Safe Spaces in Sport: Getting to the Starting Line

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The recently surfaced accusations regarding sexual harassment in Sport for Development (S4D) beg for our sector to put into practice the very “life skills” we profess to embrace and teach our youth. So, let’s take advantage of these events and open up the discourse and focus on what is right for the children and youth we serve globally.

First and foremost, let’s be honest in admitting that we, as a S4D sector, have not paid enough attention and taken tangible action towards issues of child protection and gender (and other types of) inclusion. We have not been proactive enough in establishing non-negotiable policies, practical codes of conduct and organizational processes that truly ensure safe, inclusive spaces for the youth in our care, albeit for a few hours a week. With our eyes on ambitious health, employability and empowerment outcomes, we have overlooked a most basic issue of safety that can undermine it all. This is not an accusation, but a fact that permeates every part of our sector from donors through to implementing organizations. We have a collective responsibility to do better and to start now.

While in the end, no one is arguing about the fact that these issues are real and present, the imminent danger here is silence and the fear factor. We would like these ugly issues to go away, but they won’t without our collective courage to face them together. This is our wake up call and opportunity – let’s seize it.

The Challenges
There are two key parts to the challenge we face as a sector: (1) unprecedented growth within a loosely-regulated industry framework and (2) prioritizing the achievement of development goals over a sophisticated approach to the complex and daunting challenge of resource intensive issues such as child protection and inclusion. We have also made a ‘leap of faith’ assumption that because our aims are noble, our programs are safe. The global S4D sector is currently growing exponentially. This growth, juxtaposed with an increasing global mandate to include girls is creating a perilous situation where there are (a) few strategies that authentically facilitate girl’s safe participation and (b) a lack of child protection structures in place to assure safe spaces. As a result, children, especially girls, are potentially at risk while in the care of their sport programs.

Moreover, our experience shows that even at best, those organizations that do employ policies, often do not have the experience and resources to make the transition from safety-on-paper to safety-in-reality for all their participants. Additionally, funders have not come forward to resource and support the investment required in truly creating safe and inclusive spaces. Signing a clause in an agreement needs to be the beginning not the end of this commitment. And, even if the implementation of a child protection policy is mandatory in most funding agreements there are very few examples of monitor and evaluation protocols that include protection or inclusion indicators.

Finally, in the day-to-day reality of making our programs function, grow and meet donor requirements, our attention and resources, as implementers, are fundamentally inadequate. It will take real courage, conviction and leadership to change this. And the bottom line: it will take resources.
**The Opportunity to Evolve**

Pointing out the failure or absence of child protection mechanisms for any one particular organization or funder is completely counterproductive and undermines what needs to be a sector-wide effort. We need a systems-approach that encompasses a holistic and practical strategy. This critical effort must actively include everyone in the S4D ecosystem, including funders, investors, implementing organizations, participants and the communities we serve. At the end of the day, the individuals who do this S4D work, are generally coming to work each morning with golden intentions, and making huge sacrifices and iron commitments.

Improving the safety and inclusivity in S4D hinges on collectively reacquainting ourselves with the “life skills” we teach.

Here are some considerations for what a sector-wide game plan might look like:

1. **Improve communication and interpersonal skills**, acknowledging that we have vulnerability around the harassment and abuse that needs to be addressed. We have a responsibility to use our communication skills, listen actively, express our feelings and give and receive feedback. Through these skills we can better understand both the significant challenge for our sector as well as the practical solutions that can help bring about change. We need to reframe the discussion from blaming one implementing organization or donor to seeing this as a system-wide challenge and opportunity. Above all, we must create an enabling environment where we value honesty and transparency above being right.

2. **Apply decision-making and critical thinking skills**, identifying relevant information and information sources whilst scoping accurately and factually the status of this vulnerability. We need to investigate what steps organizations have taken. Individual organizations, as well as networking organizations such as streetfootballworld, UNICEF and Beyond Sport have taken powerful strides to raise sector awareness and provide incentives and support for improving child protection mechanisms. But what has stunted or prohibited progress? What are the real needs (i.e. resources) and accelerators to progress? We need to look deeper and with greater diligence.

3. **Set goals**, create and clearly articulate a sector-wide vision of zero tolerance on any type of abuse and commit 100% to inclusion. This means putting our resources behind improving safety and inclusivity in sport for all. Let’s step up efforts to build on current initiatives, create ways to share resources and knowledge and get leverage from collective efforts.

4. **Cooperate and work together**, by expressing respect for others’ contributions and focus on assessing each of our abilities to contribute to the team ‘win’. Every aspect of the S4D system has a critical role to play. Funders must make child protection and gender inclusion fundamental to their requirements. Beyond risk and reputation mitigation techniques, they must resource, support and reward earnest efforts to make organizational change possible on the ground. Implementing organizations (with support from others) must design practical, free, open-source tools with child protection experts that address both the barriers and accelerators. The S4D sector is not the first to encounter vulnerabilities with regards to child safety. We have an opportunity to adopt resources developed by true experts and improve and adapt to our unique sport context.
5. **Redefine “winning.”** by moving beyond blaming and policing as neither serves our organizations or participants effectively. We cannot operate in a winner-takes-all paradigm. As a sector, we are only as strong as our weakest link. Let’s define a ‘win’ as progress, and reward transparency. This is truly a journey and not a destination.

For children and youth to access the development benefits that sport can provide, the sport experience itself must be safe and inclusive. Moreover, with girls in particular, parents and care givers will not give their children a chance to participate in sport if they do not trust that the space and activities are in fact safe.

**Our Starting Line**
In the spirit of transparency, Women Win has been advocating since 2007 for increased participation of girls in quality sports programs designed to empower them to achieve their rights. We readily acknowledge that we also have a great deal of work to do before we can proudly state that all of the programs we support are safe and inclusive. And although we have child protection policies in place here in the Netherlands, we recognize the challenges of practical daily implementation at every level of the organization and with our partners in the field.

While not perfect, we are completely committed to rigorous self-examination, improvement and collaborating on practical tools that will create safer, more inclusive sport spaces in this sector. As the old adage goes, players win games, but teams win championships. The championship at stake here is the wellness of the youth in our care, and that is a game worth winning at all costs.

**Call to Action**
- Don’t bury this issue and hope it goes away. Do the opposite. Raise awareness of the need for work within your organization, networks, social media communities and our sector as a whole.
- Take an introspective look at what we can do to improve practices within our sphere of influence.
- Put safety and inclusion on the agenda of every workshop, conference and awards event.
- Garner agreement among funders to strengthen and resource stronger child protection and gender inclusion requirements including embedding them into monitoring and evaluation protocols.
- Create an online forum for promising practices including access to existing work and tools.
- Reward transparency and progress at all levels.
Afterword: Prioritizing the Leadership of Children

Implementing policies around child protection and gender inclusion is a key part of the solution, but this is not enough. With the exception of a few S4D programs, such as UNICEF, children’s voices have been largely excluded from the child protection discourse and they have not been supported in taking an active role in their own protection. The United Nations Secretary General’s Study on Violence against Children (2006) states that, “Our failure to listen to children has resulted in a failure to respond to their needs.”1

Most governments have committed to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. This means programs in these countries should also commit to the conventions including: ‘Every child is a unique and equally valuable human being (Article 2 CRC), has the right to not only life and survival, but also to development to their fullest potential (Article 6), offers the best understanding of their situation and have the right to be involved in development processes that affect them (Article 12).’

Children, and girls in particular, must be given a voice within such programs and empowered to drive the agenda by determining the meaning of protection in their context and in their sport. In India, the Australian Sports Commission is being supported by Women Win and Going to School to develop processes and tools that give children a chance to participate in determining the activities and policies that will be put in place to protect them. The toolbox, Drawing the Line is currently being piloted with six India-based organizations that are part of the Australian Sports Outreach Program. This is a game that intends to help children understand their rights and address the issues they face through honest open dialogue. The toolbox is set of cards, prompts, words, and activities that propel children into a conversation about the meaning of child protection and gender inclusion within their context. With this child-centric approach, we are not replacing what is already out there. Rather, we are adding a critical missing element to allow for a more holistic and comprehensive approach and welcome collaboration from the many experts and resources throughout the S4D sector.

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