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Scoring for Social Change: Mathare Youth Sports Association Girls Team in Kenya

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**Abstract:** The Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) established in 1987 has become one of the popular football teams in Kenya. The group incorporates community building activities in its sports, and as a result these activities, MYSA has previously been nominated Nobel Peace Prize. While the MYSA is known for its men's football leagues, this paper focuses on the women's team that began in 1992. The women's team has been able to transcend cultural barriers by engaging in, and being successful in a sport that has been traditionally male dominated. This paper uses a feminist approach and adopts a constitutive view of communication to reveal first, how involvement in sports has led to a new identity and self determination for the young women that is geared toward social change. Second, the paper examines how the women's football team has led to a change in some of the stereotypes that have traditionally associated with women living in the slums.

**Key words:** Narratives, Kenya, sport, gender, social change

This paper focuses on the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA), a football group that began in 1987 as an illustration of how youth groups have engaged in activities that lead to both personal and community advancements at grassroots levels. MYSA received its initial recognition because of its men's team successes in many sports events. However, this paper specifically focuses on the girl's league that was formed in 1992.

MYSA's girl's team stands out because in Kenya, as in many other places in Africa, football has been traditionally seen as a male sport (Brandy & Khan, 2002). I use this case study to respond to discourses that constitute, conceptualize and theorize African feminism within a framework of oppression and invisibility (Oyewumi, 2003).

Oyewumi makes the claim that African women's mobilization and self-assertion are not represented adequately in feminist theorizing which could be traced, in part to colonial forces and practices. She argues that much of the emphasis has been on the voiceless African woman. Kolawole opposes such kinds of representations as she points out that African women are not only speaking back but they are also actively engaging in work that deconstructs distorted images or misrepresentations of African women. Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994) associates the misrepresentation of African women's voices with a refusal by scholars to search for African voices in the right places. This paper seeks to make a contribution that challenges the silence and subordination to cultural norms that is attributed to African women by revealing how sports has emerged as one arena that honors women's voices and organizes in alternative ways.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to situate sports in a feminist theoretical framework; and second, to utilize discourse analysis in highlighting the MYSA women's voices as they engage in sports by looking at some of the narratives that are presented in, *Letting girls play: The Mathare Youth Sport Association's football program for girls* (Brady & Khan, 2002). The paper is structured in the following manner. First, I provide a brief description of MYSA and its contribution to social change and also give illustrations of how sports has been used as a tool for social change in Africa as a whole. Second, I place sports within feminist theory and move on to present the feminist

communicology model as a lens for analyzing discourse as well as to reveal the central role that communication plays in the creation of identity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Finally, I conclude with a discussion of some of the narratives that have been presented on MYSA.

#### Sports in Africa and Social Change

MYSA is situated in one of Kenya's capital city's Mathare slums, and because of its location many of the children are from poor backgrounds. It is estimated that Mathare holds between half a million to a million people, and that 70 percent of the households are single parent families with mothers generally raising kids (Hognestad and Tollisen, 2004). In recent years, MYSA has received recognition for its innovativeness and involvement in community activities such as environmental work and HIV/AIDS. The group, for example, received the United Nations Environmental Program award for environmental innovation (Momentum, 2002). MYSA has also been involved with creating awareness about HIV/AIDS and 300 of its youth have received training for peer counseling. MYSA team members also provide information to young people about HIV/AIDS before the beginning of football matches. Moreover, MYSA allocates some of the money it receives from donors to establishing educational scholarship programs for some of its team members. Two hundred boys and girls had benefited from the program by 2001 (Wambui, 2003). These activities have been instrumental in reconstructing the traditional perception of the Kenyan public that associates the slums with drugs, illegal beer, prostitution, AIDS, thugs and mob justice (MYSA, 2005). Through MYSA, the space is (re)articulated as housing some of Kenya's football players as well as responsible young community members (Hognestad & Tollisen, 2004). While MYSA

received its initial recognition because of its men's league, this paper specifically focuses on the girl's league that was formed in 1992, and which has now grown to a membership of nearly 3,000 girls aged 11 to 16 (Momentum, 2002).

The Mathare girl's league changed cultural norms that associated football with boys by participating in the Norway cup finals, the world's largest youth football tournament in 1998 and 2000. Second, MYSA is also an illustration of how involvement in sports could act as a tool for social change, especially in Africa. In the Kenyan context, football is accessible to many people unlike in other countries such as Britain, where football is not class-neutral but is mainly a working class game, and in the US, where football is an acquired taste and is therefore semi-elitist (Mazrui, 1986).

In Africa, football is an activity that is affordable for many people. Third, sport has advantage over other cultural forms of expression because it is more readily comprehensible to the mass public (MacClancey, 1996). Moreover, sports serve the function of co-producing communities because it can facilitate the creation of feelings, belongingness and connectedness, by lessening distances between people (Mitrano & Smith, 1990). Thus, sports could be used to unite wider sections of the population than many social activities by transcending differences of nationality, sex, age, social positioning, geographical location and political attitudes.

These attributes of accessibility have made football a useful tool for social change. In the Soviet Union, for example, sports were used to socialize the population into the newly established value of systems that communism promoted. In this case, sports were used to dominate the citizenry (MacClancey, 1996). In other cases sports have been used as vehicles for resistance. In South Africa, football was used in political activism,

organizing, and speech making in the 1970s and 1980s. The use of football was appropriate because the apartheid regime had declared a state of emergency causing groups such as the Black Conscious Movement and the United Democratic Front (UDF) to use football to address crowds (Nauright, 1997). Moreover, sports have also been used in health promotions to combat unhealthy deviant and anti-social behavior such as drunkenness, delinquency, and prostitution. Mitrano and Smith (1990) provide an example of a sign placed in a sporting shop that encouraged the Crucian youth to “get hooked on sports not drugs” Don’t be a fool go and stay in school [sic] (p.53). Another illustration of the use of sports in health campaigns is the “Kick polio out of Africa” campaign that was launched in 1996 by Nelson Mandela and other African leaders which led to a significant reduction of polio induced paralysis from 205 cases per day to 388 cases the entire year (WHO Joint Press release, 2004). Football in Africa could therefore be seen as having both practical and theoretical implications.

#### Feminist Theory and Football

Feminist analysis of sports have a very short history and it is difficult to find discourse written in mainstream feminist periodicals that were written before the 1980s (Messner & Sabo, 1990). However, feminist theories could be viewed as a central element in the construction of MUSA. Feminists aim to change previous perceptions of gender or include gender as a variable for analysis. Feminists also seek to provide opportunities that could facilitate new ways of thinking about how gender relations can be recreated socially, historically and culturally (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Crosset (1990) also notes that although elements such as class nationalism and capitalism have played an important role in the development of sports, any attempt to explain the advancement of modern

sports that ignores sexuality and gender is incomplete because it misses the key components of the development of sport.

Moreover, both radical and socialist feminist scholars have argued that dominant forms that sports have taken have served to exclude women from public life and to support the construction of an ideological naturalization of women's subordinate structure in domestic life and mothering (Messner & Sabo, 1990). The authors further add that the consideration of sports as male sports as opposed to female ones have been enhanced through uncritical adoption of the social scientific role of theory that simplifies the complexities of gender by insisting on the existence of a male sex role and female role which legitimizes and normalizes dominant forms of masculinity and femininity while marginalizing others. According to Crossett (1990), such essentializing through research dates back to the nineteenth century educators of modern sports who proclaimed inherent connections between sports, morality and manliness. This connection between manliness and sports was supported by quasi-scientific theories and was accepted as a rationale for the first sporting clubs and physical education programs for young men in England and the US.

Feminist analysis of sport revolve around a number of issues that include the representation of women in sports, the power structures that inhibit women from participating in sports and other factors such as culture that may be dependent on the context in which sports activities are enacted. Consequently, the sports feminist entity as a whole cannot be attributed to a single school of feminism but rather a multifaceted mosaic of feminist visions and practices could be employed to end sexist oppression (Messner & Sabo, 1990). The inherent struggles within feminism have played important

roles in changing the perceptions of sports as a male dominated entity. Some of the liberal feminist principles, for instance, have led to an increase in the numbers of women involved in sports. Liberal feminism has traditionally advocated for individual rights such as life, liberty and pursuit of happiness (Buzzannell, 1994). Liberal feminism also emphasizes similarities between sexes, embraces fundamental individualism and presses for equal opportunity for women in education, government and the economy. However, liberal feminism has been criticized for implying that an increase in individual women's numerical status is a measure of women's advancement, which may not always be the case. The feminist case goes beyond numbers which creates room for radical feminists as they seek to provide a deeper understanding of the insubordination of women. Radical feminists contest the liberal feminist's orientation by arguing that opportunities for women within the present society are impossible because the system is fundamentally patriarchal in structure. Moreover, radical feminists argue that women's subjugation is maintained by the threat or application of force and through socialization of both sexes to patriarchal ideologies.

Finally, the socialist strain of feminism has also been critical of liberals' emphasis on equal rights because liberal feminists do not criticize existing social structures. Socialists believe that equality cannot be achieved within a capitalist system and they draw from a radical feminist conception of patriarchy and ground it in Marxian historical materialisms. They argue that capitalism transformed patriarchy in fundamental ways especially in the creation of a gendered public/domestic split. According to Hargreaves (1982), the organization of sports helps to promote patriarchal relations in conjunction with capitalist class relations which have given rise to a commercialized, bureaucratized

and masculinized activity. In sport, the three strains of feminisms have played different roles. Liberal feminists, as scholars and as change agents, have argued for and partially achieved greater opportunities for girls and women in sports (Messner & Sabo, 1990). Radical feminists have developed historical and theoretical critiques of the deeply gendered structure and values of sports. Socialists' feminists advocate for a redefinition of sports in more humane ways that emphasize its beauty and benefits and extend them to women as well as men (Gruneau, 1983).

#### Sports and Communication

Ashcraft and Mumby's (2003) feminist communicology provides a fruitful framework for understanding the discursive dynamics of sport because it emphasizes the role that discourse plays in the construction of identities. In sports, communication "is the vehicle through which community members participate in the enactment, (re)production, consumption, and organization of sport" (Kassing, Billings, Brown, Halone, Harrison, Krizek, Mean & Truman, 2004, p. 374). Communication is prevalent both at the micro and macro levels because sports members use communication as a tool for mediation amongst themselves and with sports administrators. In addition, communication is prevalent in the relationship between sports teams and the society as a whole. Ashcraft and Mumby (2003) provide four frames that can be utilized in the field of communication for exploring the relationships among discourse and gendered organizing. The two authors recognize tensions and contradictions that emerge within the frames. Frame 1 focuses on how gender identity shapes the ways in which individuals enact communication. Frame 2 emphasizes how communication and interactions among individuals create rigid gender identities. Frame 3 focuses on how organizations or

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institutional forms produce discourse that is based on gender. Lastly, frame 4 shifts to an examination of how societal discourse influences gender constructions. The next section consists of a brief description of how the feminist communicology framework relates to sports and an analysis of the application of the framework to the MYSA by using some narratives that emerge in Martha Brady and Arjmand Banu Khan's book on MYSA.

#### Frame 1: Gender Organizes Discourse

The first frame focuses on how gender determines discursive patterns by establishing how identity and interactions are viewed. In this frame, "gender remains fixed and the binary between male and females is (re)produced" (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003, p. 8). This frame often lacks attention to the cultural, political, institutional and historical context. Moreover, the role of discourse is ignored and communication is reduced to a mode of self expression. In sports, this framework becomes visible through the emphasis of difference in the communicative styles. Women are seen as more disclosing, while men are attributed a more ration-oriented communication style. Sullivan (2004) argues that such traditional beliefs that associate men with aggressiveness and instrumentality in their discussion and women with self-disclosure and responsiveness to non-verbal cues is inaccurate. Similarly, Willis (1982) also acknowledges the use of positivism in contemporary social research. She argues such models share a deterministic approach that isolates certain variables from the general culture. She notes the goal of such research as identifying and measuring variables in the system so that causal relationships may be uncovered. Such research attributes certain variable such as emotionality to women and rationality to men. In sports, the female body is used as a system in which crucial

variables that affect its ability to be successful in sports are isolated. Willis maintains that linear determinism will not work and she advocates for cultural criticism that is concerned with meanings, values and social explanation without attempting positivistic rigor. This approach accepts the differences in sports performance between men and women, but also pays specific attention not only to how cultural factors may enlarge this gap, but also the ways in which the gap is understood and taken up into the popular consciousness of the members of society.

In the analysis of sports, frame 1's validity could also be questioned because it presents discourse as fixed or as determined by the biological component of male or female status. As a result, discourse created using these forms of orientation are static and do not have room for consideration of the fact that sometimes discourse may be politicized because in many of its forms that include self expression, interpersonal interactions, or in its mediated forms, discourse focuses on the dual issues of identity formation (Deetz, 1992). Furthermore, discourse holds historically developed dimensions of interests. Frame 1 therefore fails to explain how gender differences become embedded in sport because it is deeply rooted in the gender differences between female and males without referring to the economic, political and social contexts.

Frame 2: Discourse (Dis)Organizes Gender This frame emphasizes the dominant role played by discourse. The players position themselves in their ways of thinking and physically according to discourse. Frame 2 is significant because it argues that social actors are always positioning themselves and others in terms of the available narratives which could create or limit possibilities. The sex gender system has two major

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interdependent structural dimensions. The first is sexual inequality, which allows for male domination of women. The second is inter-male dominance hierarchy, which fosters solidarity among males, conformity to hegemonic models of masculinity and acceptance of status inequality among male groups (Sabo, Donald & Panepinto, 1990). Sabo et al (1990) note that their research showed meanings that coaches attach to football revolve around hegemonic masculinity themes: distinctions between boys and men, physical size and strength, avoidance of feminine activities and values, toughness aggressiveness, violence, and emotional self control. Coaches counsel “football is the closest thing to war you boys will ever experience. It’s your chance to find out what manhood is really about” (p.124). Sports are marked as male institutions, not just in the numerical sense that many have pointed to but, more importantly in the values and behavioral norms they promote and ultimately naturalize, both on the field and in organizational hierarchies (Whitson, 1990).

### Frame 3: Organizing (En)Genders Discourse

Gender is seen as a social construction. The differences between men and women are created, sustained and transformed by interactions among members. This frame also argues that organizations are dynamic entities, and that individual identity is seen as an entity of organizational process and outcome (Ferguson, 1984). More specifically, sports provide a space whereby various structures of meaning, identity and power relations are produced, maintained and reproduced through ongoing communicative practices of members (Mumby, 2001). According to Whitson (1990), sport has become one of the central sites in the social production of masculinity in societies that are characterized by longer schooling and by decline in social currency attached to other ways of

demonstrating the physical and social prowess (e.g. physical labor or combat). Whitson provides examples of small or awkward boys, scholarly or artistic boys, boys who get turned off from sport and who resort to other means of achieving masculinity.

#### Frame 4: Discourse (En) Genders Organization

The discourse “(En) Genders organization” refers to a broader societal narrative embedded in systems of presentation. Sport for the most part influences and reinforces the society. However, the society itself is nothing but a layered complexity of elements intricately and dialectically interrelated with each other. In this framework, gender ideologies are seen as constituting belief systems of separate spheres and social meanings of masculinity and femininity that are negotiated in families, workplaces, organizations and social contexts (Parker, 2003). Parker maintains that gender does not reside in organizational messages, structures or individuals themselves, but in the relationship among organizations and environment members.

#### Analysis: Young Women and Sport

Power emerges as one of the central themes in the feminist communicology framework. Power as defined in this paper refers to the “production and reproduction of, resistance to, or transformation of relatively fixed (sedimented) structures of communication and meaning that support the interests (symbolic, political, and economic) of some organization members or groups over others” (Mumby, 2001, p. 587). Foucault (1997) captures this continuous struggle meaning by viewing power as not as a tool of any particular agent, but a construction that is reproduced in everyday practices of gestures, actions and discourse. Foucault decentralizes power and argues that power does not operate from institutions or from certain places, but it works through mechanisms and

strategies. Foucault argues that power must be analyzed in the contexts of what it does and not what it is. According to Foucault (1977) power,

“Must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization... [Individuals] are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. ...Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p. 98).

Foucault’s perspective is important in examining domination because he draws attention to historical context. The viewpoint reveals how power is reproduced through history, thereby creating discursive power structures within which individuals operate. Secondly, Foucault’s standpoint does not privilege the dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless but rather discursive formations are reified by individuals and are treated as objective positions through their repetitive discourse. Consequently, although any particular group does not own language, discourse becomes identified with the powerful, whereas subordinate discourses become that of the powerless.

MYSA is a classic example of how power reveals itself in culture and discourse such that certain ways of doing things become the norm. The first frame is useful in understanding this phenomenon because football has been perceived to be a men’s field due in part to colonial forces. However, MYSA girl’s team has challenged this norm by resisting the model that emphasizes differences. In this way their resistance has become dominant and acceptable. Additionally, their resistance has provided an alternative

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worldview that shifts the focus from football and men to a more expanded focus. The girl's resistance has taken place in two ways; first, through collective resistance and change through coalition formations and community building, and second through individual acts of resistance including self-definition and self-determination that often occur in varied, immediate and personal ways. The young women have acted as social actors by drawing on rules and resources to engage in communicative behavior and coordinated action, at the same time reproducing, resisting or transforming that structure through social action (Giddens, 1979). This notion of transformation is evident in Brady and Khan's (2001) book compiled fragmentations of interviews that were conducted in Mathare. When combined, the girl's voices could be viewed as counter-narratives. Nelson (2001) writes that counter narratives serve two functions, the first is erasing the narratives about subordinate groups that constitute the group's members identity from the perspective of the dominant group by changing the perception of the dominant group. Second, narratives could repair the negative identity by altering such perception within a person. Thus, counter-narratives may lead to a person to view herself as worthy of moral respect, as well as a person who is less willing to accept other people's representation of self.

The interviews conducted by Brady and Khan provide readers with information on how the girls in the team define themselves and also how they enact their social and relational identities as a team. The narratives also move beyond the team space as they provide a vehicle for the emergence of societal selves, relational identities and co-cultural understandings. This identity emerges through a process of self-definition as the girls begin to name their own reality through self-determination. The girls are able to articulate

their past that is characterized by removal from the public space into the private, which emerges as they allude to the tedious household tasks they perform. While many still have to attend to chores before going for sport, they see football as more engaging and creating and enhancing better prospects for the future. MYSA also illustrates how the girls in the team use discourse to their advantage as a way of formulating their self-identities and as a revelation of their self-determination that is evident through group interaction. According to Murphy (1998), dominant meanings could be produced among group members through socialization or through acknowledged rites and rituals, goals and objectives. Girls in MYSA show their self-determination through the adoption of names such as “mighty Kickers” and Bafana Bafana (the renowned South African football team) (p.12), which could be seen as a perception that projects them as capable of doing as well as these winning groups. The girls also develop relations with their teammates by valuing friendships that emerge and labeling these friends as sisters with talent that could be seen as a symbolic image of strong talented women working together as a family (Brady & Khan, 2002, p.16). Through sports the girls practice cooperative enactment as they replace the tradition of alienation, competition and dehumanization, with mutuality (Foss & Griffin, 1999). A 15-year-old female football player, for example, expressed that belonging to a team meant, “Staying together as one team and not being on your own” (p. 16). This also portrays a feminist shift from patriarchal society where they are defined in relation to others’ daughters and mothers rather than individuals with unique personalities and talents. The girls enact the principle of immanent value in that every being is unique and necessary part of the pattern of the universe and thus has value (Parker, 2003). One of the girls, for example, said, “I never thought that I was going to

learn to the extent that I would be able to coach and have my own team. But now I identify with my own team and feel happy about it” (Brady & Khan, 2002, p. 18). In addition to the increase in personal value, many of the girls acknowledged they felt more confident. One girl was quoted as saying, “Before I started playing football I was fearful. Now I am not because I’m used to mixing with people” (Brady & Khan, 2002, p.17). MYSA girls’ voices speak to the fact that personal experiences are key components in their perspectives on sport. Their personal narratives assert both a right to proclaim publicly about one’s identity and the need to define one’s experience as important. Harter, Japp & Beck (2005) note that this process reveals some opportunities and constraints of operating within the ideologies of master narratives that are available within cultures. The girls are not limited by standards set by their patriarchal society as they consider themselves as equal to the boys, which counters the cultural beliefs on gender roles. When the girl’s team began, for example, the group’s activities were initially divided according to gender, with the girls washing uniforms and the boys maintaining the sports equipment. Nowadays, both boys and girls wash the uniforms and girls drive the garbage truck. Boys and girls also care for children during the game time which eliminates babysitting as the major reasons why parents objected to the girls’ involvement in the sports group (Brady & Khan, 2002, p. 21-22). MYSA has also been effective at the macro-level. The organization has been instrumental in changing stereotypes associated with children from the slum such as begging in the street, to young responsible adults who engage in community service and personal development through education and sharing information on HIV/AIDS and environmental factors. According to one girl: When I started playing for MYSA my father would say that there is no



football for girls, and he would beat me up. So whenever I wanted to play, my mother would cover for me by saying that she had sent me somewhere. Then when I went to Norway, he started liking it. (p.14) This girl had to negotiate between maximizing her football potential and staying at home in order to earn her father's approval. However, as the quote reveals, the girl continued playing with her mother's help, and with time her father's attitudes changed when the team won in the Norway sport tournament. This particular case is an example of gender disorganizing discourse because in the past gender has been used as a tool for creating discourse that has favored certain groups. MYSA could be seen as an alternative to the male dominated field. In past years, sporting activities have been shaped and fashioned by societal discourse such as newspapers and sports coverage that continues to feature male football as a national sport (Hognestad and Tollisen, 2004). This coverage extends the stereotypes that connect societal perception of sports with masculinity. The discourse also reveals how differences that are attributed to gender are produced and reproduced by gender, therefore limiting other alternatives because gender becomes a product that has already been determined through discourse (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). It also reveals the hurdles, complexities and tensions that women encounter as they engage in sports.

Conclusion MYSA is an illustration of how a subculture of young people has emerged in Kenya that organizes in unconventional ways for development. These emergent forms of organizing could be seen as a response to the failures of the government and external pressures (e.g. external debt) that have led to unemployment, limited educational opportunities and inaccessibility to healthcare. The youth organizations' activities have sought to overcome the political, social and economic barriers by an inward focus that

shifts from dependency on governments to more self-reliant means that presents the youths as major participants in their destiny. MYSA in particular reveals how sports, mostly associated with entertainment, has been transformed to a tool that has changed women's participants' worldviews as well as the community members' perception of football as a male domain. MYSA could therefore be considered as a success story within feminist scholarship and in the development arena. However, one limitation with my research is that some key questions still remain unanswered including: how feminist principles such as organizing in more humane and democratic ways emerge as women leaders organize within the team. Secondly, while I have argued that the girls acquire a distinct identity, it would be important to find out what separates these new forms of identity from the dominant identities associated with masculinity.

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