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Children participating in a joint program between Tibu Africa and the U.S. Embassy in Morocco, January 9, 2024. Image courtesy of Sportanddev.org.

## Sports As A Mechanism For Female Empowerment And Disaster Relief – OpEd

📅 July 3, 2025    💬 0 Comments

By [Ann Leslie Riley](#)

On 17 June 2025, I spent three days visiting two villages in Aghbar, Morocco. These areas, located in the High Atlas Mountains, were struck very hard by the earthquake in 2023. Talking with the women who lived there, I had the opportunity to hear their stories. Many had lost family members or had their homes leveled to rubble, forcing many of them to live in tents or intermediary housing units. I was deeply moved by the hardships these communities had gone through, but I was most admirable about their resilience and optimism in the wake of such a tragedy.

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Even prior to the earthquake, one village was not able to send their children to school past the elementary level, a challenge that impacted girls the most. The women explained that a lot of girls get engaged at around fifteen or sixteen years old and are married by the time they are eighteen. No young people in their village were currently attending university, and women were required to have a male representative with them to go anywhere. Hearing this, I struggled not to cry in front of this community of people who had been so welcoming to me and my peers at the [High Atlas Foundation](#).

Growing up, [anxiety](#), or fear was playing soccer. I knew that no matter what happened in my life, stepping out on the pitch would always make me feel better. So during these difficult conversations, I gathered my composure the only way I knew how: I talked about soccer. Asking some of the girls “*Wash ki3jb-ek tl3b coura?*” (Do you like to play soccer?), I watched some of their faces light up. I realized that when words fail and when language barriers seem insurmountable, sports are a universally appreciated expression of connection.

Unfortunately, women in Morocco, especially in rural areas, still face more [barriers](#) to sports participation than their male counterparts, perpetuated especially by factors like gender roles, lack of accessibility, and socio-economic challenges. However, with Morocco set to host the World Cup in 2030 as well as their stellar performance in 2022, and with the Moroccan Women’s National team reaching the [finals](#) in the most recent African Cup, more female [players](#) have been drawn to the sport, along with increased [investment](#) in women’s sports programs. This soccer renaissance throughout the country provides a unique opportunity for utilizing sports as a tool for positive change.

Overarchingly, participating in sports can [teach](#) girls confidence and leadership, promote physical well-being and bodily awareness, and strengthen community connections. It also promotes an environment where girls find emotional support, encouragement, and peer relationships that boost self-esteem. In Morocco, particularly in earthquake-affected places like Aghbar, learning this kind of emotional resilience and cultivating a strong support network is greatly needed.

Similarly to the High Atlas Foundation’s psychosocial and women’s empowerment [workshops](#), sports programs are very effective at [addressing](#) psychosocial challenges and trauma, especially in [rural areas](#). Further, structured athletic sessions are crucial to challenging gender-based stigmas.

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For example, [Tackle Africa](#), a program implemented across 12 African countries, uses playing soccer as a way to [educate](#) young girls on “taboo” topics, like sexual and reproductive health and women’s rights, as well as combat gender-based violence. Additionally, the “My Game is My Weapon” and “Girl Power” programs in Lebanon and Egypt respectively, have successfully [challenged](#) prejudice towards women by showcasing the strength of female athletes and by platforming women as capable leaders.

For Morocco, now more than ever is the time to prioritize sports-based approaches as vehicles for sustainable development. At the forefront of this movement is [Tibu Africa](#), an organization that uses basketball for social impact, particularly aiding women in education, socio-economic empowerment, and leadership. Notably, their “Strong Girls, Strong World” [program](#) engages young female children from rural areas who face high barriers to upward mobility due to factors like restrictive gender norms and educational access.

Because [successful](#) sports programs must be based on a participatory approach that mobilizes coaches, counselors, and participating players at the local level, not only is incorporating sports a way for communities to empower and educate their girls, but they can also be instrumental in

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identifying local development **goals**. Tibu Africa specifically tailors their program methodology to the cultural context and expressed needs of their beneficiaries, working with local women and community leaders. This emphasis on community led facilitation is a cornerstone of efforts from organizations like HAF and Tibu Africa that allow for long-term success.

Especially in Morocco's post-disaster context, community mobilization in this way is paramount to rebuild, and integrating sports into relief and response initiatives is an avenue that is currently under-utilized. Taking steps to further integrate athletic programs into areas like psychosocial therapy and empowerment training will not only bolster sustainable development, but also ensure that sports as a universal language of connection is truly universal.

### Ann Leslie Riley

Ann Leslie Riley is an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia and an Intern at the High Atlas Foundation in Marrakech, Morocco.

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