

Sappi's #EmpowerHer community programme aims to uplift young women through sport

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In a convergence of well-timed synchronicity, Women's Month in South Africa this year also saw the Netball World Cup and Women's Football World Cup taking place, providing the ideal time for Sappi to launch its #EmpowerHer netball programme in its neighbouring communities.



In consultation with the Traditional Councils around its mills in KwaZulu-Natal, concern was expressed about the high teenage pregnancy rate as well other societal factors indicating that something should be done for the young girls in these communities.

In the words of the late Nelson Mandela: "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand." It is this belief that spurred Sappi to use the vehicle of sport as a developmental programme in the rural and peri-urban areas where it operates and where opportunities and economic activities are often limited.

Giving girls more opportunity for sports participation builds self-esteem, courage and character. As this self-belief increases, so does the likelihood of becoming leaders, of playing an active role in their own destiny and of stepping away from a future which determines that adolescent girls and young women will account for 35% of all new HIV infections and where gender-based violence statistics predict that one in five women (21%) are likely to experience physical violence by a partner.





Crucially, the programme also addresses the real issue of period poverty, where an estimated 30% of women in South Africa miss school when menstruating due to limited or no access to menstrual hygiene products, which gives girls unequal access to education, taking away their basic human rights.

The Sappi #EmpowerHer Netball Recreation Programme was launched with the training of 24 young individuals to become accredited Level 1 netball coaches and umpires in their respective communities surrounding its Sappi mills in KwaZulu-Natal. The training, facilitated by Netball KZN and loveLife, a youth health NGO, empowers these young coaches to use sport as a tool to address societal challenges faced by young people, especially girls and young women. The programme also extends its support to the participating community teams by providing essential resources such as netball poles, bibs, practice and match balls, whistles, water bottles, and care packs containing sanitary towels and toiletries.

The culmination of their training was showcased in a tournament on Saturday 12 August, when the young coaches put their skills into action featuring eight local teams from areas surrounding Umkomaas, Stanger and Mandeni in KwaZulu-Natal. It was a fun-filled day with exciting matches, culminating in a thrilling final, which saw the Diamonds from the KwaCele

Traditional Council (TC) situated in the Amandawe area, on the KZN south coast, lifting the trophy. The day also saw the facilitators from loveLife engaging in focus groups with the young women, with topics of discussion including the transformative power of sports in a young girl's life, teenage pregnancy, menstrual hygiene, and ways to combat violence against women and girls.





“This programme aims to celebrate the potential of women in our communities and using sport as a vehicle to do so offers many benefits. The #EmpowerHer programme seeks to encourage and help young women through the promotion of a healthy lifestyle to gain confidence and to step up into peer leadership and advocacy positions. It further supports our commitment to the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), in particular our support for SDG5: Gender Equality,” commented Mpho Lethoko, head of Corporate Affairs, Sappi Southern Africa.

At Sappi’s business units throughout the country, the company has also encouraged its staff to show their support for the South African women’s teams that participated in the Netball and Soccer World Cups, by wearing their green and gold attire on #EmpowerHer Fridays during Women’s Month.

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