



Photo: poruciatti / Shutterstock.com

# COVID-19, Women, Girls and Sport: Build Back Better

## Introduction

Over the past year, women in sport have gained unprecedented attention. Events like the Women’s World Cup, the Cricket T20, record attendance at women’s games and the expectations for Tokyo Olympic Games to achieve gender parity raised awareness and mobilized action around women’s participation and leadership in sport, equal pay, safeguarding policies, representation in the media and incentives for girls to play. The pandemic of COVID-19 now threatens to erase this momentum as the sport world has been forced to cancel or postpone events, schools have closed, and people are staying home. Existing gaps between women and men, girls and boys in both elite and grassroots sport may widen if governments, sport organizations, sponsors, civil society, athletes, media and UN agencies do not put women and girls at the

centre and address their specific needs in response and recovery plans.

The impacts of COVID-19 are already being felt harder by women and girls in many areas of life due to gender inequalities,<sup>i</sup> and we see this mirrored in sport. This brief is informed by the Sports for Generation Equality Framework<sup>ii</sup>, launched by UN Women and the International Olympic Committee in March 2020. It focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in sports in five areas: Leadership, Gender-Based Violence, Economic Opportunities, Media Participation and Representation, and Girls Participation in Sport. It presents key recommendations to different actors in the sport ecosystem that go beyond mitigating the impact of the crisis on women and girls, and create a future in and through sport that builds back better.

i [Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Women](#)

ii [Sports for Generation Equality Framework](#)



## 1. Women’s leadership in sports

As in many other fields, women have been historically under-represented in sports organizations’ leadership positions and, therefore, excluded from decision-making in the sector. Consequently, there are fewer women than men involved in the process of assessing the current impact of COVID-19 in sport and planning ways out of the crisis, which may leave women and girls behind.

As stated by the United Nations, “evidence across sectors, including economic planning and emergency response,

demonstrates unquestioningly that policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are simply less effective and can even do harm”.<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, unless women and girls are heard and actively participate in the creation of solutions, chances are high that their experiences and points of view won’t be included, nor their specific needs addressed. In sports, it is proven that the participation of women in decision making leads to more gender sensitive policy making.



## 2. Gender-based violence and sports

UN Women’s policy brief “COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls”<sup>iv</sup> calls attention to the increased number of reports of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, increasing exponentially under confinement measures. For many women and girls practicing sports and physical activity, their teammates and coaches tend to be their main point of reference when they seek support. For example, in some sports for development programmes, like the “One Win Leads to Another”, from UN Women and IOC, girls rely on their peers, coaches and facilitators of life skills sessions to disclose situations of violence experienced or witnessed at home.

With more than half of the world in lockdown, many women and girls are spending 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, in homes where tensions can rise under confinement and violence can explode – and there is little recourse and nowhere for them to go to escape the situation. Many, under very vulnerable conditions, cannot afford an

internet connection and are completely cut off from their friends and trusted adults. As has happened in previous crises, like the Ebola outbreak, the rates of unintended pregnancies are also likely to increase as a result of sexual violence, as well as forced marriage.

Once it is safe again to leave the house and reengage in social activities, women and girls risk not being able to return to their sports practice, due to the traumas experienced while in confinement. In contexts where women and girls have faced increased social isolation and economic vulnerabilities, the risk of their being victims of sexual abuse and harassment increases, including in sports environments. It is therefore key to reinforce safeguarding policies in sports organizations during the crisis and upon the reopening of the sport world. The sport world can also take advantage of its reach to promote awareness to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence.

iii [Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Women](#)

iv [COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#)



### 3. Economic impacts on women in sports

As support for women’s sport was making huge strides in 2019 after years of incremental, but important progress, the future is uncertain about the continued momentum of gender equality in sport due to the economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak. With slashed revenues across the entire ecosystem of sport, clubs, teams and other organizations may fall back to prioritize investments in “traditional” sports – meaning men’s sports. Arguments about this being more profitable in terms of audience, media coverage and sponsorships may rule the decision-making, leading women athletes to face even more precarious contracts and conditions of training and, in some cases, to the extinction of women’s teams and leagues all together. Salary cuts, termination of contracts and clubs closing down were already a reality for women athletes prior to the crisis. Apart from athletes, as the sport world cuts back on its workforce due to shut-downs, women professionals and support staff also stand at risk to lose jobs.

FIFPRO’s 2017 Global Employment Report<sup>v</sup> revealed that just 18% of female football players are professional according to the FIFA regulations: meaning that they

have a written contract and are paid more for their activity than the expenses incurred. The report also shows that most contracts are no longer than 12-months and almost half of female players do not have a contract at all. This means that even when sport bodies have a cash transfer emergency response in place, these may not be able to benefit women professionals due to the lack of institutional transfer mechanisms. Likewise, due to the lack of contracts, many players cannot access social protection measures provided by governments to the unemployed or benefit from union support.<sup>vi</sup>

The sport for development sector is also feeling the impact of the crisis and organizations report funds being delayed, suspended, or reprogrammed by government and private sector supporters. Due to social distancing measures, sports activities for children and adolescents are interrupted and

many workers in the sector are not being paid. Women are usually underrepresented among coaches, trainers and facilitators in sports for development organizations and may be among the first to be furloughed or fired when organizations start cutting staff.



### 4. Women’s representation in the media

Prior to COVID-19 women were severely under-represented in sport media. According to the 2018 Associated Press Sports Editors Racial and Gender Report Card<sup>vii</sup>, 90 percent of sports editors and 88.5 percent of reporters were men. With championships, big leagues and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games being postponed, sports media professionals risk losing their jobs or having their contracts suspended. Airtime for women’s sport also lags significantly. While 40% of all sports participants are women, women’s sports receive only around 4% of all sports media coverage according to UNESCO.<sup>viii</sup>

When the lockdown is over and sports events resume, there will be an intense sports calendar and some women’s events may clash with men’s, leading to competition for audience and media attention. It will be crucial to ensure a gender-balanced schedule, as the IOC does for the Olympic Games to promote more balanced coverage.

The past few years have seen a positive trend among brands who have been stepping up to sponsor women athletes and to share positive messages about gender

v [Women’s Football Global Report 2017](#)

vi [COVID-19: Implications for Professional Women’s Football](#)

vii [The 2018 Associated Press Sports Editors Racial and Gender Report Card](#)

viii [Gender Equality in Sports Media](#)

equality through their advertising. At the same time, women athletes were only receiving about seven percent of global sponsorship revenue as of 2019. Sponsors have been deeply affected by the crisis, and as the sport world recovers, there is a risk that they may tend to invest limited resources in what they already know.

This scenario holds the potential to erode women’s sponsorship opportunities. On the other hand, there is the opportunity to rebuild portfolios that recognize the value of continuing to invest in women and to promote gender sensitive sport marketing.



Photo: Marta Vieira da Silva, named six times FIFA World Player of the Year, UN Women Goodwill Ambassador and UN SDG Advocate ©Photo courtesy of Marta



## 5. Girls participation in sports

Under stay at home directives, sport for development programmes and physical education lessons are also being cancelled, suspended, or re-thought altogether. The rare sport for development programmes that focus on girls have sent these players home and often into precarious situations.

The lack of physical activity, the social isolation, and deteriorating financial situations of families can lead to an increase in their levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression challenging their mental health and wellbeing. Under these conditions a large number of girls are at high risk for physical and sexual violence, unplanned pregnancies, and child marriage.<sup>ix</sup> Many girls around the world are now losing contact with the vital support system that sports NGOs and schools have provided – through peer to peer learning and professional coaches and facilitators. These are sometimes the only safe space available, leaving them to face challenges such as domestic violence, increased burdens of care, and economic survival on their own. School closures represent much more than a space for academic learning and, through *quality* physical education<sup>x</sup> curricula, provide an opportunity for students to develop the physical, social and emotional skills needed to navigate delicate life transitions and increase individual resilience.

Some projects and schools are trying to keep children and adolescents engaged in physical education and targeted sports activities online, however not all had already developed the skills to do so, nor do all participants have access to the internet. Even when they do, particularly girls and young women can be overwhelmed with care work and household chores and cannot engage in online tasks.

Once containment measures lift, many girls will be unable to return to sports practice, as traditional roles will have set in and their contributions to the economy and care for the family will be seen as necessary to family well-being and even survival, overshadowing the “luxury” of their sport practice. Moreover, families and teachers will be especially concerned for children and adolescents to catch up the missed time away from school. Sports and physical education lessons may not be a priority. Further, even if all these barriers are overcome, grassroots organizations risk not being able to continue offering sport programmes – especially where governments and donors are stopping or reducing financial support. For girls whose parents lost incomes, they may have to drop out of sport because their families can no longer “pay to play” or cover the costs related to their engagement in sport.



## Recommendations and Conclusions

Sport has an important role to play in a recovery that leaves no one behind. When the social distancing relaxes, the world will be longing for opportunities to meet loved ones and celebrate together. Societies will need tools for people to reconnect with each other and to rebuild a sense of community. Sport activities and events are perfect occasions for that. The post-COVID Tokyo Olympic Games are set to be a major moment for this global celebration and healing.

Further, we will want to build resilient communities and to see people healthy and strong. Physical activity is an effective means to achieve this goal. For example, sport and physical activity can reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases and therefore vulnerability to pandemics such as the coronavirus. Schools are an unparalleled entry point to trigger transformative shifts related to healthy lifestyles. Active, values-based learning and daily physical exercise provide a tangible

ix [COVID-19 and child, early and forced marriage: an agenda for action](#)

x Considered as distinct from traditional physical education programmes due to an increased emphasis on frequency, variety, inclusivity and value content.

solution to boost the physical and mental health of populations.

For women and girls, sports are also a powerful tool to challenge the gender stereotypes, to regain ownership of their bodies, to rebuild their lives after trauma, to further develop skills that are transferable to the work environment, to find a safe network and a sense of meaning and purpose, and to express their talent and passion professionally.

The world is currently at work on response, resilience and recovery plans. However, the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls in sports has yet to be well studied. It is

therefore recommended that institutions collect gender disaggregated data, monitor their actions for gender equality and support in-depth research for evidence-based advocacy, policy, decision making and resource allocation. Women and girls must be equally participants and leaders in the process of building back better, so their gains are not lost, and a better future for all becomes a reality, where women and girls can participate in, work with, govern and enjoy sport on an equal playing field. Below are a set of actions that members of the sport ecosystem can take both during the current crisis, in the planning for recovery and beyond.



Photo: Participants of One Win Leads to Another, joint programme between UN Women and the IOC.  
©UN Women/Lucia Prieto



### Governments:

- Ensure that schools provide quality physical education for all including through distance learning where possible, and upon recovery
- Support Sports for Development organizations to expand their offer of sports activities for all, including, equally, women and girls
- Continue to invest in sports programmes focused on young women and girls, preferably combined with life skills sessions to address gender issues
- If economic stimulus packages are to include support to the recovery of sports, ensure that there is equitable distribution of resources for men's and women's sport and accountability for the same



### Private sector sponsors and donors:

- Continue to support women's professional teams and increase women athletes' sponsorships
- Continue to promote positive gender equality messaging in sport related marketing
- Expand support to sports programmes for women and girls as a social legacy of the sporting events your company sponsors
- Expand support to safe sports for development programmes focused on girls



### Sports organizations:

- Continue to invest in women's sport
- Include women in the creation and implementation of recovery plans
- Conduct extensive consultations with girls and boys, women and men (athletes, coaches, referees, medical teams and other sports professionals) to better understand how they are being affected differently by the crisis and respond accordingly
- Engage male athletes, journalists, coaches and other male allies to champion women's sports
- Use high profile persons to raise awareness about the gender dimensions of the crisis
- Invest in and implement safeguarding and protection policies and procedures



### Media:

- Strive for balance in coverage and airtime for women's sports
- Commit to a recovery strategy that advances gender equality both through content production and women's participation in sports media
- Continue to promote gender balance among sport journalists
- Promote awareness of the exacerbation of harmful gender norms during social distancing



### Sports audiences:

- Use social media to reach out to clubs, teams, federations and sponsors to show your support for women's sports
- Set up crowdfunding and donate to NGOs that offer sports programmes and life skills sessions for girls
- When the games are back, tune into and attend women's sporting events



### Sports for Development NGOs:

- Develop protocols to support women and girl survivors of gender-based violence
- Monitor the dropout rates between boys and girls in comparison to the time before the virus outbreak
- Approach parents and community members and incentivize them to let girls return to sports practice
- Provide distance learning opportunities where feasible and maintain contact with participants in lockdown