



GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE HEALTH PROMOTION

HOW COMMUNITY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PROGRAMS CAN IMPROVE GENDER EQUITY

Participation in physical activity has health, social and economic benefits ranging from chronic disease prevention to mental wellbeing and social connections to positive changes in the community. Many communities recognize the range of factors that influence people's abilities to participate in physical activity such as lack of time or knowledge, program costs, childcare needs, or sense of disconnection and have developed strategies to overcome these barriers.

Community physical activity programs can also have an important role in promoting gender equity. Here are some suggestions for those interested in further developing programs and organizational policies to improve both gender equity and the health and well-being of girls and women, boys and men.

1 Help shift harmful attitudes and stereotypes about the abilities of women and men related to physical activity. Many of society's entrenched beliefs and behaviours about the differences between men and women are played out in physical activity settings. Assess your organization and develop strategies to ensure that programs do not reinforce these stereotypes (e.g., men are strong and confident, women are kind and care about what other people think) and help to make positive changes. For example, in promotional materials, make sure that girls and women are included and are not stereotyped in pictures or language; recruit, hire, train and invest in female coaches and facilitators to shift perceptions about the abilities of women to coach and lead and so that girls and young women have role models; challenge stereotypes about "dumb jocks" and support boys and men in achieving their academic goals.

2 Consider how programs might support girls' and women's economic empowerment. For many girls and women, participation in physical activity programs can be an important pathway to further educational and employment opportunities. Participation in physical activity programs can encourage girls and young women to stay in school or return after dropping out, can provide opportunities to learn about other educational and employment opportunities and can be a chance to develop skills related to future employment.

3 Provide mixed and single-gender programming. Female-only or male-only programming can contribute to feelings of safety for certain groups of men and women. For example, single-gender spaces can provide opportunities to address sensitive topics (e.g., body image) and to build confidence and skills without scrutiny or pressure from outside sources. Mixed programming can provide opportunities for men and women to develop respectful attitudes and more equitable relationships. In contexts where significant gender inequities exist, it may be helpful to involve men - fathers, husbands, community leaders - in developing and supporting women's programs. However, considerable attention should be given to exploring how their involvement would affect women's participation and outcomes.

4 Incorporate gender analysis into project planning. Sex- and gender-based analysis (SGBA) is an analytical tool that systematically integrates a gender perspective into the development of policies, programs and legislation, as well as planning and decision-making processes. There are a number of tools that are designed to help identify the known or potential sex, gender, diversity and equity effects of a program, policy or research project. One starting place is the SGBA e-Learning Resource website (<http://sgba-resource.ca>)

5 Work to create physical and emotional "safe spaces." Safety is defined as being free from threat of danger, harm or risk, emotional, psychological and physical. Given global rates of interpersonal violence, finding ways to provide safe and effective physical activity opportunities for individuals who have experienced violence and trauma is important in preventing re-traumatization and can lead to positive healing outcomes. Consider issues ranging from welcoming reception areas and travel arrangements to privacy for certain types of programs and activities to single- vs. mixed gender programming to staff training and awareness of gender-based violence.

6 Further develop your program's and organization's "culture." Developing plans (e.g. strategic, operational or action plans), policies, guidelines and procedures can be an important way to define your organization's desired culture. Policy reviews, staff training, and participant involvement in evaluation activities can help to create safe, accessible, inclusive, and equitable environments where everyone feels respected, welcome, involved, and valued.

7 Shift from recognizing and working around sex and gender differences to addressing and transforming the root causes of imbalances in resources, opportunities, and power. Many organizations recognize that women and men often have specific needs and that gender norms, roles, and relations exist that have an impact on access, participation, and outcomes. While this is an important approach to address existing inequities, consider ways to *transform* rather *accommodate* gender differences. For example, some programs that offer child-minding so that women can participate in their own recreational activities may consider ways to engage men or the entire family as a way of shifting expectations or raising awareness about women's caregiving responsibilities.

8 One size does not fit all. Research tells us that that women are often under-represented in physical activity programs; however, other groups in the community such as low socioeconomic communities, older adults and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, are also under-represented. Develop programs that are meaningful for diverse groups of women and men by examining the links between sex, gender and other determinants such as race-ethnicity, income, education, occupation and the social and built environments.

9 Engage boys and men in preventing violence against girls and women. Many physical activity programs for boys and men provide a unique opportunity to shape and shift attitudes about violence against women. For example, program participants can be given practical information about the meaning of consent or program facilitators can role model and discuss ways to build and maintain respectful and healthy relationships with women.

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For more information about the project and other gender transformative health promotion training materials, visit promotinghealthinwomen.ca.