

# Sports and the Making of Men: Transforming Gender Norms on the Playing Field



The **MenEngage Alliance** is a global alliance in over 30 countries that seeks to engage men and boys in effective ways to reduce gender inequalities and to promote the health and wellbeing of women, men and children, including ending all forms of gender-based violence (GBV). The alliance is comprised of a consortium of NGOs from the Global South and North who work in collaboration with numerous international NGOs and UN partners. A Steering Committee and International Advisory Committee coordinate MenEngage.

The **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)** is an international development agency that promotes the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity. UNFPA supports countries in using population data for policies and programs to reduce poverty and to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every young person is free of HIV/AIDS, and every girl and woman is treated with dignity and respect.

This MenEngage-UNFPA advocacy brief explores ideas on how to transform sport - an important part of the lives of most boys and many men - to encourage gender equitable attitudes and behaviors, to end harmful forms of masculinity, and to transform masculinity in positive ways. This brief has three parts:

- I. **“The History of Sport and the Making of Men,”** examines why and how sport has taken a central role in men’s conceptions of masculinity.
- II. **“How Sport Constructs Manhood and its Impact on Men and Boys,”** explores the potential positive and negative effects of sport, including its influence on violence, homophobia, and emotional and physical well-being.
- III. **“Recommendations for Policy and Sport Practices,”** provides advice to policymakers and program staff on how to harness the positive and transformative aspects of sport in the lives of men and boys.



## Background

From the schoolyard to professional athleticism, sport can serve as a lifelong playground for boys and men. It is used for relaxation and recreation, and is where many boys and men experience intimacy and close comradeship with their peers. It is a place for the celebration of male bodies, physical mastery and physicality often lacking in other aspects of life, and a venue where many boys learn self-discipline and the value of hard work. For some boys, sport creates opportunities to interact with their fathers or other men. Indeed, many boys enjoy watching or playing some sport, and for many it occupies a central place in their social imagination, that is, how they see themselves in the world.

Sport can also be a stage where boys rehearse and learn negative, stereotypical male qualities. This process requires that boys learn to suppress qualities and emotions that are deemed off limits to “real” men. Sport is a venue that can dole out lavish rewards associated with attaining dominance to a small number of men – rewards that surpass those given to comparable female athletes and to many other men. The promise of such rewards comes at a cost for many boys and men in terms of injuries, the distortion of their emotional lives, humiliation meted out by their peers or coaches, and the encouragement of aggression and even violence. The cost for some also includes sexual abuse of boys and young men by trusted adults, the installation of a hyper-competitive, winner-takes-all mentality, the pursuit of hyper-masculinity, and a sense of inferiority among those boys and men who don't succeed.

In other words, sport is one of the world's primary venues for the contradictory processes that make up the construction of masculinities. (Many of the issues discussed in this brief increasingly affect girls and women).

Parts of this advocacy brief are focused on organized sport, in particular at the levels of school from kindergarten through university, as well as through organized play in sports associations and clubs, and in high performance and professional sport. Even though most boys and men do not participate in the latter, they form the template for most other sport activities, and also have a huge impact on the dominant ways that masculinity is defined.

In focusing on organized sport, it is important to make key distinctions. Although sport involves athleticism, exercise and play, much exercise and athletic play are not considered sports. For example, ballet is as physically demanding and aerobic as an ice-skating competition, floor gymnastics, or a karate competition, and yet one is deemed art, the others are sport. For many people, running is exercise, for only some it is a sport. Swimming in a lake or pool is exercise and play; racing as part of a team transforms it into sport.

One of the goals in writing this brief is to find ways to reduce the negative effects of modern sport on boys and men, and to celebrate and encourage its many virtues and positive potential: fostering cooperation and bonding through team sports; helping boys and young men learn focus and self-discipline; creating opportunities for physical exercise; breaking down barriers and encouraging empathy between males and females, between different groups of men and women and different nations.

## I. Sport and the Making of Men

How does sport socialize boys and men, and how can it make a positive contribution to transforming manhood and promoting gender equality? Answering this question requires putting sport into a social and historical context, precisely to question the myth that often surrounds sport. For example, unlike the modern Olympic games, ancient Greek Olympics were violent war games that were essentially practice for combat. They were often fights to the finish and embodied no concept of fair play or sportsmanship and certainly are not a model for what positive sport should and can be.

### *The Creation of Modern Sports*

The modern world of organized sport leagues and infrastructures was created primarily in Europe (in particular the United Kingdom and some of its colonies and former colonies) and the United States in the second half of the 19th century. Starting in the 1860s, hundreds of national sports bodies were created to regulate everything from archery and boxing to soccer, running and wrestling; between 1881 and 1913, international sports federations were set up. The first modern Olympic games were held in 1896.

During this time, physical activities and forms of physical competition that had been popular for centuries in towns, villages and the countryside were appropriated by the upper classes, which “shaped the structure, rules, values, and meanings of sports” (Messner, 1992:10). This process reflected changing economic times and the interests of those men who ran the emerging sports establishments.

In these years, one of the key concerns was the shaping of men. Indeed, this was the era that witnessed the original crisis of masculinity (Kimmel, 1987). Sons no longer worked alongside their fathers, and those fathers were away from home for long days; boys were increasingly being taught by women; the industrial revolution had begun the de-skilling of labor that had long been part of men’s identities; and women were challenging long-established institutions of male power, thus making it the era of the first wave of feminism. The result was a growing fear that boys were becoming “feminized.” Men of power were worried about where they could find men who could go into battle, administer the colonies, and run their companies and governments.

To replace the men who were increasingly absent from boys’ lives, organized, regulated and often combative sports “emerged as an institution of social fatherhood,” writes Varda Burstyn (1999:45). The “innovators, organizers, and creative publicists like [Olympic organizer Pierre de] Coubertin consciously regarded sports as educational, preparing boys and young men for careers in business, government, colonial administration, and the military by instilling physical and mental toughness, obedience to authority, and loyalty to the “team,”” writes Commonwealth Games gold medalist and sports scholar Bruce Kidd (1987:253).



## Capoeira & the Physical Culture of Resistance

The notion that sport and physical activity can represent diverse social and cultural goals is seen, for example, in the Brazilian martial art capoeira. It developed half a millennia ago among slaves and escaped slaves as a way of teaching physical self-discipline, self-defense and fighting. It has evolved into a martial art that, normally, does not include physical contact, but rather, consists of intense, complex, and dance-like physical movement between two or more people.

The new world of sport captured the ethos of the era; it would be a world of competition and machine-like performance where every movement could be optimized and individual performance could be ranked, measured and proportionally rewarded. It was governed by bureaucrats, and rules became ever more elaborate. It reinforced the class and racial prejudices of the era: specific sports became associated with specific classes, and leagues were racially segregated.

## What’s Wrong with Competition?

There are few ideas taken for granted as much as the idea of competition. It is at the heart of the world’s economies and political systems; some scientists believe human genes are competitive and, of course, it is central to the world of sport.

The problem is that there is no proof that competition is at the heart of human nature. In fact, there is much that says it is not the only way to live. It is likely that early human societies relied not on competition but on cooperation as the only way to collectively and individually survive.

Although elements of competition certainly followed the expansion of patriarchal societies, it became the dominant social ideal in the era when capitalism had finally triumphed as a socio-economic system. Modern sport traditions were born the same time as the ideology of competition became the standard explanation for all human behavior in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The problem is not that elements of competition exist, but that lives get reduced to competitive practices. Competition is based on scarcity, the notion that only some can succeed and that a person can only be a winner if another is a loser. In other words, competition divides people and pits one against the other (Kohn, 1996).

It is precisely in its focus on competition that sport, certainly at the team levels but often even in school settings, becomes distorted and ceases to be just play. It's true that sport brings people together in pursuit of common goals, but at the same time it divides them. From a young age it teaches participants that there are winners and losers and that an individual can succeed only if another fails.

Most of all, though, sport became a space where men dominated, and where a certain definition of manhood would reign triumphant. It celebrated "the most extreme possibilities of the male body" (Messner, 2007:42). In many sports, women had (and still have) only second-class status or were forced to play with "more feminine" rules; in some they were totally excluded. Sport "crafted a...manly, antifeminine warrior and succeeded in creating a form of male ritual with great power....Thus it should not be surprising that a number of the key ideals that sport pushed to the fore in masculinity were taken from the most unmistakably masculine field of all: combat" (Burstyn, 1999: 65-6).

The process of defining manhood within sport continues. According to sport scholars such as Michael Messner and Donald Sabo, sport's increasing importance is very much about the continued rise of feminism: sport remains a field of male dominance where men can live the fantasy of male superiority and toughness, even if 99.99% of men cannot play at the level of elite athletes, whether male or female. One of the incredible things about sport, though, is that in spite of this history, in spite of the way it became a proving ground for manhood, the elements of play and exercise that are at the bedrock of sport continue to shine through. Boys and men continue to appreciate sport not simply to prove manliness or to exercise domination, but because of the sheer joy of physicality, personal challenge, comradeship, and collective enjoyment.

## II. How Sport Constructs Manhood and its Impact on Men and Boys

Sport is often held up as the perfect activity for boys and young men, as a builder of character and discipline, as a way to learn cooperation and teamwork, as a way to counteract social ills from sedentary lifestyles to gang activity, and as a source of physical and emotional well-being. It is seen as a safe space for the expression of emotions and for experiencing closeness with other males, where boys and men can experience friendship and mutual support. In the case of many sports, it is one of the few places in many cultures where men are valued for their grace and beauty. Indeed, most of the men who support and seek to live in ways that display gender equality play or have played sports in schools or independent leagues, and many have strong affections for certain sports, and enthusiastically follow their favorite players and teams.

At the same time, many of the values currently celebrated in sport and the way sports have been defined and taught, have a negative impact on boys and men, as well as on women and girls.

Although this section focuses on some of these negative effects, it does so not to condemn all sport but to understand its complex role in the lives of boys and men. Most importantly, these negative effects must be examined in order to rescue and transform sport into a place that contributes to the positive transformation of manhood and the promotion of gender equality.

### Sport can Distort the Development of Men's and Boys' Emotional Lives

"I learned that pain and injury are 'part of the game'... I learned to be an animal... Animals made first team. Being an animal meant being fanatically aggressive and ruthlessly competitive. If I saw an arm in front of men, I trampled it. ...The coaches taught me to 'punish the other man,' but little did I suspect that I was devastating my own body at the same time." Former university football player and sports scholar, Donald Sabo (1986:159).

“The sport hype reduces us, men and women alike, to believing we are purely bodies: designed to throw far, jump high, play hard, and perform perfectly. The truth is we are each dispensable, constantly judged on our performance and on the size of our muscles,” an Australian elite athlete (Anonymous, 1995).

In rugby as in many other sports, “the amount of pain a player can inflict and withstand is valued as a measure of ‘manliness’” (Marston, 1995).

Sport can play a positive role in helping young people overcome personal adversity and personal limitations. Unfortunately, regimes of competitive sport (starting with gym class in schools, children’s leagues and boys clubs) often push this too far. They sometimes teach boys and girls “to hide or repress their emotional and physical pain, and not to show their vulnerabilities.” By age 11 or 12, “tears and displays of vulnerability are few and far between. Instead boys’ most common response to injuries, to making a bad play, or getting criticized by the coach, is a short burst of anger...followed by a posture of sullen determined silence....The hardening of boys teaches them to transform any feelings of hurt, pain or sorrow into the more ‘appropriately masculine’ expressions of contained anger or stoic silence” (Messner, 2011:163).

### ***Encouragement of “Hyper-masculinity”***

Sports can play a positive role in encouraging physical fitness and activity; the lifelong physical and mental benefits that come with exercise are well known. Unfortunately, sports often celebrate a hyper-masculine ideal where the attainment of manhood is measured in the sculpting of muscle mass and achievement of extreme physical prowess. This ongoing escalation of what is seen as the properly manly athlete brings with it many dire costs. To athletes in contact sports, it increases the chance of injury since with each passing year other players are bigger, stronger, and moving faster. This chance of injury is further increased because of sports practices that encourage a hyper-aggressive masculinity in which “taking out” the competition is valued.

Even in non-contact sports, the demands and rewards of modern sport can lead to drastic training regimes that increase the risk of injury, and to increased pressure on elite athletes to use performance-enhancing drugs

(including human growth hormone and anabolic steroids), which can bring about terrible health consequences and rob sport of its role as a moral guide to youth.

And, since the athletic body is the gold standard when it comes to ideals of manhood, the inability to attain the hyper-masculine athletic body becomes a source of insecurity for many boys and young men and a source of obsession for many others.



### ***Sport as Sacrifice: Injury and Sports Practices***

Sport can be a dangerous place for boys and men. This danger does not refer to the inevitable sprains and broken bones, or cuts and bruises that accompany any physical activity, but rather to the standards that often begin at a young age and reach dangerous proportions at the elite levels. As noted above, boys are taught to ignore pain (even though pain is a warning sign that something is wrong). The exhortation to “play through the pain” can not only be a source of lasting physical harm, it is part of the way that sport teaches boys to distrust their feelings and to ignore and discredit fear and health warning signs. This in turn affects the way boys perceive themselves, as weak, if they seek health services.

Particularly for those who wish to join the elite levels of sport, a sort of self-administered violence may develop based on the ever-increasing demands of physical and emotional self-sacrifice (and then the celebration and glorification of this physical self-sacrifice – which is a theme of commentators covering most sports events). One form this can take is the use of performance-enhancing drugs, or another is to be on ultra-high energy and protein diets that do not have a long-term sustainability.

*“Because they elevate external goals over intrinsic ones, sports have encouraged those who become athletes to treat their bodies as instruments, to submit to physical and psychological injury, and to inflict it on others. The active repression of pain is an everyday part of the sports world: ‘no pain, no gain’ is a common slogan, but it has ruined the careers of countless athletes and left many permanently crippled. There are also psychological scars: the constant emphasis on external goals such as winning and getting chosen for an international team is highly pathological and leaves many forever stunted and unable to define their own goals. At the same time, sports label those who cannot meet the ever higher standards of performance expected of athletes as ‘failures’ ” (Kidd, 1987:259).*

### ***Installation of Hypercompetitive, Winner-Takes-All Definitions of Manhood***

***“Winning is everything.”***

**Famed American football coach Vince Lombardi**

Organized sport can help individuals learn to value their contributions as part of a team, even if their contribution may be less than others'. Unfortunately modern sport also tends to encourage what one writer has called a “conditional self-worth” in boys (Schafer, 1975). Boys may learn that acceptance by the males around them, their coaches, peers and fathers, is “contingent upon being a ‘winner.’” As a result “narrow definitions of success” become increasingly important (Messner, 1992:34). This creates an ethos of competition and winner-takes-all that spills into the rest of men’s lives. Sport is heralded for modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors, but if success in sport is often based on the failure of at least some others (at times, even among our teammates with whom we compete for playing time), then what sport ends up modeling is an ethic that shuns empathy and pits boys or men against each other (and sometimes countries against each other).

Likewise, if young people, especially boys, are taught that winning is everything, that they should do whatever it takes to win, and that their happiness and success depends on

defeating others, how can they learn cooperation, sharing or mutual trust?

### ***A Platform for Sexism and Homophobia***

Modern sport in and of itself does not have to be negative; it is how sport is used as a platform for homophobia, or devaluation of women, that is the problem. This starts from valuing some forms of athleticism for boys and stigmatizing others: for example, ice hockey versus figure skating. The branding of certain sports and athletics as “for girls” quickly translates into beliefs that a boy who’s interested in that sport must be “a sissy” (or the equivalent in different cultures), which is equated with being gay, and hence stigmatized. In part through these various labeling mechanisms, men are taught to devalue both women and women’s sports. Such attitudes are also clear when coaches tell boys not to play “like a girl.” In sports, as in other social spaces, sexism and homophobia are too often actively used to humiliate boys. Although this is changing in some countries, women’s sports receive less attention and funding and are taken less seriously compared to those of men and, in some sports, women are always relegated to the sidelines and seen as nothing more than cheerleaders. While men and women regularly compete together on the same teams in independent or informal leagues, this happens rarely, if ever, at the professional or semi-professional level.

***“By encouraging us to spend our most creative and engrossing moments as children and our favorite forms of recreation as adults in the company of other males, they condition us to trust each other much more than women. By publicly celebrating the dramatic achievements of the best males, while marginalizing females as cheerleaders and spectators [or relegate them to less prestigious leagues or contests] they validate the male claim to the most important positions in society.”***  
***(Kidd 1987:255)***

These cultural attitudes on the field and in the locker room quickly enter the cultural mainstream. The competitive contest of sport encourages “aggressive verbal sparring that is both homophobic and sexist,” writes sports sociologist Michael Messner. In particular, “homophobia and sexual objectification of females together act as a glue that solidifies the male peer group... [They keep boys] from getting too close” (Messner, 1992:36-37).

## ***The Encouragement of Violence***

There is no essential link between exercise/play and violence. It is disturbing, then, that at least some sports are portrayed as arenas of violent combat in which players are described as warriors or gladiators who 'go into battle.' (US football in particular excels at military language and imagery with playoff games often beginning with a flyover by Air Force fighter jets). Some sports, such as ice hockey in the US and Canada, allow on-ice fist fights between players and extremely violent contact meant to "take out" rival players. The outcome of violent contact is clear: 78% of retired US football players suffer from permanent disabilities related to the sport (Messner, 2007: 102).

As a launching pad for violent behavior, football (or soccer) hooliganism is seen in some parts of Europe where fans take the symbolic territorial battles of the playing field and recreate them in violent and destructive conflicts on the sidelines. In some cities in Canada and the United States, victories or losses in championship games have led to urban riots conducted largely by young male fans. In Egypt in 2012, football matches became the venue for major acts of violence between fans of teams who were either supportive or opposed to the old establishment.

In some communities, there is evidence that sport matches between rivals can lead to an increase in violence against women, as some men return home drunk and angry their team lost or drunk (police in Glasgow, Scotland, are on alert for domestic violence following Rangers vs. Celtic football games). A rigorous study in the UK found that reports of domestic violence goes up by a third whether England wins or loses big matches (Evans, 2012).

Another concern is whether sport culture encourages players to use violence in their own relationships at a higher rate than other men. As James Gilligan writes in words applicable to certain sports, "it is men who are expected to be violent, and who are honored for doing so and dishonored for being unwilling to be violent" (1996:231). Not only is the capacity to inflict pain seen as an attractive quality of a winning athlete in contact sports, but encouraging boys and men to deaden their feelings against inflicting pain makes it more likely that they can commit acts of interpersonal violence without remorse. Some studies confirm that male athletes commit interpersonal violence at higher rates than other men. For example, two studies referred to by Michael Flood "found that while male sports team members make

up 2 percent or 3 percent of the university population [in the United States], they are responsible for 20 to 30 percent of reported incidents of violence against women" (2004). This, indeed, is a sobering figure for anyone who might think that involvement in sports is an automatic way to raise healthier men.

At the same time, Flood and Dyson note the need to be careful not to ascribe an automatic relationship between playing sport and using interpersonal violence. The majority of male athletes treat women with respect and do not use violence in personal relationships. Flood and Dyson note that levels of interpersonal violence vary by sport and by the celebrity status attached to it: the higher the level of celebrity, the higher the percentage of athletes who also engage in interpersonal violence. Athletes, like all men, make conscious and unconscious choices about whether or not to use violence in their lives (Flood & Dyson, 2007).

## **III. Recommendations for Policy and Sport Practices**

How then, can the positive elements of exercise, play and organized sport be rescued from these negative features? How can sport become a venue for transforming negative aspects of masculinity and promoting gender equality?

### ***a) Refocus on What is Important About Sport***

Physical activity is important for both physical and emotional health particularly in a world where children spend much time in front of computers and televisions. But the current insistence that children play miniature versions of high-performance and sometimes violent sports needs to be challenged. Children need less organized sport and more playing, especially physical play where they can exercise and learn pro-social values of cooperation and collective and individual achievement rather than being steeped in a system of winners and losers or a system where they measure their self-worth by winning. This positive physical activity can certainly include contact sports, but not in ways that represent serious emotional or physical danger. To achieve a better balance there must be an honest discussion of the benefits and drawbacks that sport has in society, and how to promote the former and eliminate the latter. This sometimes will require changes in the rules, coaching practices, and the age at which adult versions of certain sports are introduced. It requires measures to end

gender inequality and sex segregation within sport, the pressure placed on children, and the values celebrated in order to end many of the problematic aspects of organized sport.

### ***b) Rewrite the Rulebooks and Create New Versions of Sport***

There is nothing natural or inevitable about the way sports are currently played. It is both possible and necessary to rethink games and institutions to move away from zero-sum competitions and towards games that encourage physicality and even aggression, while also celebrating the importance of cooperation and empathy. It is also key that sports be part of promoting and modeling gender equality. In children's sports, this could include:

- Making all children's sports co-ed;
- Eliminating scoring systems that lead to winners and losers;
- Encouraging creative play instead of sports that only or mainly enforce rigid adherence to rules;
- In organized youth sport, having rules to make sure that team members equally share playing time. Youth sport should not just be for the "best" players.

### ***How the Mbuti Play Tug of War***

The Mbuti of Central Africa play a tug-of-war type game. Often they'll start it with men on one side and women on the other. As soon as the rope starts moving in one direction (perhaps at first towards the men) one of the men runs around to the women's side; when the balance shifts, women go to the men's side. When a person changes sides, they'll cheer on their new team in an exaggeratedly high or low voice. The goal of the game is to find balance. At times, the game begins with men, women, and children all mixed up. The game might go on for a half-hour or an hour until it dissolves into laughter.

### ***c) Eliminate the Encouragement of Violence in Sport***

Many sports are based on physical aggression, but this does not necessarily mean violence. Disassociating violence from sport means several things:

- Actively discourage sports such as boxing and mixed martial arts that, by definition, are blood sports with dangerous health outcomes for boys and men;

- Ban fighting in all sport and impose lifetime bans and severe financial penalties on players who engage in fights in the context of sport;
- Narrow the range of acceptable contact in sports and harshly penalize violent behavior that breaks those rules;
- Make criminal charges mandatory if an injury is caused by a willfully harmful action that exceeds the rules of a sport;
- Impose lifetime bans on coaches who encourage on- or off-field violence by their players;
- Develop programs for male athletes and coaches to promote gender equality, challenge homophobia, and work to prevent sexual, physical and emotional violence in their personal relationships.

### ***Australian Rugby League Turns to White Ribbon for Advice on Violence Prevention***

Stung by a scandal concerning sexual violence committed by one of its players, in 2012 the Australian Rugby League turned to the Australian White Ribbon Campaign to provide suggestions for consequences for players who use violence in their personal lives, and for developing programs for players focused on violence prevention and promoting healthy relationships.

### ***d) Train Coaches to Transform Sport***

Physical play, sport and exercise have an important place in the lives of boys and men, but are often neglected in public policy discussions of land use and funding appropriations. There are many accessible ways to increase the role of sport and physical activity.

- Devote public spaces and resources to encourage physical activity;
- Encourage and support workplaces to provide exercise equipment and breaks for fitness, as well as showers for people who want to bicycle or run to work;
- Stop devoting public resources (tax breaks, paying for stadiums, broadcast licenses) to subsidize privately owned sports ventures; democratize sport ownership.
- Support urban designs that promote walking and cycling.





### ***f) Engage Boys and Men to Encourage Gender Equality within Sport or to Change the Attitudes and Behavior of Athletes***

There are many ways in which gender inequality is institutionalized in organized sport: women's leagues receive less funding and exposure than men's leagues; in professional sport, men often receive more prize money and larger endorsement deals; and homophobic and sexist language is common on the field, in the locker room and in the broadcast booth. We thus need to:

- Campaign for equal resources for girls and boys in sport at all levels;
- Rewrite rules and the design of our team sports to support women and men playing more sports together;
- Educate coaches about the sexist biases and stereotypes they can perpetuate and bring into their language and coaching practices.

### ***India: Physical Games to Promote Gender Equality***

NGOs working in India developed a clever physical contest to be part of 'gender equality days' in some Mumbai schools. In it, both girls and boys took part in a race to stitch a button, dribble a ball, and fold a shirt – thus giving greater value to women's/girl's traditional skills and making the point these are indeed skills which both girls and boys can learn (ICRW, CORO, & TISS, 2010).

### ***Using Sports and Innovative Tools to Reach Male Youth***

UNFPA supported the development of Breakaway, an electronic football game aimed to engage, educate, and change attitudes of boys between the ages of 8 and 16 on the issue of violence against girls and women. In Breakaway, the player encounters real-life situations that resonate with a boy or young man's experience such as peer pressure, competition, collaboration, teamwork, bullying, and negative gender stereotypes.

The game gives players choices that allow them to make decisions, face consequences, reflect, and practice behaviors in a game and story format which take into account UNFPA's culturally-sensitive approaches, as well as the FIFA "Fair Play" rules. Through the interactive football match, players learn that things are not as they seem, and their choices and actions will affect the lives of everyone around them. First released and distributed locally in Africa around the FIFA World Cup in June 2010, the game is now disseminated globally through the Internet in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. UNFPA and partners are supporting use of the tool through dissemination and outreach opportunities. The Breakaway game and facilitator's guide can be accessed by visiting [www.breakawaygame.com](http://www.breakawaygame.com).

### ***g) Use Sport for Transforming Manhood and Mobilizing Boys and Men***

Because it is the focus of so much attention by boys and men, and because athletes have such a high status, sport can be a strategic way to mobilize men and boys on a range of gender equality issues. Some efforts enlist teams or popular athletes to support public education campaigns. MenEngage, UNFPA and partners find this approach valuable, but are also aware of two limitations:

- Because these campaigns are based on the celebrity of athletes and often use images of athletes in "macho" poses, they do not challenge many of the problematic aspects of sport, as discussed in this Brief. On the other hand, to the extent they implicitly challenge sports-associated images of manhood and show men speaking out with compassion and caring for women, they can still play a positive role.

- In cases where whole teams are asked to support a public education campaign, individual team members might take part in an empty or even cynical way. As with any group of men, some use or have used violence in their interpersonal relationships. It is also clear that a campaign will lose its credibility if an athlete associated with it is found responsible for interpersonal violence. This can be mitigated by requesting opportunities to speak with the team about the issues, and also to suggest that individual participation be voluntary: in this case, agreeing to take part would require each individual to make a personal and public commitment not to use violence.

### **Athletes Speaking Out Against Violence Against Women**

In many countries, the White Ribbon Campaign and other efforts exist to engage men and boys to prevent violence against women. Many sports teams, for example, hold White Ribbon awareness and fundraising games, such as: in Italy, football teams (including Inter Milan); in Australia, Australian-rules football and rugby teams and prominent players; football teams in England; and in Canada, many junior and semi-professional hockey teams. Top marks go to New Zealand where the domestic rugby championship is now the White Ribbon Cup. (New Zealanders also brought the campaign and a friendly match to Papua New Guinea). The UK campaign doesn't feature athletes, but in some imaginative drawings turns legs of footballers, motorcycle riders, and skateboarders into white ribbons.

One of the most creative is the series of White Ribbon posters from Australia where well-known professional athletes are photographed wearing the jerseys of their archrivals. For example, rugby star, Brendan Cannon wears the jersey of the New Zealand All Blacks. The caption reads: "I fought through injury so I could wear [our national team colors] the green and the gold. So is this embarrassing? Of course! But nothing is more embarrassing than knowing my little girl is growing up in a country where almost half of the women will be victims of physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime. So if wearing this jersey makes Australian men realize just how serious this issue is, quite frankly, it's worth the embarrassment."

Another useful initiative is using sport settings for formal programs aimed at male (and female) team members. These allow coaches, respected outsiders, or fellow players to introduce team members or participants in school gym classes to regular discussions about respect for women, violence against women (both in the context of relationships and other forms) homophobia and the destructive pressure to be "real men" both on and off the field. One example is Coaching Boys into Men in the US (and adapted to other settings, as described below). This focuses on a set of 10-15 minute discussions led by coaches once a week in the locker room. The program discusses respect for women and relationship violence. Coaches are encouraged to intervene if they hear their athletes joking about relationship violence or actually engaged in such violence.

A final type of initiative is developing programs that use sport as an environment to engage boys and men simultaneously on and off the playing field and to reach out to the broader community. The boxes about India, Brazil and southern Africa provide some examples.

### **India: Violence Against Women Just Isn't Cricket**

The Parivatan Program in India, sponsored by Breakthrough, a partner of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) along with Futures Without Violence's Coaching Boys Into Men program, works with young cricket players to reduce violence against women. One feature of the program is a van that travels to different neighborhoods, puts on a street play and has interactive games to look at the negative effects of "eve teasing" – that is, sexual harassment on streets and in schools. It also works with cricket coaches and community mentors to help them introduce messages against violence and for gender equality into their normal contact with boys.



## **Brazil: Using Football to Reach Men in GBV Prevention**

A program by Promundo worked with men ages 15 to 64 in a low-income community in Rio de Janeiro to use weekly football (soccer) matches as a venue for dialogue, along with educational activities based on the Program H and White Ribbon manuals. The goals were raising awareness about gender equality, encouraging men to examine their own behaviors, and increasing men's capacity to speak out against violence against women and to take a greater share in caregiving.

Individuals from the community were recruited and trained to deliver 15 weeks of workshops, and a soccer tournament was held over a five-month period. For a man to participate in the tournament, he had to come to at least one workshop per week. Family members were invited to meals following the matches to encourage discussion. While this was taking place, Promundo launched a community-wide campaign focused on domestic violence, sexual harassment, sharing household chores, and men speaking out against the violence.

Surveys of participants showed a significant decrease in the percentage of men who thought that interpersonal violence was acceptable and an increase in conversations about gender equality and violence against women (Instituto Promundo, et al., 2012).

## **South Africa, Zambia, & Zimbabwe: AIDS education through Grassroots Soccer**

Grassroots Soccer uses the existing structures and training models of community soccer to educate about HIV and healthy sexual behavior. It uses role models (such as players and coaches) who kids respect and stresses that learning, like sport, is best done when everyone participates. It fosters community involvement to reach out to youth and does so in a co-ed context.

## **Using Real Life Sports Figures as the Basis for an Interactive Game**

UNFPA worked with Samuel Eto'o – the internationally famous football player from Cameroon – who made a Public Service Announcement with UNFPA about being a “real champion” and standing up to violence against women. He also served as the inspiration for the character for an interactive game developed by UNFPA and partners entitled Breakaway, which encourages young people to question harmful gender norms such as stereotypes and behaviors including those that can lead to violence against women and girls.

## **Conclusion**

Concerns about the ways that modern sport has been developed and mobilized to enforce negative versions of manhood and unequal gender relations should not take away from the positive, pro-social, and life-enhancing aspects of sport, exercise, and physical play. In order to encourage those positive aspects of sport, it is important to challenge and transform sport's hyper-masculine, violent (as opposed to aggressive), winner-take-all, and gender-inequitable aspects.

Policies and programs to transform negative aspects of masculinity should not be anti-sport. Rather, it is necessary to work with women's rights partners, educators, coaches, parents, and athletes, to transform sport to reach its true potential for promoting physical and mental health, as a place for the fulfillment of equality, for learning self-discipline and responsibility to others, for teaching empathy and compassion, for instilling values of hard work and meeting challenges, and, quite simply, for the sheer enjoyment of it. NGOs, schools, policymakers and institutions interested in promoting gender equality should seek to critically examine how sports can reinforce negative gender norms and devise strategies to build on the positive aspects of sports to achieve true gender justice.

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