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## Conference Report

# Women's Sport in Africa – a Resource of Hope?



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At the beginning of March 2011, there was a one-day conference in Oxford, England, about Women's Sport in Africa. The venue was the magnificent building of the Faculty of History on George Street. The conference was organized by Michelle Sikes, a former Olympic runner for the US, who as a Rhodes Scholar is writing a thesis on female runners in Kenya; and John Bale, legendary sports researcher and professor emeritus at Keele University in Staffordshire. Registration was free thanks to support from Oxford's African Studies Centre, [RAS/ASAUK](#) and British Society of Sports History (BSSH). The impressive, albeit tight, program began with a keynote speech by Grant Jarvie from the University of Sterling, titled "Running as a Resource of Hope for Some Kenyan Women?". After that, ten presentations by renowned researchers in the field followed, among them Dean Allen, Stellenbosch University; Jean Williams, De Montfort University; and John Nauright, George Mason University, discussing various aspects of the main theme. Michelle Sikes presented a paper on the fastest women in Kenya.

idrottsforum.org was represented at the conference by Susanna Hedenborg and Aage Radmann

from the Department of Sport Sciences, Malmö University, who went by Oxford on their way to Australia for a month of research and teaching in and around Griffith University, Brisbane. Their report offers rich summaries of the presentations at the conference, and concludes with a probing discussion about possible new research about women's sport in Africa.

After an introduction by professor John Bale (Keele University, UK) who emphasised the importance of contextualising sport, the conference Women's Sport in Africa began with Professor Grant Jarvie (Stirling University, UK) giving a keynote speech on "Running as a Resource of Hope for Some Kenyan Women" in which the "power of sport", or sport as a development model was explored. His opening questions, which are questions every researcher actually ought to ask, were: what is going on; how can this be explained; and what needs to be done? The interaction between state, market and social patterns was used as a contextual background and it was suggested that a good collaboration between actors from these spheres could give a solution to issues linked to world poverty. Through presenting statistics on poverty, and elaborating on the issue of individual possibilities for using sport as a vehicle for social mobility, he discussed whether sport can be seen as a resource of hope and an escape from poverty. He concluded that this could be the case, *at least for some women*.

The importance of running as a way of changing one's life was also emphasised in Kayla Nolan's (Occidental College, USA) presentation "More than a sport: Empowerment of Women through running in Ethiopia". Here, another East African case was presented, and here too, it seems that the perceptions of what a woman can and is supposed to do have changed in relation to sport and training practices. That this change can be connected to sport as an economic activity was clear in Michelle Sikes's (University of Oxford, UK) presentation "The only Sport in (Eldoret) Town: Lessons from The fastest women in Kenya". In her latest study she poses the question of how female runners influence the inhabitants' perceptions on women and sport. She demonstrates how her interviewees (50 women and 25 men) describe the female runners as providers within the local economy, and how they can be seen as role models – despite the fact that they do not comply with traditional gender roles. Sikes shows that the female athletes invest their earnings in ways that benefit common interests and help provide for others. This is expected of them as women, whereas men spend their money on themselves. These gender roles are found in the development discussion in connection to how men and women are supposed to act and these conceptions are used as a basis for development policies (see for example the political economist Amartya Sen).

The importance of studying gender roles in connection to sport was emphasised in Dr Dean Allen's (Stellenbosch University, South Africa) lecture on "Volksmoder' Mother of a rugby Playing Nation'. In his analysis of Afrikaans rugby in the beginning of the 20th century it is clear that whereas masculinity and nation were constructed within rugby, femininity and nation were connected to each other in motherhood. Masculinity and femininity clearly represent separate spheres when it comes to the construction of the nation. Just as rugby was (is?) strongly associated with masculinity in South Africa, netball was and continues to be linked to femininity. What this femininity includes and how it can be connected and understood through analytical perspectives such as critical feminism, international relations and development studies is the aim of a planned study that was presented by Dr Louise Mansfield (Canterbury Christ Church University, UK) in the lecture 'Netball in Malawi: Women's sport and international development issues'. Using an ethnographic method she plans both to study and interact with netball players and organisers. Mansfield also outlined the great spread of netball and its change in accordance with media demands – changes that have increased interest in the sport. New Leagues have been started in Singapore, Australia/New Zealand and United Kingdom.

The conference delegates commented on the fact that women doing sport have met many difficulties. The structural discrimination against women in sports was clearly demonstrated by Dr Jean William's (DeMontfort University, UK) in her lecture on "Namibia's Brave Gladiators: From the Second World War Women and Sport Conference 1998 to Women's World Cup 2011. The term "football" does not encompass women's football. Another example was Cassie Clark's (University of Johannesburg, South Africa) lecture on "Media and the African women's football championship" in which she problematized how sporting women in the South African context have been seen as lesbians and regarded as anomalous. Here, as in other areas of the world, sport is perceived through the masculine hegemony. This may be particularly true of football. An extreme expression of this hegemony is illustrated by the example of the gang rape and murder of football player Eudy Sirmelane who played for Banyana Banyana (the female national team of South Africa). By studying the media coverage after the 2010's World cup, however, Clark demonstrated that some of the conceptions had changed. Even though women's sports continued to be of lesser importance than that of men, the study seems to suggest that there were some changes in how women's sports were seen by media consumers. This demonstrates a possible increase in the acceptance for sporting women.

The conference also included interesting discussions on methodologies used by the researchers. Ethnographic methods as well as the use of statistics were discussed and problematised. Mansfield's coming study proposed a co-production of

research as a possible way to influence sporting practices. Methodological problems related to measuring the outcome of a development sport project were problematised in Allison Woodcock's (Royal Holloway University of London, UK) lecture "Cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence for the impact of 'Moving the goalposts' in Rural Kenya". Woodcock's study showed that the project "Moving the goalposts" over a one-year period had changed some of the young women's perceptions of themselves, this in turn affecting their self-esteem. However, issues connected to societal ideas of women and sport did not change. These include matters such as it being unsuitable or even prohibited for women to play during their period, parents deciding when their daughters were to get married and to whom, and women having fewer career options than men. Woodcock's analytical toolbox will continue to be used in the project as well as in some others. It will be interesting to follow her findings in order to see whether sport can actually change norms, on an individual as well as on a societal level.

In addition to the lectures, there were fascinating presentations of other projects on women's sports in Africa: a photo collection on Elite Women's Football by Taiwo Adeogun and Kehine Adeogun; a documentary trailer on "Town of Runners" (Bekoji) about four young people trying to become international athletes; a presentation of a non-profit organization hosting training camps for runners in East Africa ([www.runningacrossborders.org](http://www.runningacrossborders.org)) that made the point that participators will attend school in addition to their training opportunities. The manner in which this project combined education with sports was of central interest, since some of the other studies pointed out that athletes often have to choose between school and sports. The documentary will be released in 2012.

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Professor John Nauright (George Mason University, USA) concluded the conference. His lecture made it very clear that for a long time, sports research was not particularly occupied with women's sport in Africa. Initially, sports research did not analyse African sports history at all. In accordance with the general pattern men's history was the focus of scrutiny when the field of African sports history grew. That is why a conference like this – thanks to Michelle Sikes - is of great importance. The delegates clearly demonstrated that there are many important questions to ask and studies to perform.

It would certainly be interesting to develop further questions relating to different parts of Africa and the intersectionality of for example social class, religion, gender and age. Africa is a large continent and there are big differences between East, West, South and North Africa – as well as between parts dominated by different religions, political systems and gender norms.

Furthermore, it is crucial to remember that the female athletes in the studies presented in this conference were young – not married women with children. Questions of generation and the opportunities for women of different ages are of interest. In the lives of young women it seems that a sporting career is something one can dream about before one gets married. When it comes to the question of generation, gender and sport it seems possible to draw conclusions about the situation of young women in the early stages of industrialization. In this process young women could and are able to work in manufacturing industries in order to support their families prior to marriage without this conflicting with the expectations on young women.

Other questions that require further discussion are issues of social class. Who are these young women athletes, and which families do they come from? Some results seem to suggest that while sport (for some) can serve as an important vehicle for social mobility, athletes do not come from the poorest parts of society. However, other results indicate that sport can be seen as a resource of hope. The social class background of African sportswomen is also relevant since such a study would enable comparisons between the African development and the changes of women's sport opportunities in Europe and the US. In the beginning of the 20th century many sportswomen from these areas came from a middle class or upper class background, and it is possible that their social class background made it easier for them to establish themselves within the context of sport. Does Africa follow the same pattern, or is the situation completely different? If so, why? Moreover, it would be of relevance to discover more about economic support for young African sports women – do they get financial support from their families?

Additional questions that need more research relate to the difference between men and women: do men choose a running career because it can be a resource of hope? How do different career opportunities in sport affect women and men? An obvious example is that more men than women become trainers – a fact that is also related to highly complex questions of problems such as sexual harassment and abuse (pointed out by Celia Brackenridge and Kari Fasting in several studies).

Research on gender roles and sports can be elaborated upon further. Not least, it seems that some of the young women presented in the studies comply with accepted gender roles in that they are economically responsible if they earn money by practicing sport. They are generous and provide their families with money. Perhaps their complying with some of the accepted parts of the gender role allows them to diverge from other parts of it? When sports and gender are analysed in relation to separate spheres it would also be interesting to use a broader concept of sport. In order to understand women's and men's role as well as the sporting context it is important to include the audience, ticket selling, coffee and cake making and selling etc. These are activities in which it is likely that women participated as essential parts of the sporting event, despite not being players themselves. A study of this kind could easily make use of the conclusions drawn in the classical study "Family Fortune" by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall.

A discussion of the concept of sport used in many sport studies is of great significance. At present, the sport concept is very often equal to the understanding of Western sports (even more narrowly it usually equates football and running). This is very problematic in an African context. The Western sport concept makes many activities and sport actors invisible, and researchers using such a narrow definition when attempting to study women's sport in Africa ask the wrong questions and look in the wrong directions, just as researchers have done when trying to study women's activities in other fields (labor market, political sphere). If PE as well as traditional sports and dance are included in the concept of sport it may become possible to better understand the physical culture of both men and women in Africa (and elsewhere?).

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