Girls benefit from sport and physical activity in multiple ways.

Physical health
• Teens who played sports were more likely to have a healthy diet — eating breakfast, and fruits and vegetables, daily — get ample daily physical activity, and sleep at least seven hours per night. All of these have been identified as important factors in preventing obesity and related diseases.¹
• Looking ahead, women who engage with physical activity, alongside proper nutrition and sufficient sleep, show a 17% lower risk of any cancer, 22% lower risk of breast cancer, 52% lower risk of colorectal cancer, 27% lower risk of all-cause mortality, and 20% lower risk of cancer-specific mortality.²

Mental health
• Hormones produced as a result of exercising—such as endorphins—help manage stress and fatigue, make you feel good, and regulate sleep. Exercise also has the capacity to stimulate the creation of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which aids in the repair of neurons and the generation of new neurons.³
• High scores on body esteem are more likely at all grade levels among girls who play three or more sports per year.⁴

Academic achievement
• Sports participation was directly related to teens having a more positive attitude toward school work, improved academic performance and higher grades, and higher aspirations for earning a college degree and post-college education specialization.⁵

Family life
• In both single and dual-parent families, family satisfaction increases as children’s participation in sports increases—especially for daughters.⁶

However, gender disparities exist in sport, and begin at a very early age.
• Overall teen boys (75%) are more likely than teen girls (60%) to participate in sports.⁷
• By age 14, girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of boys.⁸
• Worldwide, male athletes continue to outnumber female athletes in the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (58.6% of all participants versus 41.6%).⁹

This gender gap is not uniform across the nation.
• Whereas similar rates of athletic participation exist in suburban communities, urban and rural girls are less involved than their male peers.⁹
• African-American and Hispanic girls enter sports at a later average age and drop out earlier than their counterparts, leaving girls of color with an even narrower window of opportunity.¹⁰
• Compared to boys, girls in immigrant families reported lower rates of athletic participation (75% versus 43%).¹¹
However, the gender gap in sport continues past participation into leadership.

- Women remain in the substantial minority in the sport workplace within the U.S., with women comprising approximately 10% of all high school athletic directors, two in ten head coaches at the college level, and less than 20% of college athletic directors.

- Female youth coaches remain highly underrepresented (35% or lower) on sports viewed as more masculine (e.g., baseball/softball, basketball, soccer, martial arts) in which girls are likely to face greater gender barriers for continued participation.

Women who participate in sport report successes that go beyond athletics, meaning that this discrepancy has the potential to impact opportunities available to girls in the future.

- Among a survey of 400 female corporate executives, 94% in the C-suite played a sport, 52% at the university level. Seventy-four percent of respondents say a background in sports can help accelerate a woman’s career, and 61% believe sporting involvement has contributed to their own career success.

It is critical that we close the participation gap, ensuring all girls equal access to physical activity and the benefits and success it will bring.

Public policies help level the playing field. For example, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a U.S. law that prohibits sex discrimination in educational programs, including school athletics.

The impact of Title IX on sports opportunities for girls and women in the United States has been ground breaking. Before Title IX, 1 in 27 girls participated in sports, as of 2016 it had changed to 2 in 5. The benefits of Title IX are being felt outside the U.S. as well. During this year’s FIFA Women’s World Cup, countries like Australia, Jamaica, Nigeria, Thailand and others had players that have competed or currently compete for U.S. Division I collegiate teams.

Sources:
15. Title IX and the Rise of Female Athletes in America, 2016.
16. On Women’s World Cup rosters, the global impact of Title IX is clear, Washington Post, 2019.