

Promoting Physical Activity among Youth in Nicaragua: A Gender and Human Rights-Based Approach

I. Background

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer are growing unabated in Latin America. The common NCD risk factors are physical inactivity, poor diet, obesity, smoking, and alcohol use. PAHO's 2007 CAMDI study revealed that, in Managua, Nicaragua, 71% of women and 59% of men are overweight, 29% of women and 21% of men have hypertension, and 9% have diabetes.

This study examined whether one's sex and gender role make him or her more "at risk" for physical inactivity. The study also reviewed Nicaragua's human rights obligations to provide boys and girls equal access to physical activity.

II. Highlights of Interview Results

A sample group representative of public high school students in Managua, Nicaragua, 52 girls and 48 boys (ages 13-17), were selected from 15 high schools in the 7 districts of Managua using stratified random sampling.¹ Each student was interviewed using a questionnaire containing primarily quantitative questions and a small number of qualitative questions. Girls were interviewed by a female social researcher and boys were interviewed by a male researcher.

The interviews conducted revealed that both sexes face social barriers to physical activity; yet, girls participate in physical activity less frequently than boys, and face more barriers to participation.

Girls report significantly lower rates of participation in physical activity (outside of mandatory physical education classes) than boys. Levels of participation in extracurricular school teams are low for both sexes (6% of boys, 4% of girls). However, 52% of boys engage in physical activity in their neighborhood, either through formal neighborhood leagues or informal street sports, while only 13% of girls do.

Preferences regarding physical activity differ greatly between girls and boys. Girls report that they prefer to participate in sport through schools (51%), gyms (31%), and formal neighborhood teams (16%). Not one prefers to play via informal street sports. On the other hand, boys' first preference is formal neighborhood leagues (31%), followed by the gym or informal street sports (25% each), with school teams last (19%). Girls prefer to play volleyball, soccer, aerobics, and dance, while boys prefer to participate in soccer and weightlifting.

Girls reported more safety issues. For purposes of engaging in physical activity, girls are less likely to think that their neighborhoods are completely safe (48% of girls, 75% of boys) or that public sports facilities are completely safe (61% of girls, 75% of boys).

Girls report receiving less support from their families when it comes to participation. Only 33% of girls receive daily support from their families to participate in sport, compared to 87% of boys. Although 31% of boys report that their families helped transport them to sports or exercise, only 15% of girls report "always" receiving this support and 61% of girls report "never" or "almost never." Girls are less likely to receive support from their families to buy uniforms, balls, or other materials for physical activity (25% of girls and 50% of boys report receiving this support "always"), and more likely to be told by their parents that something bad could happen to them while engaging in sports activities (16% of girls and 4% of boys say this "always" happens; 38% of girls and 62% of boys said this "never" happens).

Gender stereotypes regarding physical activity and sports are held, particularly by boys. A significant number of interviewees believe that women who play sports frequently are masculine or lesbians (29% of boys, 6% of girls); women should be taking care of the house instead of playing sports (39% of boys, 2% of girls); it is more dangerous for women to play sports than men because women are delicate and can get hurt (54% of boys, 33% of girls); it is

¹ The sample is representative of all public high school students in Managua. In addition to school interviews, informal interviews were conducted with more than 20 relevant government and NGO officials.

difficult for women to engage in sports (52% of boys, 40% of girls); women do not play sports as well as men (34% of boys, 10% of girls); women who play sports have more risk of being assaulted (40% of boys, 29% of girls); and it is better if women do not play sports while menstruating (50% of boys, 33% of girls).

Girls perceive far more barriers to their participation in physical activity than do boys, and the barriers they perceive are different. 40% of boys report there being no barriers to their sports participation, while only 10% of girls report no barriers. The interviewees gave a total of 142 responses regarding barriers, 107 of which came from girls, and 35 of which came from boys. Girls report the principal barriers being the lack of fields and spaces for sports (42%), the lack of sports equipment (33%), lack of parental permission (27%), security issues (21%), lack of sports clothing (19%), financial issues (15%), and insufficient promotion of sports activities (13.5%). For boys, the main barriers are lack of time, primarily due to work outside the home (29%), financial issues (10%), and lack of fields and sports spaces (6%).

III. Highlights of Human Rights Law Review

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) obligates signatories, like Nicaragua, to provide equal rights and opportunities to men and women in sports, physical education, and recreational activities. Signatories cannot merely provide equal rights on paper; rather, CEDAW obligates them to actually achieve equality in reality. This means that a country's compliance is measured not by the legal and other measures it has taken to achieve equality, but by the results of those measures.

Nicaragua has taken many measures domestically to ensure the right to sport, the most notable being its adoption of the General Law of Sport, Physical Education, and Physical Recreation, which sets up a national sports framework, and the Law of Equality of Rights and Opportunities, which calls on Nicaragua's state institutions to guarantee equality in the realm of sports activities. While this evidences that Nicaragua has at least achieved formal equality in sports access, this study's interview data demonstrate that Nicaragua has not achieved substantive equality. Thus, it is incumbent on Nicaragua to take additional measures – including, but not limited to domestic legal reform – to achieve substantive equality and fully comply with its obligations under CEDAW.

IV. Conclusion

Gender plays a critical role in individuals' access to and preferences related to physical activity. With this study data, PAHO, Nicaraguan governmental institutions, NGOs, and other actors can tailor initiatives to ensure that all Nicaraguan youth – boys and girls – are physically active, thereby combating NCDs throughout the life cycle and furthering Nicaragua's CEDAW compliance.

To ensure that girls engage in physical activity and to take steps toward achieving substantive equality, Nicaragua could dedicate resources to increasing sports opportunities through schools, where girls prefer to participate; providing education aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes related to physical activity; identifying or creating safe spaces for girls' sports; obtaining parental support and permission; and providing appropriate sports equipment and clothing.

To ensure boys participate in physical activity, Nicaragua should consider increasing opportunities through neighborhood leagues, where boys prefer to participate; scheduling practice at times when boys do not have work obligations; and covering certain sports-related costs.