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Gender relations, gender-based violence and sport for development and peace: Questions, concerns and cautions emerging from Uganda



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SYNOPSIS

In this study we discuss how gender relations are influenced by a 'girls only' martial arts-based sport, gender and development (SGD) programme that aims to improve young women's discipline, leadership skills and self-defence capabilities in a rural Ugandan community with widespread domestic and gender-based violence (GBV). The results of our qualitative research with a Ugandan non-governmental organization (NGO) staff members and martial arts instructors demonstrate that the young women's participation in the martial arts programme challenged gender norms and improved their confidence. However, the exclusion of boys and men from the programming, combined with the cultural inaptness of girls practicing martial arts, may have contributed to the girls' subordination. Our data also revealed that young men were also the targets of GBV. Overall, we argue that an exploration of the relational impact of gender in the context of SGD, and sport for development and peace terrain more broadly is necessary in order to: (1) understand how social relations shift and change in the face of variable and fluid gender dynamics; and (2) challenge gendered assumptions about prescribed/predetermined gender relations by acknowledging that young women may not be the *only* targets of violence.

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Introduction

In June 2009, a young woman from a rural town in Eastern Uganda cycled home from school, only to be blocked by a group of four men. The men demanded that she give them her books. When she refused, they tried to rape her. In response, she used the martial arts techniques she had recently learned in a sport, gender and development (SGD) programme that was delivered by SNGO, our pseudonym for a southern non-governmental organization based in Uganda that aims to protect women and children against domestic and gender-based violence.¹ Using

her karate skills for self-defence, this particular young woman was able to fend off her attackers – but not without questions and concerns from the community in terms of the (cultural) appropriateness of her actions.² In Uganda, and in many countries where SGD interventions are deployed, young women's involvement in sport, particularly sport that is combative and deemed only acceptable for boys and men, is often perceived by community and family members as culturally inapt.

SNGO's martial arts programme is one of hundreds of self-defence-focused SGD initiatives created in numerous countries across the Two-Thirds World.³ SGD programming is part of the broader sport for development and peace (SDP) movement that advocates for the use of sport as a key contributor to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (Kidd, 2008). Increasingly, organizations are drawn to the promise of such

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initiatives for girls and women in the Two-Thirds World to confront gender norms, build leadership skills and enhance their health, well-being and self-esteem through sport (Meier & Saavedra, 2009; Saavedra, 2009).⁴ Through the growing movement of NGOs in the SGD arena, some girls and women have successfully gained employment skills, grown their social networks and accessed educational opportunities (e.g., Forde, 2008). To build on this momentum, a growing number of SGD programmes have focused on using self-defence strategies to improve gender relations, contest gender norms and address issues such as domestic and gender-based violence (GBV). However, these instances of 'empowerment' in SGD are often enmeshed with heteronormative tones that seem to go unchallenged. Furthermore, the ways that SGD programmes tend to engage with 'sex' and 'gender' ignore fluid and multiple gender roles, dynamics and relations: the very issues that SGD interventions often (claim) to tackle (see Carney & Chawansky, *in press*; Chawansky, 2011).

Unpacking gender in SGD becomes further complicated in the current international development climate, where 'the girl' has been positioned as a key solution to poverty alleviation, particularly vis-à-vis the "Girl Effect" campaign, which promotes the notion that girls and young women hold the answers to the development problems of our time (see Girl Effect, 2013). Thus, current discourses pertaining to 'girls' development have stimulated 'new' approaches by donors and (international) NGOs focused on SDP to use 'girl only' programmes – including those that focus on GBV prevention – that emphasize 'empowering' girls and women to make the 'right' choices to improve their communities and countries. Notwithstanding these efforts, recent studies demonstrate that rates of gender-based and domestic violence continue to escalate in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa (Simister, 2012). Alongside these findings, girl-focused SGD programmes are rapidly coalescing into a growing movement – and increasingly incorporating self-defence sports such as martial arts and boxing.

Despite advances in using sport to address gender and development issues, it remains unclear as to how SGD programmes perpetuate and/or prevent gender-based violence. The literature from the One-Third World is ambiguous, even slightly contradictory. While some studies suggest that sport participation may expose female athletes to increased instances of sexual violence and harassment (e.g., Fasting, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2002: 427), others posit a 'protection hypothesis' that sport is actually useful for females to build their capacity to protect and defend themselves against sexual harassment and abuse by developing self-esteem and physical strength (Fasting, Brackenridge, Miller, & Sabo, 2008). Recent studies by African feminist scholars have demonstrated that women and girls who participate in sport in Sub-Saharan Africa, whether as spectators or athletes, may experience more sexual harassment and violence through their involvement, and thus become targets of toxic myths and stigmas (see Shehu, 2010). This literature also suggests that sport spaces in Sub-Saharan Africa tend to be dominated by heterosexual, 'conventionally masculine' males (Daimon, 2010; Shehu, 2010). Although recent studies have revealed how self-defence sports such as martial arts are useful tools for empowering some girls and women who have experienced violence in One-Third World countries (Brecklin, 2008; Hollander, 2009), few studies have considered similar programmes and their impact in the Two-Thirds World context.

It is thus surprising that there has been minimal research, with some recent exceptions (e.g., Bateman & Binns, 2014) that directly investigates, and traces (1) how challenging gender norms and shifting gender relations actually transpires through SGD programmes; and (2) how SGD interventions use self-defence programmes to address gender-based and domestic violence. Little is also known about whether or not these programmes are more effective when focused on single-sex or mixed programming.

In response to these lacunas, this paper is based on an empirical study that explored the challenges and benefits experienced by young women who participated in a martial arts-based SGD programme that focuses on improving gender relations and imparting GBV prevention strategies. The first author conducted data collection in a rural community in Eastern Uganda where there are high levels of domestic and gender-based violence. Using this programme as a case study, we propose three key arguments. First, we suggest that the SGD programme we studied tended to disregard the diversity of sexualities and gendered identities amongst programme participants, which we submit promotes perilous (and static) assumptions about sex and gender in broader SDP theory, programmes and practice. Second, we argue that addressing the *relational* impact of gender in the context of SGD is crucial in order to (1) understand how social relations shift and change in the face of variable and fluid gender dynamics; (2) situate gender along a continuum; and (3) challenge gendered assumptions about prescribed/predetermined gender relations by acknowledging that young women may not be the *only* targets of violence. Finally, we contend that the ability of the young women to generate politically apt bodies and subjectivities *qua* martial arts practices may be framed as technologies of subjectivity and citizenship – or what Harwood (2009: 15) refers to as "biopedagogies."

Sport, gender and development

Girls and women have sought to play and lead/work in sports ever since the 19th century, when sport in the One-Third World was organized primarily as an exclusive male cultural practice that needed to help them develop into strong heterosexual men (Hargreaves, 1994). First-wave feminists who fought for girls and women to participate in sport focused on 'separate sphere' strategies whereby they created their own sport organizations, rules, and competitions.⁵ Second-wave feminists have generally pursued integrationist strategies, pursuing 'same as' opportunities through legislation, policy and court challenges. During the last 40 years, girls and women (and supportive boys and men) in virtually every country and community in the world have struggled for such opportunities, despite enforced exclusion, ridicule, harassment, lack of financial and material support, the frequent silence of the media and the inequality of income and life chances generally.

Contemporary feminist advocacy has been consolidated through new women's international organizations, such as Women Sport International and the International Working Group on Women and Sport, and widely supported by commitments such as the *Brighton Declaration* (Larkin, 2007). According to Saavedra (2005), advancements made within the women in sport movement influenced the official gender and development movement, as evidenced by the

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