

Abstract

The sport for development and peace (SDP) sector has become a fast-evolving field which has received significant academic and public attention. Given the continued commitment to gender equality in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, sport has been positioned as a vessel for women's empowerment, a term which continues to be the object of much academic debate and dispute. Drawing on feminist theories of development and empowerment, the purpose of this thesis is to explore (a) how young people engage in the development project and (b) to critically examine the potential of such programmes in advancing transformation in gender relations and in offering new opportunities for challenging gender stereotypes inside and outside of sport. This thesis draws upon eleven months of ethnographic research undertaken between 2017 and 2018 in two organizations in São Paulo, Brazil, which use sport—mainly football—to empower women and achieve broader societal objectives within low-income communities. I conducted participant observations and fifty semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, managers, and educators as well as the participants of the projects and their parents. The findings of this research suggest that there is ambiguity regarding the role of sport-for-development (SFD) programmes in fostering social change, which might be characterized by friction between SFD as a *primary vehicle* of change and an *indicator* of change. Moreover, I suggest that the delivery of gender-focused projects in Brazil was a complex, problematic, and contested process resulting in unintended consequences. While projects facilitated women's 'empowerment', and provided them with different knowledge and self-esteem patriarchy and social inequalities restrain the programmes' effect. In addition, findings shed new light on boys' and men's experiences. I suggest that empowerment is negotiated, revealing that men can be allies in women's struggles toward social justice and gender equality, but may experience new situations of vulnerabilities as an effect of their participation in gender-focused project. Finally, whilst both initiatives provided a relatively supportive environment regarding the free expression of queer desires, it also creates rather safe(r) spaces and temporary refuge for queer individuals. These are some of the important issues which might contribute to the decolonization of SDP research and practices. Overall, this thesis makes empirical and methodological contributions to the fields of SFD and sport sociology.