



Unequal Opportunities, Unequal Outcomes: Reducing Physical Inactivity in East African Girls

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ABSTRACT

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (PCPFS) indicates that regardless of race, girls are less physically active than boys, and girls of color are less likely to be physically active than Non-Hispanic White girls (Crespo, 2005). Consequently, girls of color are one of the most physically inactive populations. Reducing physical inactivity is important because it plays a major role in the prevention of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and obesity—and can also be instrumental in positive development. This study aims to eliminate the gaps in physical activity (PA) by exploring barriers to PA in one specific population—East African girls in the Twin Cities Metro Area. An exploratory case study design utilizing semi-structured focus group interviews was used. Results indicate that East African girls enjoy and/or would like try many activities. Swimming, fitness activities, and dance, were the most frequently cited and culturally relevant activities. In addition, a wide range of cultural rules and barriers that make participation in PA challenging were discussed and identified. The voices of East African girls must be shared, listened to, and considered thoroughly when it comes to providing culturally relevant physical activity opportunities, so that they may reap the many health and developmental benefits that can result from participation.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the physical activity of East African girls and identify barriers that may prevent this specific population of girls from participation in physical activity. This information may in turn be used to increase awareness and generate culturally relevant physical activity opportunities to increase the physical activity of this vulnerable population.

The following two research questions guided this study:

1. What physical activities do East African Girls participate in or desire to participate in?
2. What are the challenges and barriers to physical activity participation reported by East African girls?

METHODS

Research Design: An exploratory case study design was implemented utilizing a semi-structured interview process within focus groups. Qualitative narrative exploration of East African girls' life experiences with physical activity utilizing a case study method is appropriate when a desired phenomenon is underexplored (Creswell, 2003).

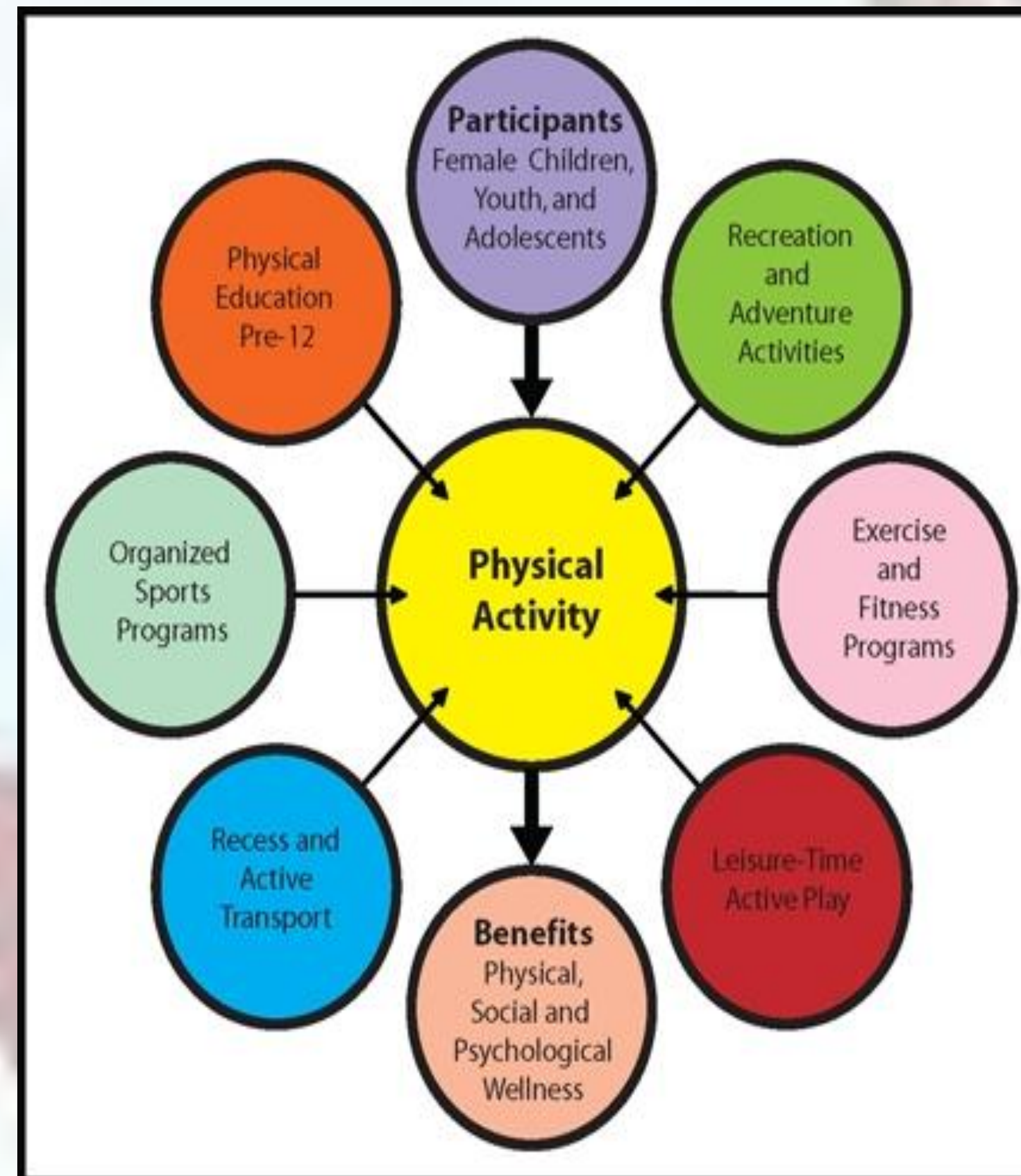
Sample: The participants consisted of 19 East African females, ranging in age from 10-18 years of age. The interviews were established by age-dependent focus groups of 2-4 individuals per group. All girls were practicing Muslims. Young Muslim women who participate in sport challenge the ideal femininity and risk being harassed; discovering and developing culturally relevant physical activities is essential to eliminating physical inactivity (Walseth, 2006).

Data Collection Procedures: After Institutional Review Board approval for human subjects was obtained, community liaisons and parents of East African girls were contacted and relationships were developed to build trust within the East African community. Interviews were recorded and lasted an average of 30 minutes.

Data Analysis: The primary researcher transcribed open-ended data responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim with Dragon NaturallySpeaking Preferred (v.9) software into a word processing document and then imported into NVIVO (v. 7), a qualitative data management software tool. The secondary and primary researcher coded the raw data responses to obtain common themes. The secondary researcher analyzed two questions from the larger study. After independently analyzing data of the two questions, the secondary researcher consulted with the primary researcher prior to advancing to the next stage of the analysis. The data was then coded into lower and higher order themes based on the responses of informants.

Verification: Trustworthiness of the qualitative data occurred through investigator triangulation and peer debriefing to strengthen validity of research (Creswell, 2003).

Table 1. Physical Activities of East African Girls



Wiese-Bjornstal, D., & LaVoi, N.M. (2007). *The 2007 Tucker Center Research Report, Developing physically active girls: An evidence-based multidisciplinary approach.* University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

"I like swimming because it's comfortable and you can wear whatever you want to [said loudly with excitement] and you can like swim by yourself you know. You don't have to worry about anyone looking at you. I don't care I'm going to swim, I'm going to wear a swimsuit, and let down my hair."

"I mean we all want to do these sports, but then there's another situation. I mean there's boys right there and we can't really play as good as we want to play. Because when we're around boys our religion says that we can't take off your clothes. Like right now, like we're wearing our hijabs. Sometimes all you want to do is take them off because it's hot, but you can't. All the boys are right there and you have to wear them."



Image taken from http://www.kersplebedeb.com/blog/hijab_soccer.jpg

"We want to play but boys say like we girls are kind of weak so they play hard and think we can't play hard you know...the boys are saying that and it's our culture you know. The boys have to play on their side and the girls have to play on their side."

RESULTS

Table 2. Physical Activity Barriers Identified by East African Girls

Themes	Frequency Cited
LACK OF CULTURAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: (Total)	(48)
GENDER	27
CLOTHING	16
COACHES	5
LACK OF EXPOSURE	19
LACK OF FACILITIES	16
LACK OF ENCOURAGEMENT: (Total)	(16)
PEERS	10
COACHES	2
PARENTS	4
LACK OF INTEREST	5
LACK OF FREE TIME	5
LACK OF RESPECT	4
LACK OF RESOURCES	2
FAMILY INVOLVEMENT	1
CONDITIONS/WEATHER	1

"Mostly all of us like girls in our religion can't like really we can't like have fun time. We have to stay at home to cook, clean. Basically technically we don't have time. We're basically like mothers because our parents work. In our culture we barely have time for it. And we have to help the children do their homework and do all that kind of stuff."

"We need a coach that understands (East African girls). Coaches are either scared of us or they don't care. Like there's some coaches that come in and they're like here for two weeks and then they're going. Then coaches from the boys' teams come over here and coach us and they don't even want to coach us."

DISCUSSION

• It is clear that East African girls care deeply about maintaining cultural norms and religious beliefs, but also have a deep desire to be physically active.

• East African girls perceive a wide variety of physical activities to be culturally relevant. While they enjoy and/or would like to try many activities, the girls most frequently discussed swimming, followed by fitness activities, dance, and non-organized sport as the most culturally relevant physical activities. This finding is interesting because the girls want to take part in the most revealing physical activity—swimming—which is in opposition to what is deemed culturally appropriate for women in the East African culture. Additionally, it is important to note that while some girls did want competitive organized sport opportunities, the majority of girls were more interested in less competitive physical activity opportunities.

• A variety of personal, social, structural, environmental, and cultural barriers exist which preclude and influence East African girls' physical activity participation. While many of the barriers are consistent with previous research, several barriers (i.e., cultural barrier of privacy, gender stereotypes, etc.) seem to be unique for East African girls. Understanding this complex web of barriers cited in the current study is imperative.

• To help increase physical activity and decrease health disparities, working to create culturally relevant physical activity programming for East African girls is imperative. They want to be active, but they need our help to do so.