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From the Field into the Office: Participation in Sports and Women’s Labor Force Advancement in Asia

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Abstract

We promote sport and women’s athleticism, both at elite and non-elite levels, as part of a solution to better integrate women into the labor force of Asian economies. Women in Asia lag other regions in terms of labor force participation and membership on corporate leadership bodies; this is particularly acute in East Asia. Involvement in sport has been found to be associated with long-term economic benefits for women internationally, including enhanced returns to education and labor outcomes. We propose a number of sports program-related policies for Asian countries to consider in order to better integrate women into education, society, labor, and corporate boardrooms.

JEL: J00, J16, I24, M14
Keywords: Gender, Women, Sports, Education, Labor, Corporate Gender Balance
I. Introduction

Asian women have taken the sports world by storm. Names like Se-Ri Park and Yani Tseng, Fu Minxia, Li Na and Kim Yuna are prominent in golf, diving, tennis and skating, respectively. Two of these, Li Na and Kim Yuna, are among the highest paid female athletes in the world.¹ Four of the top ten female golfers in the world are Korean. These individuals command great respect and media attention not only in their respective countries, but globally.

Beyond professional sports, nowhere has Asian female athletic prowess been more visible than on the international stage of the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. At the 2008 Beijing Summer Games close to eight-hundred women from East and Southeast Asian countries took home 24 percent of all medals available in female events --and an astounding 31 percent of gold medals-- even though they only made up 16 percent of all women competitors. At London 2012 and Sochi 2014, these countries fielded more women competitors than men, demonstrating the emphasis placed on female athletic ability. At the 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup, Japan bested the United States in penalty shootouts to become the first Asia-Pacific team – male or female - to take the title. The world spotlight will shine ever more prominently on the remarkable success of these female athletes as Asia becomes a central region for future mega-sporting events. After the Rio de Janeiro Games come to a close in 2016, Pyeongchang, South Korea will host the Winter Olympics in 2018, followed by Tokyo, Japan in 2020, and either Beijing, China or Almaty, Kazakhstan in 2022. This is in addition to the myriad of regularly scheduled regional sporting events held in the region, such as the Asian games.

As these women have competed against each other for the title or the gold, they have also won a permanent place in elite national and international athleticism once reserved almost exclusively for men. However, these accomplishments both belie and reflect the general situation of women workers in Asia, who still face significant limitations in their opportunities for labor force participation and their representation in corporate leadership roles.² In this paper we will promote women’s athleticism, both at elite and non-elite levels,

¹ As of 2014, Chinese tennis player Li Na ($23.6 million) is the second highest paid female athlete, with endorsement deals from Nike, Mercedes, Samsung, and Rolex. South Korean skater Kim Yuna ($16.3), in fourth place, is one of the biggest celebrities in the country (Kurt Badenhausen, “The World’s Highest-Paid Female Athletes 2014” in Forbes, 12 August 2014).

² As with well-known female athletes, there are numerous examples of women who hold elite positions in corporate leadership (see Forbes’ 2015 “50 Power Businesswomen in Asia”). And, just as is the case in the corporate world, it cannot be said that female athletes are now considered on equal footing with their male compatriots. The case in which Japan’s female soccer team, ranked third in the
as part of a solution to this serious problem facing the region. In section two, we discuss the
global position of Asian women in the labor force and corporate leadership bodies. In section
three, we present research on the long-term economic benefits that participation in sport can
provide women internationally, including increased involvement in the labor force. Finally,
we propose a number of sports program-related policies for Asian countries to consider in
order to better integrate women into education, society, the labor force and, ultimately,
corporate boardrooms.

II. Asia’s gender imbalance and why this is a problem

Countries in Asia are facing an economic gender crisis. Where, in many cases, women
possess roughly similar educational levels and skillsets, they still lag males in labor force
participation and, especially, in filling top decision-making roles in management and on
corporate boards. The extent of the problem, the specific causes, and the economic impact
differ across countries, but closing the gap between women and men in education, work, and
leadership presents an opportunity for sustained economic growth region-wide. This case is
especially salient for economies like Japan, South Korea, and China, where a combination of
longer lifespans, a falling fertility rate and the skewed sex ratios have made for the need to
fully exploit all available resources imperative.

What does Asia’s gender gap look like and where does it stand in terms of other world
regions?

Education. One factor to consider is gender balance in education outcomes. Labor force
gender inequality in part begins with comparative differences in education and human capital
development. As seen in figure 1, educational attainment in Asia is growing and the gender
gap is narrowing, more dramatically for youth than for adults. Region-wide, there are
significant variation between educational results in East Asia, where literacy levels for both
genders are approaching universal, and South Asia, were half of adult women are still
illiterate.

The gap between expected years of schooling has also narrowed. In East Asia,
according to World Bank WDI data, as recently as 1990 males were expected to receive over

world, flew coach to the 2012 Olympics while the 20th-ranked men’s team flew business class comes
to mind.
one more year of schooling than females; by 2010 the gap has disappeared. In South Asia the
gap has narrowed from nearly three years to about half a year.

Asian women are increasingly college-educated. While female participation in tertiary
education is on average low compared to most regions, particularly for South East Asia and,
especially, South Asia, for those countries for which data is available, women hold a nearly
equal proportion of tertiary degrees in social science, business and law, the category most
associated with management skills. Table 1 illustrates this, setting out the percent of women
in the cohort generally associated with tertiary education as well as the percent of females
graduating with tertiary degrees in the fields of social sciences, business and law. However,
there does appear to be fairly large gaps in the hard sciences and engineering among many
Asian countries, notably Japan. There is certainly room for improvement in terms of subject-
equality in women’s’ tertiary education, but this does not seem to be the main explanatory
factor in women’s low participation in the labor force and corporate leadership.

**Labor force participation.** As women increase their participation in the labor force, they
gain experience and the basis for positioning themselves to move up the corporate ranks. This
is especially true for women in the professional workforce. As table 2 illustrates, Asian
female participation in the labor force is low compared to world averages in some countries –
Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka stand out. However, as a regional average, East and
Southeast Asia is not radically different from other parts of the world such as Europe.

The differences arise when looking at quality of work. In Eastern Europe and North
America, for example, around sixty percent of women work in a professional or technical
capacity – a broad category, but more indicative of the type of labor that may have the skills
and opportunities to move up the work ladder. Asia, and particularly East Asia, significantly
underperforms when looking at the percent of women that is engaged in leadership positions
as legislators, senior officials and managers. Here East Asia is close only to the Middle
East/North Africa region and falls below the OECD average.

This finding is perplexing given that East Asian women are comparatively well-
educated and possess knowledge capacities similar to their male cohort. Recent work by the
OECD casts significant doubts on the argument that women lack the work-related problem-
solving skills associated with management positions. 2012 results from the Programme for
the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) found that, among the twenty-
two countries surveyed, Japanese women scored highest among all women when testing
problem solving abilities in technology-rich environments, and even well above the average
male OECD score. However, the same survey found that both Japanese and South Korean women (who scored around the OECD average) used problem solving skills at work far less than their male co-workers, as well as women relative to men in most other nations (figure 2). For these two countries, this implies a significant underutilization of human capital.

**Political and Corporate Leadership.** A third factor is the environment for leadership, both politically (table 3) and in the private corporate sector. Having women in positions of political power as parliamentarians, ministers and heads of state can have an important demonstration effect, and a means to advance gender-equality in legislation and supervision of implementation (OECD 2012, p 102). Interestingly, the share of women in political leadership positions tends to correlate more with female corporate board participation than with female percent of executives (Kotschwar and Moran 2015a), where the makeup of the former may be subject to more policy legislation than the latter.4

A related goal is to boost women’s leadership role in business; here, while there is a great degree of variation within Asia, the region generally falls behind. As seen in table 4, which displays the data compiled on the gender distribution of the 21,954 firms, aggregated by geographical region, East Asia ranks dead last in both female representation in executive ranks as well as females on executive boards.5 On average, women represent only 5.4 percent of executives and 5.9 percent of board members in East Asian firms. Out of 4,000 East Asian firms, we found only 109 female CEOs and 59 board chairs. In contrast, South East Asia ranks among the greater gender balanced executive ranks in the world, with females making up a quarter of executives and 13 percent of board members.

As in table 2, there is a clear disconnect between general female labor force participation and advancement to senior positions. An in-depth survey of Asian firms by McKinsey and Company found that, where women made up forty to fifty-five percent of entry-level professionals in the countries surveyed (excluding India), these proportions were more than halved by the time women reached mid-to-senior management in China, Singapore,

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3 The OECD’s Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) assessed 166,000 adults in 22 OECD member countries and two partner countries between August 2011 and March 2012 in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. In addition to skill assessments, the study surveyed respondent’s use of said skills at home and in work environments. Key findings can be found in OECD (2013).

4 See “Economic Implications and Policy Solutions Pursued” for examples of national legislation that targets the gender balance of publically-listed company boards.

5 This excludes the 26 firms which could not be linked to any specific country.
Indonesia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and cut to less than one-fourth in South Korea and Japan. By the level of executive committee, the share of women had been cut to a range of fifteen percent (Singapore) to one percent (Japan) (McKinsey 2012). A related McKinsey (2013) report notes that talent leakage along the corporate ladder is particularly pronounced in Asia as opposed to other regions.

What factors undergird the differences between Asia and other regions, and between East Asia and Southeast Asia? There are a number of theories relating a country’s cultural, socio-political, and structural makeup on corporate leadership and labor participation outcomes. An oft-cited theory relates to a woman’s “dual-status” in society as both professionals and caretakers. In societies like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand where women in senior leadership are comparatively high, in-built childcare infrastructure in the form of grandparents and extended family may enable women to continue their careers after children are born, whereas women in Japan and Korea, who no longer tend to live with extended family and where childcare is expensive, must make difficult decisions after childbirth (Grant Thornton 2014). Indeed, a survey of Asian companies found that the “double burden” of balancing work and domestic responsibility (40%) along with lack of pro-family public policies and services (26%) were among the top barriers to gender diversity in senior management. Tellingly, Japanese (34%) and Korean (47%) respondents were much more likely to say that most or many women leave their senior to mid-level jobs due to family commitments than Indonesians (26%). The availability and affordability of childcare in China was also cited as an explanatory factor for the high labor participation rates there (McKinsey 2012). Research on South Korea points to fewer opportunities and lower pay for women as well as the persistence of gender division of labor within the family (Lee 2009 and Joo and Lee 2009). The gap in opportunities is less in multinational firms, pointing to a strong role for sociocultural factors (Patterson, Bae and Lim 2013). In a related vein, the existence of paternity leave, which connotes a gender-neutral family leave policy, is significantly associated with greater gender balance in corporate leadership (Kotschwar and Moran 2015a). According to the ILO, Japan and China grant zero days of paternity leave, Korea grants three. The Philippines and Singapore both allow seven.6

6 As a point of comparison, countries in Western Europe like the United Kingdom, France, and Spain offer between 11 to 15 days of paid paternity leave. Northern European countries Norway, Sweden, and Finland offer between 54 and 112 days. However, neither the United States nor Canada offers paternity leave.
Economic Implications and Policy Solutions Pursued

Asia – particularly East Asian countries – lag world norms in terms of utilizing their female population’s human capital. This is not in their economic interest: bringing women more squarely into the labor force can have major implications for nations in terms of corporate performance and overall growth. Using Japan as an example, Chad Steinberg and Masato Nakane of the IMF estimate that raising the country’s female labor participation ratio to the level of the G7 (excluding Italy and Japan), would increase GDP per capita by approximately four percent (Steinberg and Nakane 2012). Raising women’s labor participation rates even higher, to the level of northern Europe, could promote an additional four percent increase in GDP per capita. McKinsey and Company estimates that raising Malaysia’s relatively low female participation rates to match the levels of Singapore or South Korea could yield an extra RM6 billion to RM9 billion in GDP growth (McKinsey 2012).

At the firm-level, a growing body of literature demonstrates the positive impact of gender balance on corporate performance. Studies find that corporate boards containing women performed better in challenging markets—such as during the post-2008 global economic crisis—than all-male boards (Credit Suisse Research Institute 2012). Similarly, research shows that women on Fortune 500 companies with the highest proportion of females on their boards boasted significantly better financial performance than those with the lowest female board representation (Catalyst 2011). Erhardt (2003) finds increases in gender diversity leads to higher stock values and greater profitability.

Beyond macroeconomic growth and corporate health, bringing women into Asia’s labor force is an economic imperative, especially for Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China. A significant literature expounds upon the potentially devastating economic effects of the rapid demographic shifts in these countries. With a population set to shrink by 30 percent and a rapidly aging labour force, Japan, which even now faces acute labor shortages in many sectors, has a strong incentive to bolster women’s role in the economy (Matsui et al. 2014). And, with a population of only 23 million, Taiwan’s premier recently warned that the country’s workforce could drop by 1.8 million in 10 years.8

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**Current Policies:** This imperative has not been lost on policymakers in Asia. Greater incorporation of women into the workforce is one of the cornerstones of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s economic policy, sometimes termed *Womenomics*. As part of his policies to improve the Japanese economy, Abe has pledged to significantly increase Japanese women’s role in the economy with a target of 73 percent female labor force participation by 2020, and 30 percent for women in leadership positions in both the government and the private sector. In addition, the administration is attempting to alleviate women’s “dual burden” role by significantly expanding childcare facilities and increasing the percentage of fathers who take paternal leave (Matsui et al. 2014).

Neighboring South Korea is facing a similar challenge. President Park Geun Hye has also pledged to boost women’s workforce participation, earmarking public funds to encourage companies to offer more flexible schedules and subsidise childcare and has set a target of increasing women’s labor participation rate from fifty-six to sixty-two percent by 2017.

Under the Gender Equality Employment Act of 2002, Taiwan grants women eight weeks of paid maternity leave, with additional provisions for miscarriages and related issues. Under the original Act, fathers received three days of paternity leave, but this was extended to five days in 2014 legislation.9 Malaysia has pursued set targets to place women in leadership positions. In 2004 the government targeted thirty percent women in decision-making roles in the public sector, which was exceeded in 2010. It is now lobbying companies to achieve the same goal on the boards of publically-listed businesses by 2016.10 Moreover India, Indonesia, South Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, and Thailand, among other countries, institute varying requirements for female national or sub-national political representation, whether this be in the form of reserved seats, quotas for females on candidate

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10 This will be hard to achieve, as the share was eight percent in 2014 (Mary E. Scott, “Gender Target Aims to Transform Malaysian Boards, But May Take Time”, in Forbes Magazine, 21 July 2014).
election lists, or voluntary quotas adopted by political parties. Setting gender targets and quotas is not a policy path followed only by Asian countries. Between 2006 to 2011, the governments of Norway, Iceland, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Italy all passed legislation enforcing targets or quotas on gender balance on the board of directors of large and/or publically listed companies (OECD 2012, p 226).

The examples of current government policies pursued do not account for the voluntary policies of private companies, which could be partially influenced by national policy initiatives. Nor do they take into account suggested policy prescriptions which could also be on the table. For example, Goldman Sachs research advises that Japan’s Womenomics initiative also pursue policies to reform immigration controls on foreign caregivers/workers, fix the tax code to incentivize dual-income households, and promote female entrepreneurship (Matsui et al. 2014).

III. Sport as a tool for economic growth and female labor force inclusion

Policies undertaken to enhance female labor force participation and leadership generally take the form of a diverse and multi-pronged approach. In this section, we introduce enhancing female participation in sport as an alternative avenue to foster long-term economic growth and societal gender equity; sport-related policy would not necessarily stand alone, but rather complement and reinforce other initiatives.

Organized sport and physical activity is an important component of leisure, socialization, and bodily well-being for individuals around the world. However, there is also a growing body of work that has connected female involvement in sporting activity to desirable outcomes in sexual health and disease prevention, social development, educational achievement, labor force participation, and leadership. Elite sport, focused around the Olympic Games and other major international sporting events, also not only provides a showcase for individual female excellence, but can transmit powerful ideational effects about a women’s role in society.

Youth Sport Programs and Female Empowerment

11 The Quota Project, in cooperation with IDEA, the IPU, and Stockholm University, maintains a cross-national database on gender quotas in political representation. It can be accessed here: http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/search.cfm (Accessed 3 March 2015). It should also be noted that many countries beyond Asia have instituted some form of political quotas, but their effectiveness is often quite weak.
A growing body of literature has established a strong link between youth sports participation and educational achievement (see, for example, Cornelissen and Pfeifer 2006; Miller et al. 2005; Videon 2002). In addition to the ethical value of offering women the same access to these gains as men, research indicates that this positive relationship between participation in sports and educational success applies as strongly, or even more strongly, to girls and women. Sports provide girls with useful education and labor force attributes: the ability to be a team player, to compete, and to win and lose with grace (Curtis, McTeer, and White 2000; Henderson, Olbrecht, and Polachek 2005; Polachek 2004; Stevenson and Wolfers 2012). Female athletes also have a better chance of graduating high school and college. Girls’ participation in high school sports has been linked to positive effects on achievement in science, traditionally a male field and where we have shown a gender gap within Asian countries (Hanson and Kraus 1998, 1999).

Sport’s connection to female development extends beyond school and into professional success. Studies show that, on average, former college athletes earn a wage premium over others. Annual wages of former athletes, all other factors held constant, are on average about seven percent higher than those of nonathletes. The association between sports participation and corporate leadership is also strong: survey research found that 96 percent of women in C-level management positions played sports at some level; 55 percent played at the university level, as opposed to 39 percent of lower-level female managers. Anecdotal evidence lists many world leaders, both political and corporate, who played sports as girls.

Betsy Stevenson’s (2007, 2010) work provides a strong empirical argument for girl’s expanded participation in sports and physical activity on labor outcomes. Stevenson uses the passage of Title IX, the United States’ 1972 Education Amendments Act, which required schools to raise the rate of participation in female athletic programs to near equality with male programs, as a quasi-natural experiment. She finds that not only did girl’s participation in high school sports markedly increase after institution of Title IX, but that “a 10 percentage point rise in the state-level female sports participation generates a 1 percentage point increase in female college attendance and a 1-2 percentage point rise in female labor force participation. Furthermore, greater opportunities to play sports lead to greater female

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participation in previously male-dominated occupations, particularly for high-skill occupations.” Importantly, by instrumenting her models with the level of male participation, her conclusions assert that participation in sport was the treatment effect, rather than a selection effect (Stevenson 2010).13

In Asia, a number of countries have taken these results to heart, implementing measures to equalize girls’ access to sports. In Japan, for example, a Basic Plan for Gender Equality was added to the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Sport, and Japan hosted the 2006 World Conference on Women and Sport. In Singapore the government added a women’s department to the High Participation Group of its Sports Commission, and worked with the Sports Council and various NGOs to increase girls’ sports activities. According to Claussen (2008) this resulted in increased physical activity by women. Taiwan passed the Gender Equity Education Act in 2004, which includes provisions mandating that girls have the same opportunities as boys to participate in sports and physical education in schools.14

In the context of developing nations, of which there are a number in Asia, enhancing girl’s participation in sports can assist countries to achieve or surpass the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals (MDG). First, access to organized sport can support universal primary education by incentivizing girls to enroll and maintain attendance in school. Secondly, sports promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women by improving physical and mental health, increasing social interaction, and providing access to leadership opportunities. Third, it can improve maternal health and combat HIV/AIDS by giving girls access to health information and services (United Nations 2008). A number of charity, NGO, and corporate-sponsored sports organizations throughout the developing world have also identified that their programs facilitates youth safety, social-network development, and the challenging of societal gender norms within communities which includes restrictions on girl’s movement (Kotschwar 2014).

Elite Sport in Asia

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13 Stevenson (2007) suggests that there could be three mechanisms of causality: First is the selection effect, in which naturally higher-skilled and intelligent female students are opting in to sports. Second is the signaling effect, in which college boards and employers view athletic participation as a proxy for other marketable traits (commitment, leadership, etc.). The third explanation is that participation in sports imbues both men and women with enhanced human capital.

Participation in sport can not only aid women and girls at the non-elite level, but at the elite international level of competition. This point is especially salient for Asia, which is not only home to a rising number of international female stars but has also become a central host region for the Olympic Games and other mega-sporting events.

Besides an increasingly representative role in hosting past and future Olympic Games, Asian countries are now sending more female athletes and winning more medals than ever before. Female athletes have higher than average representation on East and Southeast Asian Olympic delegations, as opposed to non-Asian delegations, in both the Summer and Winter Games. They also command a dominant share of medal-winning success, significantly more than their male counterparts (figure 4). Figure 5 shows breakdowns for female athletic participation and medaling within Asian NOCs at the Summer Games. It is hard to overstate the role of China in driving female participation and, especially, medaling over the last few decades. But both Japan and South Korea have historically fielded a large portion of Asian female athletes, and women outside China, South Korea, and Japan represent almost three-tenths of total female Asian participants. The impressive aggregate medal winnings also shroud great achievements in specific sporting events. For example, at the 2014 Winter Games, South Korea and China both dominated in speed skating’s 500 meter and 1000 meter events, respectively. In 2010, Kim Yuna won gold in women’s singles figure skating, followed by Japan’s Mao Asada.

Beyond the Olympics, a number of international mega-sporting events highlight the prominence of Asia’s female talent. In football, the women’s teams for Japan (4\textsuperscript{th}), North Korea (7\textsuperscript{th}), China (13\textsuperscript{th}), and South Korea (17\textsuperscript{th}) all sit on the top-20 FIFA leader boards, leagues better than any of their men’s teams. The same goes for international competitive volleyball. Moreover, not only do female athletes from China and Taiwan make it onto the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) doubles top-10 list, but in 2013 Singapore became the

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\(^{15}\) Asian cities hosted the Olympic Games in 1964 (Tokyo), 1972 (Sapporo), 1988 (Seoul), 1998 (Nagano), and 2008 (Beijing). In addition, the 1940 Olympics were scheduled in Tokyo/Sapporo before being cancelled due to the outbreak of war between Imperial Japan and China (Kelly 2011).

\(^{16}\) In football, at 54\textsuperscript{th} place South Korea was the top ranked FIFA men’s team as of February 2015, followed by Japan (55\textsuperscript{th}) and China (82\textsuperscript{nd}). In 2014, the Federation Internationale de Volleyball (FIVB) ranks the women’s teams of China (3\textsuperscript{rd}), Japan (4\textsuperscript{th}), Korea (10\textsuperscript{th}), and Thailand (12\textsuperscript{th}) significantly higher than their men’s teams.
first Asia-Pacific country to win the rights to host the WTA Championships for the next five years, ensuring a brighter spotlight for Asian tennis players going forward.17

A number of channels could explain both the prominence and success of Asia’s elite female athletes. Research which seeks to causally model the determinants of Olympic success finds strong evidence that winning medals in female events is associated with a complex set of socio-economic determinants within the Olympic delegation’s home country (Noland and Stahler 2014, Klein 2004, Lowen et al. 2014). Specifically, a country’s per capita income, level of education among the female population, gender force labor ratio, and other measures of gender equality, on average, lead to higher medal counts for female athletes at the Olympics.18 A parallel empirical literature which explores the determinants of success for women’s teams at the FIFA World Cup highlights similar socio-economic explanators of success in football (Klein 2004, Hoffman et al. 2006, Bredtmann 2014). However, in addition to standard socio-economic controls, these researchers find that more gender-equal societies—measured through political representation, labor force participation or gender-inequality composite indices—have a more pronounced positive effect on women’s performance as opposed to male performance. In other words, environments that become more conductive for a woman’s social and economic success are also conductive for athletic success, and this is particularly true for women. Asia contains a number of developed economies such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore where per capita income and


18 Researchers also found that status as a communist country had a pronounced effect on female medal winnings, which in part explains the success of China (and perhaps North Korea too). This could be because planned economies are theoretically better at strategically allocating resources to achieve national goals. In the Chinese case, Dong (2011) makes this point explicitly: The Chinese government formulated an “Olympic medal-winning plan” in 1994-- which included funding for facilities, nutrition, and sports research-- in order to maximize China’s success at the Games. Successive policies drafted leading up to the Beijing games sought to strategically allocate resources into events like shooting, judo, weightlifting, wrestling, and other area where the state observed the highest chances of medaling for Chinese athletes. Notably, a key component of these policies was to prioritize resources and training in female events, where “woman are considered more likely [than men] to win honors for the nation” (Dong 2011, pg. 166).
female educational levels are well above world averages, which in turn could be exhibiting optimal conditions for nurturing world-class female athletic talent.\textsuperscript{19}

Research suggesting that more gender-equal societies produce higher quality female talent is strong, but we must also note the self-reinforcing effect that these star female athletes have on the national consciousness. Numerous researchers have pointed to Asian female athletes that broke historic ground, such as Hitomi Kinue who became the first Asian female medal winner ever at the 1928 Olympics and received media attention never before seen by any female athlete in Japan (Orlansky 2007). Nearly a century later, Homare Sawa, who scored the game-tying goal with the USA at the 2011 Women’s World Cup, brought women’s football to the forefront in Japan much as Mia Hamm did for the United States.\textsuperscript{20} In China, the state-supported success of female Olympians and other athletes elevated the social and financial status of Chinese female athletes who receive material rewards from the state, mass adulation, and access to lucrative commercial endorsements (Dong 2011). Therefore female success is a constant feedback loop: the more numerous and successful female athletes become, the more visible they are as role models and trailblazers to a new generation of girls.

**Female Leadership in International Sports Governance**

A final component connecting elite sport and leadership is women’s role in international sport governance bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or FIFA. In this arena women’s gains have been meager. For example, until 1981 the IOC, which is the governing body for the Olympic Games, contained no women, and as of December 2014 only 24 out of 115 IOC members are female (Kotschwar and Moran 2015b). On FIFA’s executive committee there is only one female member as of early 2015.\textsuperscript{21} However, sporting bodies have recognized that the underrepresentation of women in leadership needs to be addressed, and several multilateral meetings are devoted to this issue.

\textsuperscript{19} An interesting exception for Asia is the labor force participation gender ratio, which is positively correlated with female medaling at the Olympics within the total sample of countries, but exhibits no correlation in an Asia-restricted sample.


In 1996, the IOC instituted a 20 percent minimum target for women in executive decision-making roles on NOCs by 2005 (IOC 2010).

Echoing the gender gap in corporate leadership, Asian sporting bodies in particular have not been successful in enhancing the role of women on sports leadership boards. According to data compiled by Kotschwar and Moran (2015b), among the 71 National Olympic Committees where data is available, Asian countries such as Indonesia, China, Japan, and Taiwan rank near the bottom of the list in terms of female representation on the board of directors (Table 5). A 2010 study commissioned by the IOC confirmed similar findings: as a region, Asia was well below the 20 percent target with only 12.6 percent women on executive NOC bodies (IOC 2010). Similarly, of the 39 countries with available information on gender balance on National Sports Organization boards, Japan – the only Asian country where data is available -- falls in 38th place with 8 percent female board directors. Only Bangladesh ranks lower.

Clearly, women in sports leadership roles do not match the numbers or prominence of Asian female athletes in Olympic delegations. As with corporate boards and political representation, this discrepancy may present barriers to pursuing gender equitable sports policy or to featuring Asia’s exceptional female talent to its utmost.

IV. Recommendations for applying sports-related policy to address female labor force participation in Asia

The benefits are clear for countries that better integrate their female population into the labor force, corporate leadership, and political decision making bodies. This holds particular salience for Japan and South Korea as their policymakers make concerted efforts to capitalize on underutilized female talent to address their demographic and economic challenges. This task is just as salient for developing countries in Asia, where efforts to grant equal opportunity to girls in education and work will reap long-term benefits to growth. In this section, we provide multiple recommendations designed to promote sport and physical activity for girls, which in turn develops the human capital and gender-equitable environments necessary to propel women into the labor force and top decision-making bodies. These recommendations not only apply to governments; there is also ample room for the participation by foreign and domestic NGOs, corporations, and academic institutions.

It is important to note the wide heterogeneity of culture, politics, and economic development levels in Asia. The region is home to some of the advanced and high-income
economies in the world (Japan, Singapore), quickly developing global superpowers (China),
nations that have only recently opened to the outside world (Myanmar), and others that have
not (North Korea). Therefore, while enhancing sport both in youth development and on the
elite level can be beneficial for all countries, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for these
policy prescriptions.

While much of the evidence on girls’ sports participation is preliminary or anecdotal,
it is clear that girls benefit from engaging in sports and net the same positive gains available
to boys who do so. Bridging the gap in girls’ sports participation will expedite and enhance
countries’ gender equity gains. Increasing the opportunities for sports participation will have
long term benefits for girls and women’s’ health, education, workforce and leadership
outcomes. And these outcomes will benefit Asian countries economic growth.

Even as this could grow organically, the process could be jump started by mandating
female participation in leadership roles in the political and corporate sphere, as well as in
governing sports bodies. Below we set out a number of recommendations for approaches
countries could take towards this end.

**Expand girls’ opportunity to play sports inside and outside of school.**

First, countries should take steps to increase opportunities for girls to participate in
sports, such as providing a safe place for girls to play, funding programs to encourage them to
play, and enacting initiatives that will change attitudes towards their participation in sports.
While the US program Title IX provides the best evidence of the benefits of increasing girls’
participation in sports, other, nonlegislative steps can also work to bolster girls’ access to
sports.

One way of providing a safe place to play and encouraging girls to do so is by
incorporating physical education programs into the primary and secondary school
curriculums and training teachers in gender sensitivity. By mainstreaming sports into schools,
policymakers will reach a large segment of the target population. Teachers should be trained
to encourage girls to participate and to treat athletic participation as part of the school
requirements. Educators in developing countries are often already overstretched, but the
opportunity cost of not involving girls in sports is too high. There is encouraging evidence
that policymakers in Asia are connecting sport with broader educational goals. On March 18,
2015 the governments of the United States and Japan announced a joint collaboration project
to advance girls’ education across the globe, including in Cambodia. In addition to
facilitating girls’ participation in primary and secondary education, the partnership explicitly includes measures to enhance sports and physical education programs.22

A number of Asian countries have implemented gender equity legislation, and some of these explicitly encourage gender equity in sports opportunities. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of Education, over $3 billion is allocated annually to gender equity education, including access to sports programs for girls. In July 2015, Korea’s Framework Act on Gender Equality took effect. This act strengthens previous gender equity legislation, adding protections for motherhood and fatherhood, setting quotas for female senior and executive positions. We would recommend that in its implementation, Korean policymakers follow Taiwan’s lead by also providing access to equal sports programs for girls and boys.

Another important element is to equalize access to facilities, equipment, and mentors. This will help reduce the time cost for girls, particularly as they continue to shoulder much more nonwork obligations, particularly in the household, in many parts of the world, thereby making it much more difficult to engage in extra activities. While the Title IX experience in the United States predicts that any short term resentment at rebalancing sports’ budgets to give girls opportunities equal to those for men, this will be compensated by the benefits of elevating the perceived prestige – and acceptance --of female athletics. In the Indian case, world class women athletes have noted their frustrations that resources are always first channeled to men’s sports, with girls receiving the men’s castoffs, and facilities and equipment for women’s sports have always been of lower quality. This has been compounded by a lack of leadership and a proper motivating system. It is important to invest in sport facilities, equipment, and spaces that girls and women feel comfortable accessing. As gender equity programs are introduced into sports, it is important to take into account the situation in developing countries. Some countries have much farther to go than others. It is also important to recognize that one size does not fit all. What makes sense for one region or one group will not necessarily bear out in another place or time. How gender operates in a community should always be part of a preliminary assessment.

While it is extremely difficult to find female sports participation data for individual countries, the literature does indicate that female participation in sports is lower than male participation in the region. Kaori Araki et al, for example, write that “In Japan, 60.2% of

http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/txtrans/2015/03/20150319314070.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3UqU3CAOX
female and 82.6% of male students between the ages of 12 to 15 years old reported that they exercise everyday [1]. Moreover, 921,646 female (40.4%) and 1,359,597 male (59.6%) junior high school students participated in afterschool sporting programs. However, it is clear that female students tend to participate less than male students.” This indicates that there is significant scope for improvement.

**Implement government legislation that enhances women’s access to sport and physical activity.**

Reforming physical education practices in public and private schools is another way to bring girls into the fold. In the United States, Title IX, which required an equal opportunity for girls to be involved in sport, significantly raised female participation in high school sports and has increased the salaries of coaches on women’s teams (UN 2007). Spain issued seven Presidential Decrees since 2003 support women’s access to sports activities (UN 2008). Enhanced access to sport and its clear connection to education and labor force outcomes should be incorporated into broad policy proposals such as Japan’s “Womenomics” initiative.

**Use frameworks designed by multilateral bodies to anchor policy reforms.**

Multi-governmental organizations such as the United Nations have but increased emphasis on crafting agreements designed to empower women and girls through sport. The equal right to sport is explicitly contained in international human rights documents like article 10 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (of which all Asian countries are signatories), the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action at the 4th World Conference for Women, and the Asian Women and Sport Action Plan. These agreements contain detailed policy recommendations for countries to implement. Moreover, the UN’s Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group designed specific policy recommendations for countries to follow in enhancing female access to sport and physical activity, including in respect to capacity building, government policymaking, and research, monitoring, and evaluation work (UN 2008). All countries should take stock of their participation in existing agreed frameworks and actively benchmark stated goals against current progress. We also recommend that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) incorporate programs aimed at bolstering women’s access to sports in their economic development programs.
Expand non-governmental sports programs promoting gender equality as engine of social change.

Non-government organizations and even corporations can play a role in expanding access to sport and physical activity for girls. There is an array of NGOs that specifically use extra-curricular sporting programs to engage women in developing country contexts. In Indonesia, Women without Borders gave free swimming lessons to girls and women in the South Indian coastal regions after the 2004 tsunami – not only helping develop survival skills (many women and girls perished in the 2004 tsunami as they were reportedly unable to swim or not capable of climbing out of harm’s way) but also self-confidence and solidarity. In Malaysia, the Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation was established in 1995 to foster women’s empowerment through sport. The foundation offers a wide range of activities to girls, including coaching training and offering paid female coaching positions. In Cambodia, the Mighty Girls soccer team, part of the Sports and Leadership Training (SALT) Academy, established by FIFA coach Samuel Schweingruber, aims to develop academic and safety skills for girls through soccer to help them avoid human traffickers. The Mighty Girls now serves as a training ground for the Cambodian Women’s National team. 23

Also in Cambodia, the Battambang Ladies Racing Team, supported by the subsidiary of a major Australian corporation, has empowered disabled women and proven a valuable tool for peaceful social change in a post-conflict region (UN 2007). Both NGOs and major corporations operating in developing Asia should evaluate the efficacy of creating women-based sporting initiatives to positively affect communities. Companies have also begun to show an interest in this burgeoning market. Nike, for example, through its girls effect program, has invested in programs to increase sports among Japanese and Chinese girls. 24

Promote the achievements of female Olympians and other elite women athletes in campaigns connecting achievement in sports to achievement in professional life.

23 More information about these programs can be found in UN Women 2000 and Beyond and at individual websites: Malaysia (www.wsffm.com); Mighty Girls soccer team in Cambodia (viaprograms.org/sports-for-social-change); One world Futbol in Cambodia (streetfootballworld.org/es/latest/blog/one-world-futbol-project-empowers-mighty-girls-cambodia).

Elite athletes, including Olympians, can play a vital role in challenging gender stereotypes and serving as role models and mentors. Asian countries, who have a wealth of successful female Olympians, can feature this talent prominently in public campaigns designed to highlight the value and accomplishments of women in society. Specifically, public campaigns could highlight successful female athletes that have successfully transitioned from the world of sports to the professional world, or former athletes that now serve as executive members on National Olympic Committees. Asian cities will host the Olympic Games multiple times in the next decade. Planners should use the excitement and publicity surrounding hosting the games to specifically highlight female talent in all spheres of society: athletic, academic, corporate, political, and artistic.

Countries should exploit the talent that they have by showcasing the achievements of their elite athletes. Examples from Brazil, Ethiopia, and India point to the impact of recognized athletes on girls’ interest in and confidence with sports. Derartu Tulu, who started running in her elementary school, has been a strong advocate of keeping girls in school. Marta Vieira da Silva, who played on the boys’ team at her school as there were no teams for girls, has increased the profile of the sport in Brazil and helped make soccer an acceptable and desirable pursuit for girls.

**Promote women’s participation on sports governance boards.**

As a region, Asia lags other countries in terms of female representation on sports leadership boards such as the National Olympic Committees. These bodies play a central decision-making role in the world of sport, and a higher share of female representation could enhance the implementation of gender-balance policies. NOCs should target female Olympians with years of experience in the world of elite sport for membership on committee boards.

Increasing the number of women on boards could provide multiplier effects. First, seeing women in a management role could help other capable women strive to achieve this role. This would, particularly in cultures where girls and women are not regularly encouraged to take on leadership roles, increase the candidate pool of talent and provide the best candidates for such positions. Second, these candidate would be more familiar with the issues facing women and with the barriers that seem to be blocking qualified women from taking those roles. As such, they would have the best knowledge to propose solutions to these obstacles.
The world of sports has taken note, sponsoring programs to stimulate girls’ participation. The number of women in leadership roles is notoriously low in many of these organizations. Promoting the participation of women in leadership roles – by, for example, setting quotas or targets, could have a positive demonstration effect. The Olympic NOCs have set an informal target of 20 percent. The International Triathlon Union has used a slightly different approach. Within the ITU, each national federation is allowed two delegates. However, for each female representative, the federation receives a “free” delegate, so could have up to four delegates if two are women. This alleviates the fear that qualified men would be crowded out by adding women.

The private sector should also take note of this growing market, which, if fostered, could bring even greater gains. By sponsoring girls’ sports in developing countries, local and international companies can gain a loyal customer base for their related products. In the long term they will be part of a program that can stimulate greater growth and thus more robust markets.

*Fund research projects which evaluate the country-specific effect of sports on educational/professional outcomes.*

While interest has gained traction, the study of sport’s role in gender-equitable economic development is not comprehensively understood. While sport is to some extent important to all societies, how and to what degree it affects human development and educational/labor outcomes surely varies from country to country. There is still much room to conduct surveys or empirical studies on how participation in sport affects both men and women’s educational and professional success in an Asia-specific context.

At the international level, more data needs to be collected on girls’ participation in sports. Little data exist on participation rates in countries outside of the United States, which makes it difficult to conduct rigorous analysis on the impact of girls’ participation in sports. In order to justify adding girls’ sports programs to their education or sports budget, policymakers need to be able to quantify the benefits. International organizations could help: Tools such as the OECD’s Social Institutions and Gender Index, the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, and the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index explicitly recognize the impact of discriminatory social institutions on gender inequality and social outcomes. These tools could add to their explanatory value by adding access to opportunities in sports in their toolkit.
V. Conclusion

Better integrating women into the labor force and the corporate boardrooms of Asia enhances diversity, encourages economic growth, and can alleviate the harmful effects of an aging workforce. Perhaps more so than ever before, leaders in government, the private sector, and NGOs across the region are aware of this important issue and are taking measures to address it. Enhancing women and girls’ access to sport through the range of channels that we have outlined is a promising component to a problem that requires a multi-faceted policy response.

In a March 19, 2015 speech in Tokyo, First Lady Michelle Obama emphasized the importance of support to women and the importance of these women’s achievements to the nation – and to the world: “I mean, just think about what we would be missing here in Japan if women were not educated. Just imagine if Sadako Ogata was never able to attend school and become one of the greatest diplomats of our time. Imagine the loss of her moral leadership at the United Nations. And what if the great violinist, Midori, never had the chance to discover her talent. Think about all the music we would never have heard. Think of all the beauty our world would have lost. And how about Chiaki Mukai. Without her education, she never could have become the first woman astronaut in Japan, inspiring so many young girls to reach for the stars.”

It is time for Asian countries to take the steps to allow Se-Ri Park, Yani Tseng, Fu Minxia, Li Na and Kim Yuna to play similar roles in encouraging girls to maximize their leadership potential through the power of sport.

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References


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Figure 1. Literacy rates in Asia, by region and gender

![Graph showing literacy rates in Asia by region and gender]

Table 1. Percent female tertiary graduates, by field of study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Humanities, arts</th>
<th>Science</th>
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*Source: WEF global gender gap index*
Figure 2. Percent difference using problem-solving skills at work (men minus women)

Source: OECD Survey of adult skills (PIAAC)
Table 3. Women in political leadership

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Source: WEF global gender gap index
Table 4. Summary of data on gender balance among corporate leadership by region, percent female

Table 1. Summary of data on gender balance among corporate leadership by region, percent female

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<th>% Female</th>
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Compiled on the basis of PIIE corporate gender data set
Figure 3. Growing success of Asian women at the Summer and Winter Olympics

**Summer Games, 1960 - 2012**

- Share total medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total female medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total gold medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total female gold medals won by Asian NOCs

**Winter Games, 1960 - 2014**

- Share total medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total female medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total gold medals won by Asian NOCs
- Share total female gold medals won by Asian NOCs

Source: International Olympic Committee
Figure 4. Asian female participation and performance at the Summer Olympics compared

Note: China did not participate in the Summer Games until 1984; (2) Neither Japan nor South Korea participated in the 1980 Moscow Games.

Source: International Olympic Committee
### Table 5. Female Representation on Asian National Olympic Committee Boards in 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (out of 71)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date of Recognition</th>
<th>Board size (No. of Directors)</th>
<th>No. Female Board of Directors</th>
<th>No. Male Board of Directors</th>
<th>Percent Board of Directors Female</th>
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</thead>
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</tr>
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</table>

| Average, total sample | 1950 | 16.2 | 2.8 | 13.4 | 21.2 |
| Average, top ten in sample | 1942 | 9.5 | 4.5 | 5.0 | 47.8 |

Note: List represents all Asian countries where data is available.

Source: National Olympic Committee websites, IOC website, Sydney Solution website