
The Global Observatory for Gender Equality & Sport: A Catalyst for Change in Physical Education

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Keywords :

ABSTRACT

This article synthesises a lecture by Dr. Lombe Mwambwa, CEO of the Global Observatory for Gender Equality & Sport, on the organisation's mission to advance gender equality in and through sport, with a significant focus on physical education (PE). The central thesis is that achieving safe and inclusive PE for all girls and women requires a multi-stakeholder, evidence-based, and intersectional approach. The Global Observatory positions itself as a crucial intermediary, aggregating data and bridging the gap between policymakers, academics, and practitioners. The article outlines the Global Observatory's key functions, including its digital knowledge hub, its systematic mapping of global and national policy frameworks against commitments like SDG 5, and its development of indicators to measure progress. It highlights the organisation's focus on underserved populations, such as women and girls with albinism and deaf women and girls, and its efforts to track women's leadership in the Sport for Development (SDP) sector. The article also addresses critical challenges in knowledge mobilisation, including the accessibility of research and the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration. It concludes by summarising the Global Observatory's call to action, urging the PE community to reflect on its power, adopt an ethic of care, and engage in collaborative efforts to ensure that gender equality remains a central and actionable priority.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of gender equality is a central pillar of global development, enshrined in international agreements from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN General Assembly, 1979, 2015). Within this broad agenda, the domains of sport, physical activity, and physical education (PE) represent critical yet complex arenas for change. These spaces can serve as powerful platforms for empowering girls and women, fostering leadership skills, promoting health, and challenging restrictive

gender norms. However, they can also be sites where inequalities are reproduced and reinforced, through discriminatory policies, unsafe environments, and a lack of inclusive practices.

Despite a growing body of research and advocacy, a persistent gap remains between policy commitments and on-the-ground reality. Progress is often fragmented, difficult to measure, and unevenly distributed across different regions and populations. It is within this context that the Global Observatory for Gender Equality & Sport was established. This article synthesises a lecture by the Observatory's CEO, Dr. Lombe Mwambwa, which outlines the organisation's mission, methods, and priorities. The central thesis of the presentation is that accelerating progress towards gender equality in sport and PE requires a new kind of infrastructure: one that is dedicated to aggregating knowledge, fostering collaboration, and holding stakeholders accountable.

Dr. Mwambwa's lecture positions the Global Observatory as a vital intermediary—a catalyst designed to connect the distinct worlds of policymaking, academic research, and practitioner-led action. By systematically tracking progress, identifying gaps, and sharing promising practices, the Global Observatory aims to create a more coherent and effective global ecosystem for change. This article will explore the key pillars of the Global Observatory's work, from its intersectional approach and its focus on underserved populations to its ambitious data-mapping projects. It will also delve into the critical challenges of knowledge mobilisation and the ethical considerations that must guide this work. Ultimately, this synthesis aims to provide the PE community with a comprehensive understanding of the Global Observatory's role and a clear invitation to engage in its collaborative mission to collaborative mission.

PRESENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

Dr. Mwambwa's presentation provided a comprehensive overview of the Global Observatory for Gender Equality & Sport, detailing its strategic positioning, core functions, and programmatic priorities. The following sections synthesise the key arguments and initiatives discussed.

2.1. THE OBSERVATORY'S MISSION, FRAMEWORK, AND STAKEHOLDER MODEL

The lecture began by defining the Global Observatory's core purpose: to address gender inequalities across sport, PE, and physical activity by tracking progress, identifying areas of stagnation or regression, and documenting the global movement for change. The fundamental question driving its work is: "Is sport safe and inclusive for girls and women in all their diversity?" This mission is underpinned by a commitment to an intersectional framework. The presentation stressed that gender does not exist in a vacuum but intersects with other dimensions of identity, including race, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, and geography. Consequently, achieving genuine equality requires moving beyond a monolithic view of "women and girls" to address the specific barriers faced by diverse and often marginalised sub-groups.

The Global Observatory's operational model is designed to bridge the persistent divides between three key stakeholder clusters: policymakers (governments and UN agencies), academics (universities and

research experts), and practitioners (sports federations, NGOs, and educators). Dr. Mwambwa positioned the Observatory in the “middle” of these groups, acting as a knowledge broker to facilitate the uptake of research by policymakers and its practical application by those working on the ground. This involves aggregating data from primary research partners, connecting expertise across silos, and ensuring that knowledge is shared in a way that is legible and actionable for all parties.

To ground its work in a globally recognised consensus, the Global Observatory aligns its efforts with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which calls to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” This provides a powerful political framework that connects the specific issues within sport and PE to broader development goals related to autonomy, health, education, and economic empowerment.

2.2. PROGRAMMATIC PRIORITIES: THE DIGITAL HUB AND POLICY MAPPING

A cornerstone of the Observatory’s strategy is its Digital Knowledge Hub (www.genderequalitysport.org). This online platform serves as the central repository for the data, research, and promising practices that the Global Observatory aggregates. It is designed with the three key stakeholder groups in mind, offering tailored content and resources for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. The hub is the primary vehicle for the Global Observatory’s knowledge mobilisation efforts, facilitating dialogue and ensuring that valuable insights do not remain siloed within the academic community.

One of the most ambitious programmatic priorities detailed in the lecture is the systematic mapping of policy and legal frameworks. The Global Observatory is undertaking a comprehensive global effort to catalogue and analyse commitments to gender equality in sport at international, regional, and national levels. This involves reviewing key international instruments like the Beijing Platform for Action and the UNESCO Charter of Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, as well as regional conventions (UN Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995; UNESCO, 2015).

At the national level, the process involves a meticulous review of legislation, policies, and action plans to determine whether they meet the “bare minimum” of eliminating discrimination and creating an enabling environment. The mapping framework is multi-dimensional, examining:

- Instrument Type: Whether the commitment is enshrined in legislation, a national policy, a strategy, or an action plan.
- Thematic Focus: The framework tracks 17 thematic axes of gender equality, including leadership, media coverage, coaching, gender-based violence (GBV), and monitoring and evaluation.
- Impact Area: It assesses whether the policy explicitly covers PE, physical activity, and/or sport.

Dr. Mwambwa reported that data had already been collected for 40 countries, with 12 country profiles published and a further 30 pending validation. This initiative provides a critical baseline for

accountability, allowing for a clear-eyed assessment of whether governments are translating their stated commitments into concrete action and resource allocation.

2.3. A FOCUS ON UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Beyond broad policy tracking, the Global Observatory directs its attention to specific knowledge gaps and underserved populations that are often rendered invisible in mainstream research and policy. The lecture highlighted several key focus areas:

- **Leadership in Sport for Development (SDP):** The Global Observatory is building a tracker to monitor women's representation in the leadership of SDP organisations. This is particularly crucial in the Global South, where SDP programmes often intersect with the delivery of school-based PE.
- **Women and Girls with Albinism:** This group is almost entirely absent from the literature on sport and PE. The Global Observatory is conducting a preliminary report to document their experiences and needs, aiming to inform more equitable resource distribution and practice.
- **Deaf Women and Girls:** The presentation called for greater attention to the inclusion of deaf learners in PE, urging for intentional design changes in curricula, pedagogy, and training to account for audio-related differences.
- **Maternity and Parenthood:** The lecture pointed to the practical disruptions that maternity and parenthood cause in the careers of PE teachers and the educational trajectories of students, advocating for solutions that go beyond high-profile issues like equal pay for elite athletes.

This focus on specific, marginalised groups is central to the Global Observatory's intersectional approach. It is a deliberate effort to answer the question, "Who is in the 'all'?" and to ensure that the push for gender equality leaves no one behind.

2.4. THE ETHICS AND CHALLENGES OF KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION

Dr. Mwambwa dedicated a significant portion of the lecture to the ethical challenges inherent in the production and dissemination of knowledge. She questioned the accessibility of traditional academic outputs, such as expensive, paywalled journal articles and costly handbooks, which create hierarchies of access and leave many practitioners and educators behind. The Global Observatory advocates for more inclusive forms of engagement, such as online and low-cost conferences, and a move towards open-access publishing to democratise knowledge.

The presentation also stressed that because inequality is a multidisciplinary problem, the response must also be multidisciplinary. The PE community is urged to break out of its silos and engage with other disciplines to develop more robust research and delivery models. In this vein, the Global Observatory supports the development of global indicators for measuring gender equality in PE, an effort led by UNESCO. While promoting shared metrics to build a clearer global picture, Dr. Mwambwa also cautioned that such indicators must be relevant and useful for national-level practitioners and must be leveraged to advocate for resources.

Finally, the lecture emphasised the need for context sensitivity. PE curricula and teacher preparation cannot assume an ideal, stable environment. They must reflect the shifting realities of political instability, climate crises, and forced migration that impact education systems worldwide.

2.5. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The summary document included a record of a panel discussion and Q&A session featuring Dr. Mwambwa and other experts, which explored several practical applications of the Observatory's principles.

How can storytelling be used as a tool for advocacy within institutions?

Dr. Mwambwa provided a powerful example from a digital storytelling project she worked on with young women peer educators in SDP organisations in Zambia. The young women were empowered to create their own short films to advocate for their needs and highlight how the organisations could better serve them. This demonstrated that storytelling is not just a tool for high-level policy change but a practical method for students and participants to advocate for change from within their own institutions, such as schools or sports clubs.

How can stories about specific, marginalised groups be made relatable to a broader audience?

This question, which focused on making the experiences of racialised girls in secondary schools relatable, was answered by framing the issue around the universal concept of power abuse. Dr. Mwambwa explained that while the specific experiences of marginalisation may differ, the underlying dynamics of power are widely understood. By focusing on this cross-cutting theme, a story about a specific group can resonate with others who have experienced different forms of exclusion. This approach avoids comparing or ranking suffering and instead builds solidarity based on a shared understanding of structural inequality.

How can the PE and academic communities support the Observatory's work?

In response to an offer of support, Dr. Mwambwa outlined several concrete pathways for collaboration:

- 1 Mobilise Research: Share existing research and help collate it for the Global Observatory's knowledge hub.
- 2 Shape Research Agendas: Join the Global Observatory's global expert network to help identify knowledge gaps and co-create research projects.
- 3 Translate Research: Help translate academic findings into actionable messages for policymakers.

- 4 Provide Support: The Global Observatory welcomes institutional collaborations and financial support to sustain its work.

CONCLUSION:

Dr. Lombe Mwambwa’s lecture presented a compelling vision for the Global Observatory for Gender Equality & Sport as a critical piece of infrastructure for driving meaningful change. The organisation’s work is defined by a commitment to evidence, a sophisticated understanding of the global policy landscape, and a deeply intersectional ethic. By positioning itself as a connector between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, the Global Observatory is not merely collecting data but actively building a more cohesive and effective ecosystem for action. Its focus on knowledge gaps and underserved populations is a crucial corrective to mainstream approaches that often fail to account for the diverse realities of girls and women.

The presentation concluded with a powerful call to action for the PE community, framed around the concepts of power, people, process, and possibility. Dr. Mwambwa urged educators and researchers to reflect on their own power in setting agendas, defining curricula, and shaping the discourse. She called for a deliberate focus on the “people” who are often left out of the conversation, ensuring that the term “all” is truly inclusive. She emphasised the importance of engaging with the “process” of systemic change, even when it is slow and difficult. Finally, she encouraged a sense of “pragmatic optimism”—an ethic of care that fuels a persistent belief in the “possibility” of a more equitable future.

For the physical education community, the Global Observatory offers both a resource and a challenge. It provides a wealth of data and a platform for collaboration, but it also challenges the field to be more self-aware, more inclusive, and more engaged in the broader struggle for gender equality. By embracing this challenge, PE professionals can play a vital role in turning the promise of safe and inclusive sport for all into a lived reality.

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