motivated and fight against their disempowerment.

The theory of gender and development (GAD) advocates the total involvement of women in the means of production; women should possess the means of production so as to attain full empowerment [10]. It translates into making women manufacturers of sport apparel, sport equipment, sport journalists, sport consultants, physiotherapists, elite coaches, trainers, sport nutritionists and sport medical doctors.

### **Social Benefits for Women through Sport**

There are some discoveries that attest to the positive impact of sport on an individual particularly women. Health has been a major factor that reduces females from participating in sport activities globally, [15]. Young ladies who participate in sports reduce their chance of getting breast cancer by 60%, [3].

During school years, sports participation provides boys and girls from diverse socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds with real and measurable positive educational benefits. These range from improved school attendance, increased participation in maths and science, more time spent on homework and higher educational aspirations in their senior years, [19]

Sport inculcates spirit of team-work. There is strength in number; therefore, the ability to strive within a team construct should be the hallmark of women's sport participation. Women could learn leadership practices, how to win and lose with grace, how to recognize strength and weaknesses in themselves and others, and get used to perform under pressure [16].

### **Barriers against Women Participation in Sport**

Gender stereotyping in the economic sector has led women to be reluctant to compete with men even in leisure sport activities. [5] Note that sports became stereotyped as feminine or masculine. Sports labelled as feminine seem to be those that allow women participants to act in accordance with the stereotyped expectations of femininity, such as being graceful, nonaggressive and that provide for beauty and aesthetic pleasure for men, [9]. During the Roman Empire, women slaves were forced to show-case gymnastics skills and dances to entertain the winning warriors. Performing those games

was not remunerated at all. Furthermore, it led women not to be eager to venture into any sporting activities for any economic gains.

Today women sports do not attract much media attention, rendering it trivial and inferior to male games. Failure to publicize women sport means less gate takings and little remuneration for the female athletes. Sponsors also want to market their products through funding sporting disciplines that are crowd-pullers like soccer, cricket and motor racing.

It is the media, that is, all forms of screen channelling (television, computers, mobile telephones and all forms of written word and picture channelling (advertising hoardings, magazines, newspapers, books and journals along with digitalized commentaries of radio that have been crucial to this positioning of women sports. Women have often been portrayed as sex tools, a practice that denigrates women status and made men to discourage their wives to participate in sport.

An unempirical perception among women was the belief that participating in vigorous sport activities destroys girls' virginity, a symbol of being morally upright and honest among girls, and a token for being a marriageable girl among the African cultures, [1].

Connell in [8]'s concept of hegemonic masculinity has developed to describe a dominant form of masculinity, constructed, conveyed and internalized through institutions and social practice. The assertion from this concept is that men contribute to the granary of barriers that retard women from taking part freely in sport. Messner, Sabo, McKay and Whitson (1994) in [1] posit that hegemonic masculinity makes men as a group to enjoy privileges in sport through the construction of unequal power relations to the disadvantage of women.

Another observation by [2] was that cultural capital, which has a bearing on the economic status of the family, skewed against the girl child, leaving the resources to the advantage of the boy child who enjoys all the privileges to be a sport elite than the girl child. This entails that family culture contributes much more to the future sport life of the child.

Religious sect beliefs and taboos have a stake in retarding women from participating in sport as women's body parts like thighs, breasts, shoulders and hips are sacred to be exposed, yet in sport an athlete is expected to put on tight apparel for biomechanical performance advantages.

### **Empowering Women through Sport**

Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. Since participation requires increased influence and control, it also demands increased empowerment- in economic, social and political terms [12]. From this assertion, women through sport could make themselves empowered by taking influential leadership positions in sport administration circles at school level, community level, and provincial level, national and international level. In those positions they have opportunities to challenge existing unfavourable gender inequalities in sport fraternity.

Women could start sport businesses in their communities, for instance, selling sport uniforms to schools and clubs, they could sell fresh fruits during sport tournaments. Those women physically active generally have higher self esteem in society and develop confidence that lead them to break male social barrier and eventually assume political positions after making a vivid mirage through sponsoring, being an elite sport medallist, being a renowned sport administrator (a case of Mavis Gumbo for the Mighty Warriors of Zimbabwe, female soccer)

Blackmon (2010), on [20] reveals that studies indicate that young people who are involved in athletic activities achieve higher grades and are more likely to complete high school and college. This may be because adequate exercises improve mental acuity. Education is a socializing agent that empowers women to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political circles in the community.

In addition to all the quantifiable and tangible benefits of sports participation for young women, sports offer women opportunities to interact with people of varying abilities and experiences. Through sport, women can find positive role models. All these substantiate [2]'s social capital theory that propounds that one can learn much from social interaction with those who have more knowledge than him/her.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is rooted in the feminist emancipatory paradigm in which the research sought to reveal the benefits that women in sport realize under economic and social perspectives. Furthermore, the study advocated the removal of those barriers that retard women from participating in sport activities after identifying them from women's experiences. It was further revealed that sport is a force to empower women economically and socially. This attempt qualified this study to a feminist emancipatory paradigm. The study used the descriptive survey to analyze the views, perceptions and attitudes of women on their understanding of sport as an empowering force.

### Population

The population of this study was made up of female school Heads in the National Association of Primary and Secondary Heads, District Physical Education and Sport Teachers, women in Sport Association administration levels and women in the communities who took part in sport activities.

### Sample and Sampling Procedure

The sample size consisted of seventy-five women who were into sport and both purposive and simple random samplings were deemed suitable when selecting this sample.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Data were presented in tables and graphs. The researchers presented and discussed the data solicited from women in these strata: sport administration, teaching and training, affirmative groups, and athletes. The sample of respondents is presented in the following table:

**Table1.** Distribution of respondents in strata N = 75

P.E.Resource Teachers	20 (27%)
Female Head Teachers	20 (27%)
Women Affirmative groups	10 (13%)
Women sport participants	25(33%)

The table shows that there were 20 (27%) P.E.Resource teachers, 20 (27%) female Head Teachers, 10 (13%) women affirmative groups, and 25 (33%) were women sport participants. In order to answer the research question at hand, five research questions were asked and were presented and discussed below.

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN SPORT

The four categories of respondents expressed eagerness to be involved in sport. The category of women in sport had 45(60%) who expressed ignorance about economic benefits of sport, while 30(40%) realized that there are economic benefits from sport participation. This proves a point by [10] that the majority of women do not have reasons for and knowhow of starting sports businesses because of lack of education. From the responses, it appeared that that 60% constituted women whose level of education was below grade 7, and the 40% of women who knew the importance of participating in sport was made of women with 'O' or 'A' level education with some professional qualifications. This substantiated the fact that lack of education was a disempowering agent among women.

Asked what economic role sport has played in the communities, the four categories of respondents confirmed that mothers were able to pay school fees for their children, some mother groups in the two districts had started a market gardening and sport uniform sewing project through sponsorship from NGOs after being identified as well organized sport teams. This shows that in sport there can be economic empowerment.

**Table2.** Participants were asked which activities women do during any sport tournament

	Activities during sport days	Responses
1.	Selling food stuff	75 (100%)
2.	As spectators	67 (89%)
3.	As players	8 (11%)

Table 2 shows that all respondents 75 (100%) agree that most women in every tournament are engaged in selling food stuff for economic gains, 67 (89%) agree that most women are spectators, All

Affirmative women groups (100%) expressed knowledge of breast cancer attack reduction through other Western medical therapies not sport. That showed ignorance about research studies that sports reduce ladies’ chances of getting breast cancer by 60% [3]. If most women were aware that being active in sport serves them from being victims of cancer, they could have been motivated to join sport in large numbers.

While 8 (11%) of the respondents agree that women will be actual sport athletes in every tournament. From these data, it substantiate [13] statistics that fewer women take part in sport although their population surpasses that of men. These data also show that the main activity for women during any sport activities is selling foodstuff followed by being spectators. Overall, it shows that there is economic empowerment for women through sport although this study does not go as far as revealing any evidence of types of businesses women invest their money in from those proceeds they get from selling foodstuff at sport tournaments.

Asked about knowledge of any sport businesses they could engage in as women into sport, 60 (80%) of respondents mentioned sewing sport uniforms, fruit selling at sport tournaments whilst 10 (13%) were aware of possibilities to venture into sport boutiques and only 5 (6%) indicated venturing into sport consultancy. The data showed that those women who had the idea of venturing into sport consultancy were from the elite group who had wide exposure. That narrow knowledge of economic entrepreneurship among women in communities could impact negatively against the zeal to participate in sport.

**Knowledge on the Social Benefits for Women in Sport**

**Table3.** From P.E. Resource Teachers N=20

Benefits	Frequency	Percentage
1-Sport reduces cancer	1	5%
2-Sport frees one from obesity	5	25%
3-Sport increases academic performance	0	0%
4-Sport instils confidence and self-esteem	10	50%
5- sport improves workmanship	4	20%
6-Sport develops good citizenry	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data above show that very few women (5%) are aware of the most important benefit that cancer can be reduced by being active in sport exercises. Cancer disease has tormented most women and if they had knowledge about the cheapest treatment which is sport exercises they would have been motivated to participate in sport. Also, it is clear that women do not believe that sport increases academic performance, hence they do not encourage their girl children to be actively involved in sport exercise; this is shown by the 0% response.

**Table4.** From Female Head Teachers N=20

	Benefit	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Sport reduces cancer	0	0%
2.	Sport frees one from obesity	2	10%
3.	Sport increases academic performance	0	0%
4.	Sport instils confidence and self-esteem	5	25%
5.	Sport develops honesty	5	25%
6.	Sport improves workmanship	4	20%
7.	Sport develops good citizenry	4	20%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

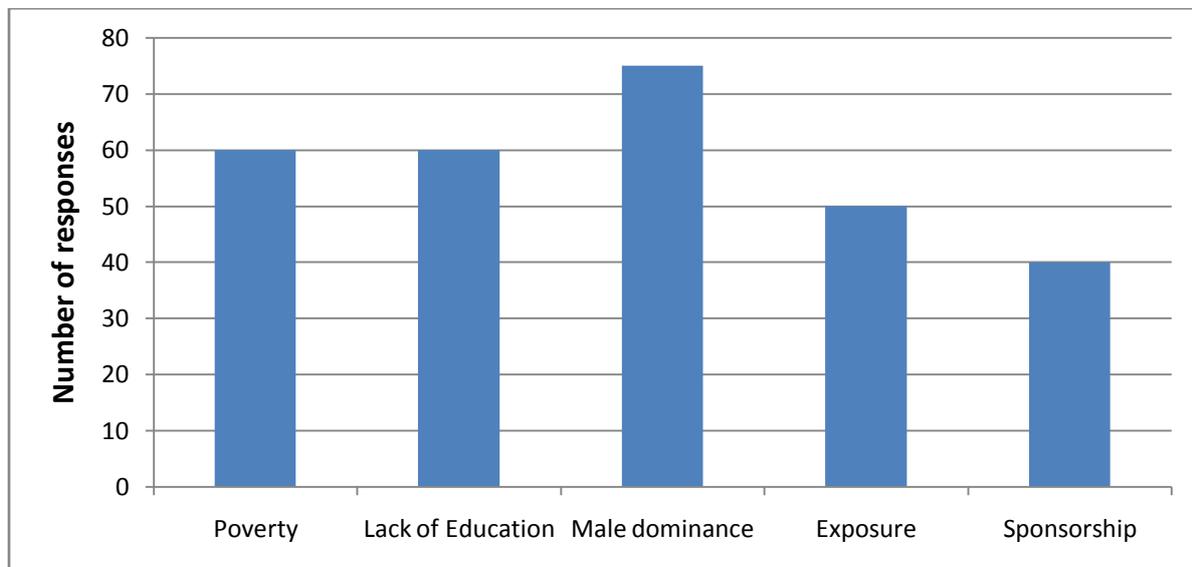
The data shown on table 4 indicate that even females in sport administration in the structures of NASH and NAPH are not aware of the fact that sports reduce cancer attack among women. Most women sports administrators believe that sport has nothing to do with increasing academic performance, but are aware that sports instil confidence, improve workmanship and develop good citizenry. The responses by these female sport representatives who should be on the know for the benefit of their female groups prove a point that women are still lagging behind in terms of crucial information about their health and could remain under the tyranny of hegemonic masculinity as observed by [8].

**Table5.** Responses from Women Affirmative Groups N=10

	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Sports reduce cancer	0	0%
2.	Sports free one from obesity	0	0%
3.	Sports increase academic performance	0	0%
4.	Sports instil confidence	1	10%
5.	Sports develop honesty	2	20%
6.	Sports improve workmanship	2	20%
7.	Sports develops good citizenry	5	50%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>10</b>	<b>100%</b>

The data on table 5 reveals that even the women affirmative groups are not aware of the pertinent health benefits offered by sports, hence they do not talk about the importance of sport in their advocacies. The percentage is skewed towards characteristics of a submissive and obedient citizen which according to the researchers in this study was viewed as reminiscent of the oppressed person. These data prove a point that even the women pressure groups which must be more knowledgeable about sports social benefits are not aware of the most crucial and motivating opportunities which they should inform their women fellowship.

Asked on ways sport could empower women the four women strata concurred that it was only educational opportunities that lack among the women population as compared to men population.



**Fig1.** Barriers to women participation in sport to gain empowerment

From the data on this figure, it shows that 60 (80%) of women believe poverty, exposure and lack of education top the list of barriers to sport participation. Male dominance was singled out as the major barrier according to all women 75 (100%). This concurs with Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity in [8]. Also, exposure and sponsorship are influenced by media coverage which women have again pointed as being poor to motivate more women into participating in sport.

**Table7.** Strategies to improve women participation in sport

1.True political will	15/75 (20%)
2.Sponsored sports tournament for women	50/75 (67%)
3.Establishing women sports clubs in communities	50/75 (67%)
4.Increasing women in sports leadership	25/75 (33%)
5. Training women in sports business and provide loans	75/75 (100%)

The data above indicate clearly that all women 75 (100%) are of the opinion that if sports associations or their governments provide them with training in sports entrepreneurship and be given loans to start those sports businesses, women would be economically empowered. It also shows that no matter they are eager to have community clubs, if they are not sponsored to have tournaments poverty does not allow them to spend time doing sports. The data also indicate that women are not aware that for them to attain empowerment there should be a political support from the local and national leadership of the

state. This scenario substantiates the common argument by women affirmative groups that most policies on women remain paper-policies vivid during political campaigns only.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study has concluded that:

- Sport has substantial potential to empower women both economically and socially.
- Women are not aware of the values of sport to their health; hence they are not motivated to venture into sporting at individual level, family level and community level, as result of lack of education.
- Hegemonic masculinity, lack of education, poverty, lack of media coverage, has emerged as the outstanding barriers to women participation in sport both in towns and rural areas.
- Poverty in women communities has made women inactive in sport.

## **Recommendations**

- For women to be involved in sport activities there should be need for training, establishing clubs and advance funding, a responsibility for governments.
- Women Affirmative groups should take a strong initiative to conscientize women communities about the economic and social values they gain from sport participation.
- Ministry of Women, Gender and Empowerment (in the case of Zimbabwe) should put a policy that compels government structures to involve women out of school to do sport in their communities.
- Local and national media should have a policy to cover every women sport, particularly in rural areas so as to motivate them and expose their talents.

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