

Original Research

View from the grassroots: Sport for Development and gender in the Pacific Islands

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ABSTRACT

Alongside the progression of sport-for-development (SFD) internationally, there has been an increase in research into how sport can contribute to gender equity outcomes. However, within this body of literature, only a small number of studies have specifically explored SFD initiatives targeting gender focused outcomes in the Pacific Islands. Further, few have managed to explore perspectives of program beneficiaries or broader, processes to achieve long-term outcomes. As such, we aim to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards supporting gender equity.

Data were gathered over a six-year period and examined SFD programs across nine Pacific Island nations. These initiatives were funded by an Australian Government program – Team Up – which aims to foster inclusion and create opportunities for women. Local program leaders and staff collected data from program participants via a story-based evaluative method. Findings highlighted program impacts, including confidence, self-belief, and achieving goals; challenging gender norms; and employment pathways, skills, networks, and agency. By focusing upon locally collected data that elevates participants' experiences and voices, we enhance practical and empirical understandings of the longer-term outcomes of SFD programs, particularly those focusing upon gender equity in the Pacific Islands.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, academic interest in the field of sport-for-development (SFD) has burgeoned (Schulenkorf et

al., 2016). Existing research has sought to explore the relationship between sport and the achievement of a wide range of development outcomes, including poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS education and prevention, and conflict resolution, amongst a host of other social policy and development outcomes (Welty Peachey et al., 2019). Sport has also been used widely by practitioners and policy makers as a vehicle to promote gender equity in low- to middle-income contexts, where programming seeks to challenge and reshape repressive gender norms that constrain the lives of women and girls. Reflecting the rise of SFD research more broadly, studies into sport's contribution to outcomes associated with gender equity have also increased, such as women's social inclusion, education, and health promotion (Hancock et al., 2013). Whilst research to date has broadly focused on the potential for SFD to contribute to gender equity, only a small number of studies have explored the contribution of sport to gender equity outcomes and associated concepts throughout the Pacific (Khoo et al., 2014; Uperesa et al., 2023; Sherry et al., 2017b), with local Pasifika voices of program beneficiaries and providers thought to be particularly lacking (Henne & Pape, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Mach, 2019). In addition, while some scholars have provided evidence of some short-term SFD gender-focused outcomes in the Pacific, others have questioned the enduring nature of these impacts (Schulenkorf et al., 2022; Siefken et al., 2015). Therefore, the aim of our research was to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards achieving gender equity. Specifically, we draw upon six years' worth of secondary data provided to us, the research team, by Team Up, a multi-national and multi-program SFD initiative funded by the Australian Federal government and delivered across the Pacific.

Keywords: Sport-for-development, gender, Pacific Islands, empowerment, inclusion

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and SFD

According to de Soysa and Zipp (2019), the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, with the inclusion of gender equality and empowerment, allowed actors in the emerging field of SFD to focus on gender and pursue funding relevant to the achievement of outcomes related to this. Continuing in the expansion of the Sustainable Development Goals, the pursuit of gender equity outcomes provided further opportunities for SFD organizations to promote initiatives for girls and women. As the field of SFD has continued to develop, key themes for gender and development have emerged including the increasing use of sport, by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as a tool to achieve sustainable development goal gender objectives and the emergence of the ‘girling’ effect of development (Hayhurst, 2014a; Nauright & Zipp, 2018). The ‘Girl Effect’ positions girls and women as actors in society, that, given agency and empowered can influence and develop their communities, countries, and nations (Hayhurst, 2014a; Zipp et al., 2019). Through this effect, SFD programs assume that investing in girls through access to sport opportunities, leads to empowerment and emancipation of girls and women’s oppression, which in turn can provide economic and social growth (Hayhurst, 2011). This trend has emerged from assertions that sport may serve as a transformative force for empowering women, challenging existing gender norms, whilst also promoting health, well-being, self-esteem, and leadership qualities (Hayhurst, 2014a; Saavedra, 2009; Szto, 2015). Additional outcomes attributed to the role of sport in achieving gender equity have included opportunities to resist gendered domestic labour, improve social networks, advance communication, and display greater autonomy (Hayhurst, 2011).

As with SFD more broadly, researchers have remained cautious about advocating for the potential for sport to contribute to such wide-ranging outcomes and highlight critical issues of the ‘girling’ effect. de Soysa and Zipp (2019) have asserted that “research on exactly how SFD plays a role in improving the lives for these girls and women is still lacking, with critical researchers calling for more in-depth and larger-scale studies” (p. 1790). To address this call, researchers need to consider the challenges associated with current concepts and approaches. While the ‘girling’ effect has been associated with positive outcomes, there are several criticisms of this concept. Firstly, in this way, SFD assumes girls and women have an innate deficit or weakness and when interjected with neoliberal ideological narratives, it situates poor often non-white people in need of help from the West (Zipp et al., 2019).

This inadvertently neglects the consideration of local contexts, where externally defined approaches to empowerment may not align with local cultures and norms. In one example exploring the danger that women’s empowerment may pose in social contexts where this is not seen as the norm, a woman football player was gang raped and murdered for becoming too ‘empowered’ and not conforming to dominant gender norms in her community (Meier & Saavedra, 2009).

Further, it is questioned whether positioning girls and women as “shy, quiet, and lacking self-esteem” (Forde & Frisby, 2015 p. 882) may contribute to reinforcing harmful gender norms (Naughtright & Zipp, 2018; Oxford, 2017; Zipp et al., 2019). Alongside the assumption that empowerment results in girls and women becoming assertive vocal leaders with the ability to bring about positive changes (Forde & Frisby, 2015), this neglects deeper structural issues, whilst denying the necessity of systematic changes to achieve gender equity. Too much emphasis on fixing SFD participants neglects consideration of larger economic, social, and political structures and power dynamics that have and continue to generate inequalities (Zipp et al., 2023). Under neo-liberalism, gender initiatives in SFD adopt individualized approaches to behavior modification, whilst failing to acknowledge and address systematic and structural inequalities that contribute to women’s oppression (de Soysa & Zipp, 2019; Forde & Frisby, 2015; Hayhurst, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

The examples provided highlight some of the tensions inherent in the use of SFD to promote gender equity. SFD must consider gender as a fundamental aspect of inequalities within development, rather than a strict binary construct with girls and women as targets (Zipp et al., 2019). Gender dimensions and gender SFD initiatives require an understanding of cultural, social, and political processes, power structures, and cultural norms (Collison et al., 2017).

In response, we have drawn upon the Capabilities Approach (Zipp et al., 2019) to better understand how initiatives are experienced by girls and women. Our research provides emphasis on how a SFD initiative is experienced and seeks to understand associated processes as opposed to outcomes of whether a program is effective or not. The Capabilities Approach can allow room for understanding how gender is experienced in SFD (Zipp et al., 2019). Considering the Capabilities Approach can provide a more balanced and realistic understanding of the role of sport for gender equity, by providing consideration to how SFD programs can contribute to meaningful choices and emancipation of girls and women to pursue and

accomplish goals (Svensson & Levine, 2017). For SFD to address these challenges, we recognize that girls and women do not experience programs in the same way. Researchers have challenged the construction of gender and heteronormativity of SFD initiatives, arguing that existing research demonstrates a lack of consideration for diverse gender and sexual identities within initiatives seeking to empower girls and women in low- to middle-income countries (Carney & Chawansky, 2014; Chawansky, 2011). Intersectionality of other social positions such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, nationality, disability, and religion are also important to consider when examining the outcomes of SFD programs. Intersectionality might work to constrain, repress, and disempower girls and women in development contexts (Shehu, 2015). To address these challenges, research methodologies that capture the complexity of individual experiences and more thoughtful engagement with research participants is necessary (Sherry et al., 2023). Although SFD case studies have provided a foundation to understand the role and potential for SFD programs for girls and women to effect change and challenge norms (Jeanes & Magee, 2013), in-depth studies are lacking (de Soysa and Zip, 2019). Our wide-scaled study, through the use of storytelling, intends to address the need to clarify if and how SFD programs contribute to gender equity and girls and women's development (Hancock et al., 2013). Gathering the perspectives of program recipients is crucial to understand these specific experiences.

SFD, Pacific Island nations, and Gender Equity

Whilst research investigating the perspectives of participants and providers on the contribution of SFD to promoting gender equity is limited, this is particularly the case in the Pacific context, despite outcomes related to gender equity being at the forefront of aid policy throughout the Pacific (Henne & Pape, 2018). The Pacific Island nations represent 23 small island states spread across the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean (Schulenkorf & Siefken, 2018), excluding the larger nations of Australia and New Zealand. The region includes clusters of islands, nations, and peoples making up Micronesia (e.g., Guam, Kiribati), Polynesia (e.g. Tonga, Samoa), and Melanesia (e.g. Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu). Much of this region has a long history of colonization by European nations including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the United States of America. Mirroring the rise of SFD globally, sport has increasingly been viewed as a vehicle for the promotion of development outcomes throughout Pacific Island nations. Despite this growth, there has been limited academic attention investigating SFD in the Pacific (Sherry et al., 2017a). Except for SFD research in Papua New Guinea

(Seal & Sherry, 2018), Vanuatu (Siefken et al., 2013; Siefken et al., 2015), Fiji (Sugden et al., 2019), and Samoa (Khoo et al., 2014). In Fiji, Sugden et al. (2019) sought to map intergroup relations between rugby union and football (soccer) players according to their identity, ethnicity and chosen sport, finding sport to affect intergroup relations positively and negatively. In Samoa, researchers sought to investigate the use of sport as an alternative pathway to schooling for young Samoan men who were deemed to be 'at-risk' or 'academically unfit'. Findings indicated that whilst this approach served to teach skills that were useful to future employment opportunities, it also had the potential to de-skill young men in other areas, thereby reinforcing their marginalized social position (Kwauk, 2016). These findings demonstrate that SFD programs may lead to unintended outcomes. It is important to recognize that sport itself may not result directly in positive development outcomes; instead, management of programs and engagement with local communities to design and implement them are key factors (Schulenkorf, 2017). These studies are also focused on men, neglecting the influences of SFD on gender equity, girls, and women, not atypical in sport-focused research agendas (Sherry et al., 2013). Gender is complex within a social context but is further complicated in the field of SFD due to cultural and historical contexts that have constrained girls' and women's participation in sport (Zipp et al., 2019). Women and girls often face gender-based barriers and discrimination. In SFD research, it is important to shed light on these inequalities by examining programs inclusive of women, to inform policy, challenge practices that hinder women's participation and development, as well as to align with the Sustainable Development Goals to achieve more gender equity.

Chong et al. (2022) presented 15 SFD studies designed to achieve gender equality and/or women empowerment, and only one study investigated a Pacific region (Seal & Sherry, 2018). Seal and Sherry (2018) explored experiences of women involved in a cricket program with focus on empowerment. The authors found the cricket program to be positive for micro factors by improving wellbeing, self-efficacy, motivation, and for the development of social support and networks. Macro benefits reported included disruption to traditional gendered relations and challenging public perceptions. When considering these processes, one cannot assume that a sport program can transform complex hierarchical and gendered structures. SFD must recognize its potential to leverage opportunities for women, men, and organizations negotiating these structures. Paramount is the involvement of local communities' members and organizers to codesign program and the involvement of female staff to build capacity and operations (Seal & Sherry, 2018).

Similarly, research undertaken by Siefken and colleagues (2013, 2015), investigated the impact of a walking program on exercise and eating behaviors of women in Vanuatu. Whilst the authors noted a short-term change in participant behavior, it was unclear how these changes would be sustained in the longer-term, and whether this would have a demonstrable impact on the rates of non-communicable diseases.

Further, Henne and Pape (2018) noted that initiatives intended to empower women and promote better health outcomes were increasingly part of the policy apparatus of funding agencies such as the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Other research has highlighted the multi-layered challenges related to achieving gender outcomes through SFD programming (Sherry et al., 2017a). These authors highlighted that throughout their research, they experienced “negative attitudes toward women’s participation in sport and physical activity, particularly in rural village locations where women are expected to engage in domestic tasks or focus on traditional arts and crafts for recreation, rather than pursue sport and physical activities” (p. 309). In another example, research conducted into the contribution of cricket to promote gender equity, asserted that whilst cricket had been successful in providing women the same opportunities to participate as men at all levels of the game, at the administrative level this equity was not reflected, which mirrored the dominant trend throughout Samoan society of an overrepresentation of men in employment (Khoo et al., 2014).

Participant Perspectives of Gender Equity in SFD

Whilst the contribution of sport to promoting gender equity has received concerted attention throughout the SFD literature, relatively few studies have directly captured the perspectives of program recipients (Mach, 2019). A review of existing literature highlights some examples exploring the perspectives of participants regarding the contribution of sport towards gender equity. Through an evaluation of a basketball program seeking to impact participant attitudes towards gender equity amongst Senegalese youth and coaches, findings demonstrated that after one year of involvement in the program, there was a significant positive shift in the attitudes of program participants, though no noticeable difference was seen in those of program delivery staff (Meyer & Roche, 2017). In addition, an examination of adolescent girls in St Lucia found that the perspectives of the young women involved in SFD initiatives supported broader claims within the research, particularly that sport possessed the ability to “challenge gender norms and support girls’ empowerment, improve perceived self-efficacy and foster positive peer and mentor relationships”

(Zipp, 2017, p. 1928). In an exploration of gender identities and sexuality amongst women in Fiji, rugby was thought to provide a medium for performing alternative gender identities (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). This research found that the expression of masculine attributes through rugby provided a context through which women could challenge dominant discourses that positioned them as passive and inferior. Finally, through an exploration of the perspective of young women involved in an SFD initiative promoting women’s empowerment in Delhi, India, researchers found that the “young women’s narratives describe in detail how the program impacted positively on their own behavior and self-perception, and also affected how others viewed and treated them” (Kay, 2009, p. 1187-1188).

Whilst robust claims within the existing literature base suggest that SFD may contribute to promoting feelings of empowerment amongst program participants, the strongest critique is that this often fails to challenge structural barriers within the broader societal context. Through an exploration of a SFD program based in Columbia, Oxford and Spaaij (2019) captured participant perspectives, who expressed that despite local powers that constrained their lives, participation in sport allowed them to escape violence, challenge social norms that reinforced restrictive gender roles (such as the division of domestic labour), and challenged the stigma attached to women’s participation in sport (an arena traditionally reserved for men). Even so, the authors treated these narratives cautiously, arguing that this represented a “false sense of agency” that highlighted the range of oppressions that impacted their lives (p. 68). In an exploration of football programming targeting young women in Zambia, researchers sought to examine whether football provided a vehicle for promoting gender equity and women’s empowerment through an exploration of the experiences of program participants (Jeanes & Magee, 2013). Their research suggested that whilst young women involved in football programming experienced feelings of personal empowerment and an increased sense of control over their own lives, there was limited evidence of these impacts translating beyond the sporting context. The researchers also found that the young women involved did not necessarily believe that participation in football would lead to the programs’ stated outcomes, which included “challenging gender stereotypes, reducing violence against women and increasing opportunities for themselves outside of the home” (p. 148).

Overall, the literature reviewed to date has demonstrated that whilst program participants and providers may perceive a range of positive outcomes derived from SFD initiatives that promote gender equity, the evidence of this impacting the broader power structures that contribute to the

the subjugation of women largely remain unchallenged. Whilst some studies have sought to examine SFD and gender equity initiatives in the Pacific more broadly, there is a significant shortage of research examining the local perspectives of program participants towards the achievement of these outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Context

Our research focuses upon the experiences of participants engaged in SFD initiatives that are designed and implemented by Australian non-profit NSOs in partnership with over 30 regional sport organizations and NGOs across the Pacific (Team Up, 2022). Specifically, SFD initiatives that were administratively coordinated by 'Team Up' and situated across nine Pacific nations: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu. Team Up (formerly known as the Australian Sports Partnership Program) is an Australian Government program which supports Pacific SFD initiatives in their goal of bringing people together, fostering social inclusion and creating opportunities, particularly for women and people with disabilities (Team Up, 2022). Multiple inter-organizational partnerships are involved in the design and delivery of these SFD initiatives, with Australian and New Zealand-based national sport organizations (NSOs) employing staff to manage these programs and deliver them in partnership with Pacific NSOs and local developmental organizations (Raw et al., 2021). Through examining this research context, we aim to explore participant perspectives on initiatives throughout Pacific Island nations, with a focus upon the contribution of SFD towards achieving gender equity.

For the purpose of this paper, gender equity is focused on women and girls. The understanding of gender in many Pacific Island contexts is complex for several reasons. In many Pacific Island nations, there is a cultural context of a third gender (e.g. *fafafine* in Samoa), and those people would not identify as transgender or non-binary in a Western understanding of gender. As such, for SFD program delivery and related research, work that focuses on women and girls in this setting may and does often include people outside of the traditional gender binary. To further complicate this issue, many of these nations are also very religious and/or conservative, therefore although socio-culturally people of a third gender may exist and be accepted in their communities, there would be no formal record of gender differences. As such, when we refer to women and girls, it should be understood that there may be gender differences within the participant cohort but would not be identified as such in the data collected.

Research Team Positionality

Two members of the research team had an established relationship via the Team Up program as research and evaluation partners for several Pacific Island sport programs delivered under the auspice of the Team Up program (e.g., Raw et al., 2021; Sherry et al., 2017a; 2017b). Specifically, Raw and Sherry, had been involved in monitoring and evaluation efforts across multiple projects and Pacific locations since 2015. As such, they both had prior experience working with local staff, SFD initiatives, organizations; and as a result, were mindful of government funding processes and reporting requirements, cultural practices and sensitivities (particularly regarding gender norms), and broader contextual factors such as international relations. Despite this experience, however, this project was the first overarching piece of work undertaken as a research team with the Team Up program overall. Both primary team members were involved in the project concept and design, with one author working with the Team Up program to collate and prepare the data, and the other undertaking the first round of data analysis. All authors engaged in discussions around the findings of the analysis and worked together in the preparation of this manuscript.

Data Collection

Qualitative data from Team Up's monitoring and evaluation efforts of SFD programs over a six-year period (2015-2021) functioned as the data set for this research. Local program leaders and staff who were involved in the implementation and delivery of programs also oversaw data collection with program beneficiaries via a 'most significant change' story-based evaluative method (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005). Also known as 'stories of change', this method has been adopted by many international development programs as a flexible and simple tool that can be implemented by local stakeholders (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005). In this instance, stories of change functioned as a reporting requirement of the funded programs (Sherry et al., 2017b). This evaluative approach was developed and implemented due to its flexible nature and its capacity to empirically capture the voices and perspectives of children, many of which are primary school aged. All program leaders and staff had appropriate child protection compliance and training. The method used has been highlighted as particularly appropriate for the Pacific context, in that local staff and stakeholders were involved in data collection, and doing so, this method aligns well with local community values and cultural traditions around storytelling for the purposes of knowledge sharing and education (Sherry et al., 2017b). Such collaborative approaches to evaluating programs have been encouraged

by scholars, as they can help bridge different works that researchers and local stakeholders tend to inhabit and can assist with navigating potential socio-cultural boundaries (Spaaij & Schaillée, 2022).

In terms of the implementation of this method, local capacity and access to technology varied greatly, with some program staff capturing stories of change via video recordings on their phones or iPads (which were then transcribed verbatim), others enabling program beneficiaries to type directly into Microsoft Word documents on a computer, or in some instances, responses were handwritten onto paper and then photographed. The questions asked of participants were also wide-ranging, but in essence all centered around program beneficiaries sharing their story of participation in programs. This exercise was built into the final program delivery day as a reflective exercise. The exact prompts to capture the stories were adapted organically by the in-country staff who collected these, depending on who they were talking. For instance, one program leader asked multiple questions, including “When did you first become involved with [sport location]?”, “Why or how did you get involved?”, “What has changed for you and / or your family, community, team, organization, since you became involved? Please tell me about the changes in your situation (life) ‘before’ you became involved and your situation (life) ‘now’.”, and “Of all changes you have told me, what do you think was the most important change? Why was this change important?”. Alternatively, other program staff simply asked participants to tell them a story about their time in the SFD program. All responses were either completed in English or were completed in local languages and then translated into English by local staff before being provided to Team Up. In total, between 2015 and 2021, Team Up received 466 stories of change from fourteen NSOs, which implemented SFD programs across the nine aforementioned nations using the following sports: athletics, Australian rules football, badminton, basketball, cricket, gymnastics, hockey, netball, rugby league, rugby union, soccer, swimming, table tennis, and volleyball. After gaining university ethics approval (BLINDED UNIVERSITY + ethics approval number), Team Up provided this data set to the research team before secondary qualitative data analysis methods were implemented.

Data Analysis

Drawing upon suggested methods for qualitative data analysis (Saldaña, 2016) and secondary analysis of stories of change data (Dart & Davies, 2003; Davies & Dart, 2005), data were interpreted and sorted into common themes. Davies and Dart (2005) explained that in the

context of stories of change “Secondary analysis involves the examination, classification and analysis of the content (or themes) across a set of SC [significant change] stories... [secondary analysis] is generally done in a less participatory way, often by the person in charge of monitoring and evaluation, or a specialist” (p. 39). However, in some instances, secondary analysis can occur in a more participatory manner, whereby program stakeholders help to sense check analysis procedures and thematic codes (Davies & Dart, 2005). The latter approach was deemed as the most appropriate for our research, in that two members of the research team are academics with expertise in monitoring and evaluation, and the third member being a program stakeholder. Hence, we had one member of the research team undertake the bulk of the following data analysis procedures, whilst also sense checking procedures with the other two members along the way. As many of the respondents were children and/or English as a second language speakers, the researchers ensured that they represented the data as clearly as possible, whilst considering the socio-cultural context of the data being collected.

As suggested by Davies and Dart (2005), we undertook thematic analysis of the data set and searched all stories for different kinds of change and programmatic impacts, both intended and unintended. The first step in the process was to form an overarching database within qualitative analysis software (Saldaña, 2016), NVivo 12. Following this, we undertook the first cycle of data analysis, where data were initially generally coded which led to the development of multiple recurrent themes (Saldaña, 2016), with attention to capabilities and gender experiences. Multiple data analysis cycles then followed this, with the development of common codes patterns (Saldaña, 2016). Afterward, we worked together as a research team to identify common themes and narratives, from which we interpreted research findings, which forms the basis of this paper (Saldaña, 2016). In doing so, we worked together via self-reflexive methods, examining codes and themes collectively and in an in-depth manner to piece together narratives, and recognizing our thought processes and biases along the way (Tracy, 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes and data illustrate stories told by the beneficiaries regarding their experiences and perspective of initiatives throughout the Pacific Island nations, in relation to gender equity. As the focus of the question prompt for the story was individually focused, the majority of responses reflect individual experiences and functioning. We present three main themes that reflect the capabilities and functions of participating in a SFD program:

'Confidence, Self-Belief, and Achieving Goals'; 'Challenging Gender Norms'; 'Employment Pathways, Skills, Networks, and Agency'. The first theme highlights the individual capabilities achieved through participation, which provided foundations for functional outcomes and influences on gender norms and employment.

Confidence, Self-Belief, and Achieving Goals

Participants highlighted how their engagement in SFD had assisted in developing confidence in themselves, a sense of achievement and self-belief: “[Development Officer] was looking for women to fill the team, and sent me down to the foreshore to start training... I never thought I would be capable of making the team...For the first time in my life, when I played AFL, I challenged myself to step outside my comfort zone and challenge myself to a different style of training; to train to be one of the best and be part of a team... It's an honor” (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). Similarly, to research conducted by Kay (2009), these accounts highlight how SFD programs can positively impact participant behaviors and self-perception.

One participant explained how participating in an all-abilities programs enhanced her confidence in her physical abilities and improved her willingness to try new things: “The game became more than just a game it became the very vehicle of developmental changes inside of my physicality, mentality, and emotions. I discovered new physical abilities, and it gave me a boost of confidence in my personal independence. I was taken out of my isolation to meet new people, and this inspired and motivated me to try out new things and live life” (Woman Program Participant, Table Tennis, Fiji). A sense of self awareness, belief and support in these environments helped to motivate participants to work towards their goals: “My teammates motivate me, and I know that I can take another step to train hard, so I can wear the white jumper and represent my country. I believe that if you get to believe in yourself and work hard then you can definitely achieve anything” (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). Similarly, another participant described how their self-belief had developed as they progressed from being a participant in programs to a coach: “Since become involved my interest in water sports has grown and I feel like I have a purpose everyday...I never thought that I would become a swimming and volleyball teacher and it has helped me achieve things I thought I never would be able to. I need to be a good example to others all the time as I am in a position where people look up to me and respect me” (Woman Coach, Swimming and Volleyball, Vanuatu). Scholars have pointed to the importance of participants' agency and self-awareness of personal development when working towards

empowerment and gender equity in SFD (Samie et al., 2015). In this context, confidence and self-belief appeared to be a relatively common but important outcome for many participants, laying the foundation for broader community outcomes, such as challenging gender norms, as we discuss in the next section.

Challenging Gender Norms

In line with SFD research conducted in St Lucia (Zipp, 2017), our research findings demonstrated how sport can help to challenge gender norms. For instance, one participant explained how her engagement in SFD programming helped to challenge the traditional notions of domestic labor: “The most important change for me is that I have been able to continue my sport, even after having my baby. Traditionally in our culture, once children came along the mother is expected to give up any sporting involvement and stay at home. The success of our volleyball women has helped change the expectations and this has allowed me with the support of my family to still be actively engaged” (Woman Program Participant, Volleyball, Vanuatu). Research has highlighted how sport can help to work towards gender equity by resisting typical gendered notions tied to domestic labour and helping participants in displaying greater autonomy (Hayhurst, 2011). Similarly, Oxford and Spaaij (2019) demonstrated how sport enabled participants to challenge social norms, like women's participation in sport, and gender roles, like the division of domestic labor. However, the authors were cautious and noted that there were a range of oppressive socio-cultural norms that still impacted participants. In fact, multiple researchers have highlighted how SFD initiatives tend to reinforce neo-liberal and individualized approaches within programming, whilst failing to address the broader structural and socio-cultural barriers that continue to oppress women (de Soysa & Zipp, 2019; Forde & Frisby, 2015; Hayhurst, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

Participants often had to overcome several external obstacles within their community so that they could play sport. Family support was highlighted as one such barrier, with participants explaining its importance when engaging in SFD initiatives. One participant described how initiatives provided a safe space in which women could play sport with the support of their family, and in which men could also play traditionally feminine sports: “I think the social order of responsibilities of women and men have slightly changed right now ... what I have seen in netball, I've seen families come in, the father plays with men's team, then you've got the mother playing ... and then you've got the kids somewhere enjoying themselves, and helping out. That's what is becoming very common in the netball courts.

And it's a change, and it's a positive change that I think is good for netball, that we've got men involved, not just the boys in the school, but we've got men who are involved, generally involved in netball. Their interest in netball has grown and they would like to participate even more. So, in terms gender roles, I think it has changed slightly and change we can see is through netball, there are more participating now, the men ... sometimes you'll find the fathers just bringing their daughters and then they play prior to their daughters ...” (Woman Development Officer and Coach, Netball, Samoa). Likewise, family support was also considered important if participants were women and playing a sport that was traditionally masculine: “My family didn't support me initially, as AFL was seen as a male dominant sport, and it's not lady-like, but I saw it as an opportunity to train as hard as the men, and to not see gender barriers that exist in sporting culture. AFL provided the opportunity to develop my confidence and sporting ability to be as strong and independent as the men. To make my own decisions in society as a woman. My voice can be heard as much as the men” (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji).

Scholars have pointed to the importance of challenging gender and heteronormativity in SFD, particularly when considering initiatives that target women in the low- to middle-income countries (Carney & Chawansky, 2014; Chawansky, 2011). Research into the participation of women in sport in Fiji demonstrated how playing rugby enabled women participants to contest gendered notions that often position them as inferior or submissive (Kanemasu & Molnar, 2017). Conversely, scholars have questioned the integration of women into masculine sporting norms, in that it implies women can only be empowered if they express masculine traits and conform to heteronormative ideals, and thereby inadvertently reinforce existing boundaries associated with sport (Zipp & Nauright, 2018). Additionally, this approach risks positioning women and girls as lacking self-esteem (Forde & Frisby, 2015), or struggling under the patriarchy, and implies that they can only become empowered by pursuing sport or fitness and transforming themselves into assertive leaders (Henne & Pape, 2018). Furthermore, by interpreting gender equity in this manner, and implementing programs in accordance with funding requirements, we continue to reinforce existing Australian policy discourses in the Pacific context (see Henne & Pape, 2018). That is, we continue to largely interpret gender equity through the lens of privileged Australian policy makers, rather than through the lens of the most important stakeholder group in SFD, program beneficiaries, or in this case, local women. Consequently, we, as researchers and policy makers must prioritize the involvement of local women in the design and

implementation of these policies and programs. Team Up has demonstrated progress in this space over recent years, with efforts made to establish a local field office in Fiji that employs local staff to support and collaborate with regional, sub- regional and national stakeholders (Team Up, 2021). Further, Team Up encourages local sporting organizations and stakeholders to employ local staff to implement and evaluate programs, many of whom were originally program beneficiaries themselves. We explore participants' experiences in association with this in the following section.

Employment Pathways, Skills, Networks, and Agency

In addition to challenging gender norms, there were multiple programs that emphasized pathways for participants and the employment of local staff: “I was given a job opportunity from Cook Islands Football and became the first female project manager for Just Play in the Pacific” (Woman Program Manager, Soccer, Cook Islands). Alongside employment, professional development opportunities helped to improve local capacity, skills and had a flow-on effect upon programming and pathways: “I had the opportunity to go and represent Samoa in a coaching program that the Oceania Federation organized...So when I got back with the input from the facilitators of the workshop, I was able to design a framework, adapted from the New Zealand pathway, where you identify the pathway of a coach...I think this training has really opened up our eyes in saying, okay, put us on the right pathway, we can go there and of course, we can get there” (Woman Development Officer, Netball, Samoa). SFD scholars have consistently pointed to the importance of local capacity building in these contexts (Hayhurst, 2014a; Henne & Paper, 2018; Khoo, et al., 2014) because women's representation within the administrative level of sport is an important step in fostering gender equity within Pacific contexts that typically have an overrepresentation of men in employment (Khoo, et al., 2014). In addition, research into SFD for women in the Pacific highlighted how programs were more stable if they relied upon the capacity and knowledge of local women (Henne & Pape, 2018). Overall, fostering self-belief and leadership skills among participants is not only important in promoting gender equity, but these impacts have the potential to ripple beyond the individual level and help to improve the sustainability of organizations via enhanced funding prospects and local employability (Hayhurst, 2014a).

In addition to employment and vocational skills, participants described how they progressed from being a participant in programs themselves, to then becoming employed and involved in implementing programs, and thereby becoming a role model to other participants: “I

never thought that I would become a swimming and water polo teacher and it has helped me achieve things I thought I never would be able to. I need to be a good example to others all the time as I am in a position where people look up to me and respect me” (Woman Coach, Swimming, Vanuatu). Program participants also reflected this, highlighting how their engagement in sport helped them to meet new people and engage with role models that they could look up to: “The AFL Fiji Development Coordinator has always been my role model...if the Development Coordinator can balance her studies, work and training than so can I” (Woman Program Participant, AFL, Fiji). These improvements in peer and mentor relationships (Zipp, 2017), as well as overall social networks are important steppingstones when working towards gender equity (Hayhurst, 2011).

In addition to social networks, those involved in the implementation of programs described how it enhanced their personal development and gave them a sense of agency in working towards gender equity in their community: “I think for me personally this course has helped me grow as a player, a coach and as a woman who is able to stand up and promote gender equality and fight injustices done to women and children...” (Woman Coach, Rugby Union, Fiji). For some, this sense of agency was vital in improving their own personal circumstances. One local development officer highlighted one instance where a fellow development officer had been through personal difficulties and became homeless after her partner removed her from her children and the family home:

behind the humor and bubbly personality lies a life story that would be considered a nightmare to a lot of people. Before she became involved with [cricket] she was not sure where her life was heading. She was living with her partner and children at her village until one day she found herself kicked out of the family and without a place to go...her hardship went beyond anything you can imagine. It was during those difficult times that she discovered the [sport] and according to her, making the decision to join was life changing. (Woman Development Officer 1, Cricket, Vanuatu)

This individual was interviewed by local staff and described how her employment in SFD had helped her overcome these challenges:

Joining as the island cricket ambassador is a blessing for me. It provided me with a job and now that I have a full-time job at the VCA I am able to get back on my feet. Having a full-time job is helping me financially to start over again and create a new home for myself. (Woman Development Officer 2, Cricket, Vanuatu)

Economic empowerment has been viewed as a key component in fostering gender equity and combating cycles of domestic violence (Hayhurst, 2014a). Research into SFD in Columbia demonstrated how sport can help women to challenge restrictive gender norms and flee domestic violence (Oxford & Spaaij, 2019). If designed appropriately, programs can help participants and staff to develop confidence and skills that can assist in preventing gender-based violence (Hayhurst, 2014a, 2014b). However, this can be a dangerous proposition in some contexts, in that women can risk their personal safety if they are considered to be too empowered or assertive (Meier & Saavedra, 2009). Further, as noted earlier, scholars have suggested that these programs often also struggle to challenge the broader societal barriers that underpin many of these issues (Hayhurst, et al., 2018; Oxford & Spaaij, 2019).

Consequently, SFD managers, policy makers and researchers must continue to work with local community stakeholders, particularly women, to understand these socio-cultural and systematic barriers and address them in a culturally appropriate way. However, we must note that programming that empowers women via the use of sport has been unwelcome in some contexts, particularly in rural locations or male-dominated local sporting organizations (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a). Further, realistic expectations need to be placed upon SFD and what they can achieve. That is, how far can the SFD ripple effect go (see Sugden, 2014), if it is not welcome locally? This is not to suggest that such programming should not occur, rather, we must continue to pose questions around culturally appropriate and co-designed programs, safe and welcoming environments, and most importantly, focus upon the needs and desires of local women and girls. These questions are particularly pertinent to those SFD initiatives targeting women in low- to middle-countries, but also funded, designed and or implemented by those in high income contexts.

CONCLUSION

Practical and Theoretical Implications

From a practical perspective, our research demonstrated the importance of confidence and self-belief as individual oriented outcomes in women focused SFD. While arguably self-evident, these outcomes lay the foundation for broader, structural outcomes, such as challenging gender norms and employment. With regard to challenging gender norms, our findings indicated the value of providing safe spaces for women to play traditionally masculine sports, like football or rugby, as well as facilitating program environments in which men could play traditionally feminine sports, like netball. While we note that scholars have questioned

whether these approaches reinforce or challenge gender norms and heteronormative ideals (Zipp & Nauright, 2018), we also point to the fact that local participants believed that they benefitted, and gender norms were challenged by participating in SFD designed and implemented in this manner. Although different programs identified different mechanisms of change (e.g. in school vs. community), the common characteristic across all programs was the co-design with community and local program managers and delivery staff. The communities were engaged from the outset of designing and initiating the programs, which led to the program successes in their various forms across the delivery modes and locations. To that end, SFD policy makers and researchers should implement co-design programs and continue to prioritize the voices and needs of local women in low- to middle-income countries. In doing so, the cultural appropriateness of certain programs and sports in some locations should be discussed with local stakeholders. These considerations are particularly important when programming is funded by and or overseen by organizations or governments based in high-income contexts. Specifically, the needs of local women should be prioritized before the needs of international funders. This may occur through more flexible funding mechanisms and trust-based philanthropy. While this might be idealistic given the nature of international SFD, if considered appropriately, in partnership with local staff designing and implementing programs, they will be better placed to deliver upon gender outcomes such as the ones described in this paper.

Theoretically, while there has been an increase in research into SFD programming focused on women and girls, there have only been a small number of studies that have specifically explored sport's potential to foster gender equity outcomes in the Pacific (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a). Not only does our research help address this, but it also assists in addressing calls for a greater focus upon the voices of local program beneficiaries in low- to middle-income contexts (Khoo et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2017a; 2017b). Specifically, we have done so by drawing upon secondary data provided by Team Up and collected locally by staff and stakeholders of programs. Given scholars have questioned the enduring nature of SFD impacts (Schulenkorf et al., 2022; Siefken et al., 2015), this broad data set provides empirical evidence of programming conducted over a six-year period and demonstrates gender equity outcomes over the course of this time. Methodologically, this is a large set of participant-focused and locally collected data, an important feat given the ongoing calls for more local capacity in the delivery and administration of international SFD (Hayhurst, 2014a; Henne & Paper, 2018; Khoo, et al., 2014). In doing so,

these data collection methods have arguably reduced the visible presence of international academic researchers. This is significant in this context when considering the impacts of post-colonialism and associated issues of power and control.

Limitations and Future Directions

The size and locally driven nature of the data set we explored in this paper is fundamentally a strength of this research; however, it also posed difficulties as the quality of data varied greatly depending upon local capacity, technological access, and language barriers. An additional limitation is the possibility of self-selection bias in the sample of those participants willing to tell their story, as it may be those who are most engaged and most happy with the programs and outcomes who are prepared to have their stories recorded. Further, this large data set posed issues regarding the research team being able to untangle the data set and demonstrate clear touch points and participant journeys across the six-year period. While some positivist researchers may argue this is not methodologically sound in an academic sense, as SFD researchers we posit that the benefits of locally driven data collection in international contexts outweigh the drawbacks or challenges that were faced. That is, these methods offer a culturally safe platform for program beneficiaries and staff and can help to leverage local voices and uncover insights that might otherwise have gone unseen. Further, building upon our experiences, we acknowledge the practical reality of researching in SFD internationally can be challenging, but would suggest that future research efforts work to collect information on the demographic make-up of participants and look for innovative solutions that help to map out participants' touch points in SFD over time. In addition, we suggest that scholars work to involve Indigenous and or Global South researchers in their projects moving forward, both in terms of inclusion within research teams and within reviews of literature where possible. Overall, we would encourage future research that builds upon methods of participant focused and driven monitoring and evaluation methods, as they help to adopt contextually and culturally appropriate data collection practices and help to move towards improvements in post-colonialism.

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