

**STATEMENT OF
DOMINIQUE DAWES, PRESIDENT OF THE WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE
ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION
United States Senate
February 1, 2006**

I am Dominique Dawes, president of the Women's Sports Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit national educational organization. The Foundation was founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King, to advance the lives of girls and women through sports and physical activity. Billie Jean and a host of legendary athletes leaders who like me, have served as President of the Foundation, did not want girls following in their footsteps to face the same barriers to participation as they did. To address the needs of girls and women in sports, the Foundation produces programming in four areas: education, advocacy, recognition and grants and is among the top ten public women's grant-giving funds in the nation.

As an athlete, I have had the privilege of representing the United States in three Olympic Games: 2000, 1996, 1992 and was a member of the 1996 Olympic women's team that clinched the first-ever gymnastics team gold medal for the United States. In addition to the team gold medal, I won an individual bronze medal in the floor exercise at the 1996 Olympic Games, becoming the first African-American to win an individual event medal in gymnastics. On Aug. 13, 2005 I was honored to be inducted into the USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame. I am also a television sports commentary and analyst and I coach gymnastics privately at Hill's Gymnastics in Gaithersburg, Md., the gym where I grew up training. I am also a spokesperson for the Girls Scouts "uniquely ME" program which builds girls' self esteem and empowers them to fulfill their potential. I am a graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, with a degree in communications.

Today is National Girls and Women in Sports Day and I am also here representing the seven co-sponsoring agencies of the Day: the American Association of University Women (AAUW), Girls Incorporated, Girl Scouts of U.S.A., the National Association for Girls and Women in Sport (NAGWS), National Women's Law Center (NWLC), the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), and the YWCA of the U.S.A. (YWCA).

I am here before you to express concern about the current state of inactivity among girls and how non-compliance with Title IX, the lack of equal opportunity in schools and colleges and open amateur sports and our current media culture contributes to girls being at higher risk for chronic diseases that are the result of sedentary lifestyles. While others on this panel will address the issue of inequity of sports opportunities, I would like to place in perspective what is at stake if we do not equally encourage our sons and daughters to participate in sports and engage in regular physical activity.

Girls At Higher Risk for Physical Inactivity

The current widespread American support for equal treatment of males and females in sports is directly related to the fact that the public now understands that sports and physical activity are essential for the health and well-being of our children. We are in the midst of an obesity epidemic that has been created by sedentary lifestyles and poor nutrition habits. If we do nothing to change these circumstances, one in three children born in the year 2000 will develop Type II diabetes¹.

We also know that girls are at greater risk for inactivity in our society than boys, especially girls from underserved and lower socioeconomic populations. By the time a girl is 17 years old she has seen 250,000 television commercials focusing on her looks – not her health or physical abilities.² Forty-two percent of girls in grades one through three want to be thinner³, 51% of 9-10 year old girls feel better about themselves when dieting⁴ and 53% of 13 year old girls are unhappy with their bodies, increasing to 78% at age 17⁵. The media has convinced girls that “big” is unattractive and they must achieve an unattainable body type, even though big girls can be fit and healthy. One in six girls is now obese or overweight contrasted to one in 21 in 1970⁶. Black girls are twice as likely to be overweight as white girls.⁷ If a girl does not participate in sports by the time she is 10 years old, there is only a 10% chance she will participate when she reaches the age of 25.⁸ Between middle school and high school, girls drop out of sport at a rate that is double that of boys.⁹ By the age of 16 or 17 only one in seven girls attends physical education class daily and 15-30% report no regular physical activity at all.¹⁰ High school boys receive 40% more chances to play varsity sports than girls with similar statistics in college.¹¹

Sport and Physical Activity: An Effective Intervention

We know that sport and physical activity are effective interventions to addressing the obesity crisis and research shows that sports and physical activity participation has an incredibly positive impact on the lives of girls and women. A 2004 compilation of research on the relationship of girls' and women's health by the Women's Sports Foundation summarized these benefits.¹² Regular participation in physical activity during childhood and adolescence promotes the development of positive body image¹³, confidence¹⁴, and self-esteem¹⁵. Girls who participate in sports and physical activity are academically more successful¹⁶, more likely to graduate from high school¹⁷, more likely to matriculate in college¹⁸, and experience greater career success¹⁹. Participation in sports and other physical activities can help reduce a girl's health risk for obesity²⁰, diabetes²¹, heart disease²², osteoporosis²³, breast cancer²⁴, depression²⁵, unintended teen pregnancy²⁶, anxiety and lack of self-esteem²⁷ among others.

A physical activity intervention is essential if we want to change the following startling statistics:

- 1 in every 6 girls is obese or overweight²⁸; and as women, are 60% more likely to die from breast cancer²⁹
- 1 in 3 teens get pregnant by the age of 20³⁰
- 1 in 3 girls in grades 9-12 currently smoke³¹; lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths among women³²
- 1 in 3 adolescent girls will experience depression³³, anxiety or eating disorders³⁴
- Girls aged 4-19 have significantly higher “bad” cholesterol levels than boys; heart disease is the #1 cause of death among American women³⁵

In addition to physical and mental health benefits, the lessons of sport contribute to women's career success. Eighty percent of women identified as key leaders in Fortune 500 companies participated in sports during their childhood and self-identified as having been “tomboys.”³⁶ More than four out of five executive businesswomen (82%) played sports growing up – and the vast majority say lessons learned on the playing field have contributed to their success in business.³⁷ In a study of active female executives, 86% percent said sports helped them to be disciplined, 69% said sports helped them develop leadership skills that contributed to their professional success, and 69% said sports has given them a competitive edge over others.³⁸

Need For Congressional Leadership

I am here to respectfully request that members of Congress continue and increase their efforts to address the issue of lower opportunities for girls to participate in sports and physical activity. Specifically:

1. The Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Education must enforce Title IX. There are too many institutions that are simply not in compliance with the law and too few compliance reviews are being conducted. Funding and other encouragement for this agency is necessary.
2. Efforts to weaken Title IX should not be supported by Congress. Our sons and daughters must have the same opportunities and encouragement to participate in sports and physical activity.
3. Funding for the Carol M. White Physical Education Program, an act promulgated because of the leadership of Senator Stevens, should be increased in order to provide funds for mandatory physical education programming and meeting state physical education standards. Physical education delivered through our school is most cost effective physical activity delivery system we can invest in and the only program that serves children of all socio-economic levels.
4. The United States Olympic Committee and its national sports governing bodies must be asked to fulfill the full promise of the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act to provide equal opportunities for women, minorities and the disabled in grassroots as well as elite level sports. We will not continue to dominate Olympic competition if we forget about broad participation at the grassroots level.

Your consideration of these comments is greatly appreciated.

¹ Journal of the American Medical Association. (2003). 290:1884-1890.

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⁵ Brumberg J. (1998). *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. NY: Vintage.

⁶ National Center for Health Statistics. (2002). *Health, United States, 2002*. Hyattsville, MD, 2002.

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- 8 Linda Bunker, University of Virginia. (1988). Lifelong Benefits of Sports Participation for Girls and Women, Presented at the Sport Psychology Conference, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, June 22.
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- 10 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2002). "Surveillance Summaries." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 51 (No.SS-4).
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