

*From the Field*

# Sports and Development from a Gender Perspective:

## The Value Sports Ofek Leadership Program for Young Female Athletes

Adi Mohel

**In this article, the author reflects on some of the difficulties facing female athletes in Israel today, then describes her experience working in a leadership program that seeks to address these issues.**

Tasnim, the Value Sports facilitator at the Ofek Leadership Program for female athletes in Nazareth and Shefar'am, drew an especially turbulent session to a close. The subject addressed was portrayals and representations of female athletes in society and the media. The session began with scattered photographs of female athletes in the room – a few photos demonstrating their strength during athletic performance, others featuring them holding a ball and smiling while wearing a dress and a face full of makeup, and others depicting them nude as part of a fundraising campaign. Tasnim then asked: “Who do you identify with? How would you want your picture to be taken?” The team members shared their choices and a heated debate commenced. While some identified with the more professional photographs, others felt there was a gap between being feminine and being an athlete. After the session ended, the debate continued into the night on the WhatsApp group: Can a pregnant woman still be an athlete? Is pregnancy a social or a biological barrier? Although they had been playing together for years, it was the first time the athletes had a chance to share their experiences, feelings, and thoughts on the matter with one another.

In other parts of the country, athletes from all sectors of society and

geographic areas were looking at those exact same photographs and asking similar questions. Issues raised included fears of social rejection by family and peers outside of the world of sports, social disapproval of their choices in life, a lack of role models, difficulty equating athletic qualities to feminine ones, and fears of looking masculine. All these issues sound familiar to me; they remind me of the experiences I myself had as a female athlete. At the end of the day, it was those exact issues that shaped my social awareness and drove me to work at Value Sports and to establish a project that combines both my love for sports and my passion to promote women's rights.

### Female Leaders in Sports are Needed!

Apart from enhancing health, wellness, and quality of life, participation in physical activity and sport develops skills such as teamwork, communication, goal setting, leadership, and other achievement-oriented behaviors that women and girls may not be exposed to in other contexts. Indeed, “sport provides women and girls with an alternative avenue for participation in the social and cultural life of their communities and promotes enjoyment of freedom of expression, interpersonal networks, new opportunities and increased self-esteem.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Women, gender equality and sport, (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Division for the Advancement of Women, 2007), 3, <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Women%20and%20Sport.pdf>



Picture by Adi Mohel, Israel

Although participating in sports offers so many physical, psychological, and social advantages, girls and women from all sectors of Israeli society still face social barriers that often prevent them from partaking in them. The femininity and sexuality of female athletes is continuously questioned by their environment. Every girl learns as part of her socialization process that “throwing like a girl” (meaning like herself) is always a bad thing.

As in many other areas – politics, health, and education – there is a gross underrepresentation of female athletes in key positions in sports organizations. Surrounded by male coaches, managers, and male-dominant sports media, female athletes often find themselves as outsiders in sports without female role models to look up to. According to research done in the United States in 2010 on women's coverage in the media, coverage of women in the sports media is only about 4 percent, and it often relates to the athlete's physical appearance or her feminine qualities, rather than her athletic aptitude.<sup>2</sup> Physical education and coaches' courses still teach from a “one size fits all” perspective based on models derived from work with male athletes. As a result, female athletes are faced with the options of either adapting to a system that is not suited to their needs or quitting.

The International Working Group on Sport for Development and Peace addressed the urgent need to create a pool of talented and

inspiring female leaders in sports in order to create role models and mentors for young girls.<sup>3</sup> The contributions of women, particularly in leadership positions, can bring diversity and alternative approaches and expand the talent base in areas such as management, coaching, and sport journalism. As the UN Division for the Advancement of Women has claimed, the presence of women as leaders in sport can affect wider perceptions about women's aptitudes for leadership and decision-making, especially in traditionally male-dominated domains.

### The Value Sports Ofek Leadership Program

The goal of the Ofek Leadership Program is to mentor girls in sports clubs to recognize and enhance their sense of agency, self-empowerment, and independence, and to become influential role models to others on and off the field. Each sports club participating in the program assembles a leadership team of 10-12 young female athletes between the ages of 14-18, who meet twice a month for an eight-session workshop led by a Value Sports facilitator. During the workshops, the athletes work on attaining and strengthening key skills such as teamwork, communication, goal setting, self-efficacy, and leadership. As part of the program, group participants choose a project where they can transmit their experience and skills they have acquired to younger girls in their sports club or in their schools.

<sup>2</sup> Michael A. Messner and Cheryl Cooky, “Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows, 1989-2009,” (University of Southern California Center for Feminist Research, June 2010), <http://dornsifecms.usc.edu/assets/sites/80/docs/tvsports.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Meier, “The value of female sporting role models,” *Sport in Society* 18, no. 8 (2015): 968-982.

The Ofek Leadership Program encourages the creation of female athlete communities within the male-dominated sports world. During the year, leadership teams from varied sectors and geographic areas meet together to discuss mutual strengths and challenges in creating an efficient network of young female athletes dedicated to promoting women's sport.

Developing leadership skills among young athletes fosters bottom-up personal growth that may affect young participants and female sporting role models themselves. As Marianne Meier argues, female sporting role models instill leadership skills both explicitly and by example, which in turn increases their own capacities.

The program also creates a top-down process within the sports clubs by working with key characters such as managers, coaches, and athletes' parents. Value Sports provides these agents of change with new tools and perspectives to support female athletes. Inculcating a gender perspective in the sports club creates a long-term process, which affects future generations of female athletes.

Reflections by coaches included: "This process is definitely helping me understand the girls better, improving our mutual communication, empowering them, and increasing girls' attendance," and "The girls from the leadership group keep asking me about the younger girls and when can they come and cheer them in their games."

Our measurement and evaluation results show a significant change in the unity and communication of teams. Athletes participating in the program have reported feeling more confident with their teammates: "In the beginning of the year I felt I was alone in this team and that none of the other players was trying to make friends with me. Now they are my best friends." One said: "I got to know a different side of the girls in my team, and learned how to support them in stressful situations."

The results also showed improvements in the athletes' self-efficacy and ability to handle failure and stress. Above all, many of the participants were surprised to realize for the first time that they could be looked up to as role models: "This project has strengthened my personality. Today I feel more confident and I am no longer afraid to speak in front of a group."

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Picture by Adi Mohel, Israel