

Reducing Physical Inactivity and Promoting Healthy Living: From the Voices of East African Girls

Chelsey Thul, M.A., Nicole M. LaVoi, Ph.D., Jill Haom, 2009 McNair Scholar

Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport || School of Kinesiology || CE+HD || University of Minnesota



BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Nearly two-thirds of adolescents do not meet the Surgeon General's recommendations for daily physical activity. Ethnic minority girls are the least active adolescent population and therefore fail to accrue developmental and health benefits, and are at risk for obesity and other chronic diseases associated with inactivity. There is scarce research about the beliefs, needs, desires, and barriers related to the physical activity (PA) of East African adolescent girls—a prevalent and growing population in Twin Cities Metro Area (TCMA)(Minnesota Department of Health Refugee Health Program, 2009). Felton et al. (2005) and others (see *The 2007 Tucker Center Research Report*) suggest it is essential to ask girls about their wants and needs in physical activity programming is essential.

PURPOSE: To explore East African adolescent girls' experiences with and beliefs about physical activity along with their suggestions for promoting culturally relevant active living.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What physical activities do East African girls perceive to be culturally relevant? (See Table 1, right)
2. What barriers to physical activity participation do East African girls perceive they face? (See Figure 1, right)
3. What aspects of culturally relevant programming do East African girls perceive necessary to help increase physical activity participation and promote active living? (See Table 2, below right)

METHODS

Given little research has been conducted with this population of girls, an exploratory action research design was employed. We were interested in hearing the girls' stories regarding their experience with—and suggestions about—physical activity. Creswell (2003) states that narrative research is best suited for asking individuals to provide stories about their lives. Semi-structured interviews in both focus group and one-on-one field settings were conducted with East African girls (N =19) from the TCMA in Minnesota who ranged from 12 to 18 years of age. All girls were practicing Muslims. Data were analyzed using axial open coding. Trustworthiness was obtained through investigator triangulation and peer debriefing (Patton, 2002).

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

East African girls perceive a wide range of primarily non-organized sport activities to be culturally relevant, and face an array of personal, social, structural, and cultural barriers to active living. While many of the barriers identified in this study are consistent with previous research, several barriers (e.g., traditions of privacy and modesty, lack of coaches with cultural understanding) may be unique to East African girls. To help increase physical activity, the girls offered many creative culturally relevant programming strategies—which ironically align with the characteristics of optimal positive youth development settings outlined by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004).

In sum, to promote active living, foster positive youth development, and decrease health disparities, listening to the voices of East African girls and working collaboratively to create culturally relevant PA programming is imperative.

This project was funded by a grant from the Melpomene Institute for Women's Health Research.

Table 1. Top 4 Culturally Relevant Physical Activities

1. Swimming
2. Fitness
3. Dance
4. Non-organized sport

"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."

RESULTS

Figure 1. Physical Activity Barriers Identified by East African Girls

"Mostly all of us, like girls in our religion can't, like really, we can't like have a fun time. We have to stay at home to cook, clean... We're basically like mothers because our parents work. In our culture we barely have time for it."

Like the girls we're not used to playing we don't know how...so some don't like it, you know."

"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 our 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."

"The boys they like to take all of the place, you know. Like, they say, 'We are the boys, we like doing this,' you know, and just take it. They just like taking all of the place, especially in our community...the whole place. And we have like, a big field you know, and they play on the whole thing. They have the big boys, and the small boys, they have groups to take over the whole place."

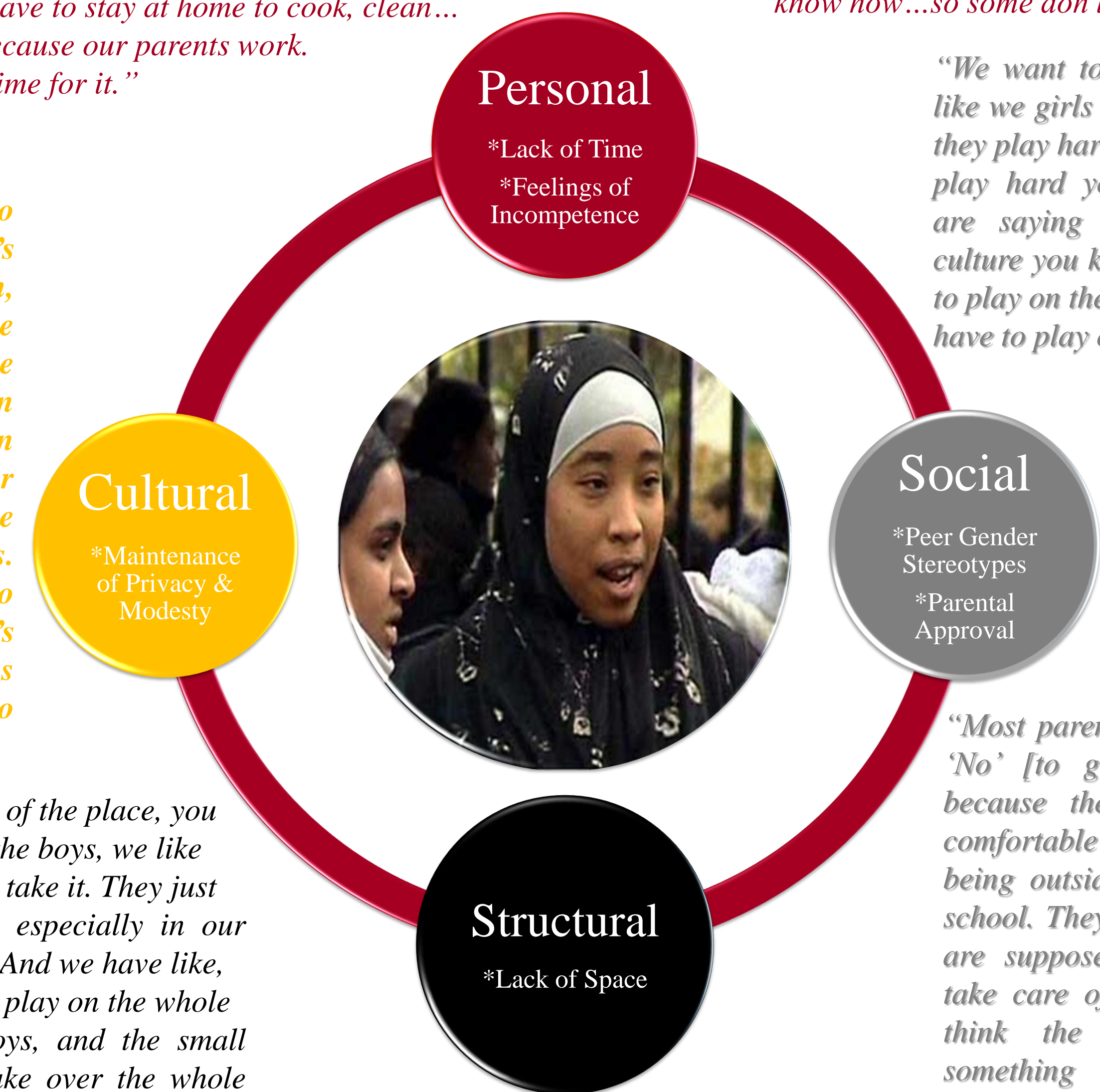


Table 2. Culturally Relevant Physical Activity Strategies Identified by East African Girls

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SETTINGS	QUOTES FROM EAST AFRICAN GIRLS
SAFETY	<i>"The number one thing we need is privacy...A space for all girls, like a locker room to put our stuff in where we can feel more comfortable."</i>
CARING RELATIONSHIPS	<i>"We need good coaches that are here every single day that actually want to coach us and that also understand our culture. Coaches are either scared of us or they don't care...then we have other coaches from the boys' teams and they don't even want to coach. We need a girl coach who understands us. You know, guy coaches they can't really say a lot to us, so we need a girl."</i>
BELONGINGNESS	<i>"I would want a group of girls to be active with. because it's like good when you have a group of people and doing some activities...you're going to be like, 'Oh let me do them' you know. But when you're, like, lonely you're going to be, like, bored, 'Ah just leave it, I'm not going to, I don't want to do it."</i>
SKILL DEVELOPMENT	<i>"A program with instructors because you know some girls they don't know how to play the games or, like, they don't know how to bike, swim, or anything, someone who can teach them."</i>
POSITIVE SOCIAL NORMS	<i>"Sometimes the coaches, you know, they get tired of us because of our culture, because of the way we play, because we can't take our hijab off, so they're like this is so stupid you're not even trying and then they start yelling."</i>
STRUCTURE	<i>"In the program we can play other teams, we play against other teams. And we play for fun with each other...but we can't play with other teams with no training. We need training."</i>
AUTONOMY SUPPORTIVE	<i>"Place where they can do whatever they want. They don't have to be judged...Some go to soccer, some go to basketball, some go swimming, you know, have fun. They'll be more comfortable you know."</i>