

Gender Equality in Sports

The 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo ended with an extraordinary achievement for women in the world of sports. For the first time in the 125 years that the games have been taking place in modern times, the percentage of participating female athletes was nearly identical to that of male athletes (49%). It was also an unusual event for the State of Israel: out of the four Israeli medal winners, two were women athletes. Those accomplishments are unprecedented and should not be taken for granted in the sports world, which is still identified with men and gives them preference over women.

Like in other areas, in sports there are also significant disparities between women and men in Israel. Quite often, sports activities are considered a 'male' domain and gender stereotypes affect the very choice to engage in sports in general, and the choice to engage in certain branches of sports in particular. Furthermore, for many years women have suffered from systematic, institutional discrimination in sports that manifests itself in budgets and the use of sports facilities. They also have to deal with sexual harassment that is not comprehensively addressed. Consequently, women generally participate in sports activities in lower numbers than men and are absent from decision-making positions in the sports world. When women do participate, there is clear gender segregation in the categories they are engaged in – for instance, men are concentrated in football (soccer) and basketball, whereas women are concentrated in rhythmic gymnastics. Overall, 'women's sports' is perceived as being a less esteemed category.

Why is gender equality in sports even important? Engaging in sports is important to the body and mind, to physical health, and also to personality formation and the development of emotional and social skills, such as teamwork and leadership, and communication skills. Engaging in sports is especially crucial to girls and women because it helps them cultivate self-confidence and a positive body image. It also challenges gender stereotypes about physical appearance and traits that are considered 'inappropriate' for women – being muscular, being competitive, being able to overcome failure, and others. Sports can, therefore, be a critical tool for advancing gender equality in other areas as well.

A global research study conducted by Ernst & Young (2020) found that

94% OF C-SUITE WOMEN HAVE PLAYED SPORTS, demonstrating that sport participation can propel them into successful business careers and break glass ceilings in the labor market.

This chapter, which is led by the Sports Authority at the Community, Culture and Sports Administration and the Resilience and Social Equality Authority, maps the current situation regarding the factors and barriers faced by girls and women when participating in recreational and competitive sports, as well as women's representation in decision-making positions in sports. The chapter presents examples of policy measures and intervention programs that have been implemented in Israel and around the world to advance gender equality in sports. Based on all of the above, the chapter defines action items that can lead to change in Tel Aviv-Yafo.

Sports for Girls

A review of the organized sports services offered in Israel to girls and boys up to the age of 18 (at school, at sports clubs, in private lessons or at community centers) reveals two important findings: fewer girls are engaged in sports than boys, and the girls who do engage in sports participate mainly in categories that are considered 'female'.

Why is this the case? Participation in sports and the types of chosen activities are influenced by a social construct that views sports as being 'less suitable' for girls. That construct also affects the choices made by parents. Additionally, children in this age group typically engage in sports during their free time in the afternoon – at privately-run facilities that are separate from the schools, where the underlying assumption is that few girls are likely to participate in sports. For that reason, there is a tendency to invest more in classes for boys where a large number of participants is guaranteed (for example, soccer and basketball). Thus, the reality perpetuates itself.



In Tel Aviv-Yafo, **ONLY ABOUT 7% OF THE GIRLS** (aged 6 to 18) **ENGAGED IN SPORTS PLAY BALL SPORTS** (as opposed to 52% of the boys), and **AROUND 50% OF THE GIRLS DO DANCE AND AEROBICS**

(Municipal Sports Survey, 2020).

Sports for Adult Women

Recreational sports

Recreational sports activities are held in informal settings such as lessons, fitness clubs and spontaneously organized games. The surveys and research conducted on the subject paint a very favorable picture of the participation of adult women in recreational sports in Tel Aviv-Yafo. However, disparities still exist, and the most blatant one relates to organized teams that play recreational sports: men are inclined to organize teams on their own and play ball sports on their neighborhood fields, whereas that is less common among women.

→ In Tel Aviv-Yafo, 55% of women residents do some sort of physical exercise according to the Ministry of Health recommendations, compared with 63% of the men (Municipal Sports Survey, 2020). At the national level, only 27% of all women in Israel engage in a recommended physical activity, compared with 37% of the men (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

→ In Tel Aviv-Yafo, among those engaged in some sort of physical exercise, men work out more outdoors (in parks, at the beach, etc.) than women do (50% as opposed to 43%). That gap widens even more when the activity involves using a facility, such as an athletic field, sports complex or outdoor gym in the public space (25% of the men as opposed to 14% of the women) (Municipal Sports Survey, 2020).

→ Among those engaged in physical activity in the city, around 74% of the men do their main workout on their own, compared with about 40% of the women (Municipal Sports Survey, 2020).

Professional competitive sports

Professional competitive sports are at the top of the pyramid and are the 'showcase' of the sports world. They include organized sports clubs that compete with one another in the official leagues of the respective associations and federations. Here, too, a lower percentage of women participate compared with men, and they are mostly concentrated in 'female categories' such as rhythmic gymnastics and acrobatics.



In Tel Aviv-Yafo, **FEMALE ATHLETES ACCOUNT FOR ONLY 28% OF ALL THE ATHLETES ENGAGED IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS.**

The percentage of women's competitive teams is only 27% of the total (municipal data, 2021).

Forty branches of sports receive municipal support:

IN TEN OF THEM, WOMEN MAKE UP LESS THAN 25% OF ALL THE PARTICIPATING ATHLETES (for example, in

soccer – 10%, in basketball – 13%). Women are a minority in the other branches as well, and in many categories there are no active female athletes at all

(municipal data, 2021).

In Israel, sports in general, and women's sports in particular, suffers from a scarcity of facilities. In addition to that, the conditions are for the most part inadequate, including the employment terms of women players and coaches, as well as the professional support – unsuitable training facilities, inconvenient scheduling of games and more. Furthermore, at the national level there is clear-cut gender inequality in budgeting.

The result is fewer teams of women's sports, leagues that are small and not sufficiently competitive, and limited ability to make a mark in the international arena. This reality perpetuates the low percentage of women who participate in sports and the status of women's sports as a secondary category. Furthermore, it reinforces the shortage of role models for girls.

The sports clubs in Israel receive funding from the government, and in addition to those budgets they also receive municipal funding, sponsorships, money from private organizations, and other support. Even though women's teams are prioritized in the municipal funding criteria, a budgetary gap still exists between them and the men's teams. That gap can be attributed to the fact that soccer and basketball are the highest ranked branches – branches that have an undeniable male majority.

Representation in Decision-Making Positions

Even though there is legislation in Israel which is meant to ensure adequate representation of women in executive positions in sports bodies, women's representation in high-ranking positions is very low.

→ In Israel, about 17% of all sports executives are women and only around 14% of the coaches are women (Lehrer and Sharvit, 2021).

→ At 42% of the clubs supported by the Tel Aviv-Yafo Municipality, at least 30% of the executive positions are filled by women, including the Maccabi and Hapoel Tel Aviv soccer clubs which have women CEOs, and the Alley Runners, where the chair of the board is a woman (municipal data, 2021).

Why are women underrepresented? A comprehensive research study that examined sports through a gender lens, which was conducted for the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sports, identified some key barriers faced by women: an absence of professional networking; a difficulty in balancing management and coaching positions with family responsibilities (which largely still rest on women's shoulders); the recruitment and advancement of women only for 'female' positions, while management and coaching, especially in the world of sports, are considered 'male' in nature; the tendency to trivialize and doubt women's knowledge and expertise in sports, and an inclination among women to refrain from competing for key positions (due to the aforementioned reasons) (Lehrer and Sharvit, 2021).

The small number of women in decision-making positions in sports means that women's viewpoints and needs, which can be different from those of men, are not considered when setting policy and allocating resources in sports.

What did we learn from other parts of the world?



In the **United States**, Title IX was passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972. It requires all schools and colleges that receive federal financial assistance to give women and men an equal opportunity – in participation, in funding and in conditions. The law, which enrooted the matter in formal education settings, led to a sharp increase in the number of girls engaged in sports in general, and in branches perceived as being 'male,' in particular. The law is considered the main reason for the dominance of American women in global competitive sports.



In **Umeå, Sweden**, a decision was made in 2000 that training times on soccer fields would be divided equally between teams of girls and women and teams of boys and men. The new policy increased the girls' interest in soccer, and today there is an almost equal number of girls and boys who play soccer.

The City of **Moreland in Australia** spearheaded a strategic plan in 2008-2009 for advancing sports among girls and women, which focused on minority groups, including women over the age of 65, women and girls with disabilities, and others. According to the plan, the allocation of city-owned land for use by sports clubs was conditional on the degree to which the clubs include girls and women in their activities. Among other things, trainings and workshops on the subject were delivered at the clubs. This led to a significant increase in the participation of women and girls in sports and a change in the atmosphere at the clubs.



Action Items for Advancing Gender Equality in Sports in Tel Aviv-Yafo

For Implementation Within Five Years

Mainstreaming gender in municipal sports

- Creating a new position at the Sports Authority dedicated to advancing women in sports 
- Conducting a gender analysis of the data 
- Raising awareness and providing information about gender equality in sports, and developing programs for preventing sexual harassment
- Holding trainings for professional staff members about gender and sports 
- Establishing a municipal forum, whose members will also be from sports clubs, to advance women's sports in the city

Encouraging girls and women to join organized team sports for recreational purposes, with a focus on minority groups

- Extending municipal assistance to organized teams of women engaged in recreational sports (subsidizing coaches and field time) 
- Instituting regularly scheduled, on-campus sports activities at elementary schools after the regular school day (a promising pilot has already been launched in Yafo) 
- Assessing the suitability of the physical infrastructure for women (locker rooms, restrooms, outdoor facilities, etc.) 
- Creating safe running paths customized to women in the northern and eastern parts of the city that will increase their sense of security and encourage athletic activities in the public space 

Advancing competitive sports among girls

- Incentivizing the sports clubs in the city to advance activities for girls 
- Opening a competitive sports hub for girls

Increasing women's representation in decision-making positions

- Incentivizing the sports clubs and encouraging them to appoint women to executive and professional positions 
- Holding courses that train women to be trainers, coaches, managers and referees 



*Already in progress

[Click here to read the introduction and the other chapters of the plan >>](#)

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