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GIRLS UNITED, COMMUNITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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INTRODUCTION

1. As we continue to highlight the ongoing challenges for equity in girls and women's football, it is pleasing to share the efforts of another organisation seeking to use football to positively impact the lives of girls and women.
2. Girls United, Community and Empowerment is the 9th data driven report produced by the University of Edinburgh's Academy of Sport. The reports aim to: (i) support charities, clubs and national associations to better understand their communities and their impact, (ii) use data driven innovation as well as traditional methods of data collection to inform the football industry, and (iii) support the closing of data gaps where they exist.
3. The purpose of this briefing is to provide additional insight into the work of one grassroots community football organisation, Girls United. Girls United aim to remove barriers to football and build pathways that empower girls and women to fulfil their potential on and off the pitch.
4. Girls United, Community and Empowerment is one of two reports that considers how community focused organisations in London use football to empower girls and women.[2]

BACKGROUND

5. Girls United was set up on International Women's Day, 8 March 2017, in Mexico by social entrepreneur Romina Calatayud. Currently, Girls United offer programmes in both Mexico and London. Sessions are specifically designed for girls aged 5 to 18 by teams of qualified coaches from the communities in which they work.
6. As of October 2024 Girls United has worked with 135 coaches to deliver over 6,000 hours of football to over 5,000 participants across 32 locations, including Mexico City and London [3].

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[2] The other report specifically focuses on the work of one football community trust attached to an English Premier League Football Club based in London.

[3] Girls United Impact (2024) <https://www.girlsunitedfa.org/impact> Last Accessed 24 October 2024.

7. In a world where women and girls face inequality on and off the pitch, Girls United is a global grassroots community that strives to enable a sustainable future for women's football with social impact at its core. Girls United's vision is for girls and women globally to reach their potential, and the organisation creates pathways that empower girls and women through football.

8. In London between September 2022 and August 2023, Girls United conducted sessions in 29 locations across Southwark, Lambeth, and Lewisham, engaging 938 players in weekly programmes, facilitating 2,112 hours of activity, and connecting with 1,545 individuals through various events.[4]

9. In March 2024 it held the United Kingdom's (UK) largest grassroots women's football tournament to raise funds for women and girls in football.

10. Girls United's mission is to embed community values in the future of the game by ensuring inclusion and long-term journeys for girls in football. The 2022-2026 Girls United Strategy aims to: (i) deepen impact, (ii) build a sustainable model, and (iii) create an inspiring identity.

11. Numerous challenges have been identified for girls and women in sport, including:

- Lack of confidence and fear of being judged
- Not feeling safe outside
- Raising levels of inactivity
- Far distances to travel, a lack of available sessions and unwelcoming environments
- Coaches that aren't representative or considerate
- More young people living in poverty
- Unprecedented levels of mental health issues
- Lack of support for the value of sport at home

12. Girls United run programmes that aim to reach low-income areas in South London, including Peckham, Dulwich, and Lewisham. These areas are known for their rich ethnic diversity, a mixed economy with both lower-income and middle-income residents and a variety of housing from council estates to Victorian houses and new developments.

13. Girls United goes beyond creating opportunities and employs a theory of change model that supports girls and women as agents of transformation. This is built around three pillars: (i) exploring systemic change by opening pathways that allow for a sustainable future for girls in football, (ii) inspiring communities that are inclusive, have a powerful voice and promote gender equality, and (iii) empowering individuals who have the skills to effect change and to be their best selves.

APPROACH

14. Girls United, Community and Empowerment involved four stages of data collection over 2024. These were as follows: (i) analysis of desk reports and documents relevant to Girls United, (ii) the piloting or research data collection instruments and obtaining ethical approval, (iii) the implementation of a focused survey with a sample of participants, and (iv) a series of follow up interviews with programme staff.

15. The desk research involved visiting official webpages of 18 Community Football Organisations (CFO) in London and reviewing annual reports, programme descriptions, and any published research related to the organisations' activities.

[4] Girls United Impact Report (2023)- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/581dc40bebbd1a19863bbb6c/t/65faf47f0aa1095b449a9239/l728295805437/impactreport2223.pdf> Last Accessed 25 October 2024.

16. The purpose of the desk research was to: (i) understand what existing research has found out about the role of community football organisations and independent football charities, and (ii) understand the specific efforts of interventions targeting adolescent girls in London.

17. This was viewed as a critical step towards understanding the landscape of interventions aimed at empowering adolescent girls in London. The desk research was used to analyse the organisation type, programme format, intervention style and target demographic of each CFO.

18. The survey allowed participants to give their perspectives on their experiences of programmes and the impact that engagement with Girls United has had on them. The survey focused on key areas:

- Demographic information
- Participation duration
- Physical activity levels
- Reasons for engagement
- Barriers to engagement
- Development of life skills
- Programme feedback and improvements

19. The semi-structured interviews with a small number of London staff members (4) aimed to generate an understanding of the challenges and opportunities of Girls United for promoting empowerment in adolescent girls. The interviews focused on the following areas:

- Background and role
- Aims of the programmes
- Football as a development tool
- Societal attitudes and cultural norms
- Promoting gender equality
- Engagement challenges
- Opportunities and strategies

IMPACT, COMMUNITY FOOTBALL ORGANISATIONS & INDEPENDENT CHARITIES

20. UNESCO'S 2024 report, which analysed the social value and impact of sport, built upon previous similar reports. It concluded that investing in sport to achieve social objectives yields significant returns in areas such as health, education, peacebuilding and environmental sustainability.[5] The report noted that in some studies the return was more than three times the original investment.

21. 1.Football, with its significant scale and reach, has long been recognised as a useful social tool around which other outcomes can be enabled.[6] Since 2015, the United Nations has recognised sport as having a mandate to enable the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals[7], much of which is achieved through football.[8]

[5] See **UNESCO (2024)** The Social impact of Sport: Unlocking the Potential of Sport to Drive Social Transformations. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000390603> Last accessed 10/10/2024.

[6] See **Schulenkorf, N., Sherry, E. & Rowe, K. (2016)**. 'Sport for development: An integrated literature review'. Journal of sport management. 30(1), pp.22-39.

[7] See **United Nations (2016)**. The Role of Sport in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/role-sport-achieving-sustainable-development-goals> Last accessed 10/10/2024.

[8] See **United Nations (2016)** Football for Goals. <https://www.un.org/en/footballforthegoals> . Last Accessed 10/10/2024.

22. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) specifically focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls. Football, in particular and sport in general, has been viewed as: (i) a cost-effective means of accelerating SDG 5, (ii) a force for challenging societal norms[9], (iii) providing a distinct platform to advocate for female empowerment[10], (iv) tackling stereotypes[11], and (v) providing access to education[12].

23. With specific regards to physical activity and adolescent girls, two key themes emerge from existing research: barriers to participation and strategies for retention. It is crucial to acknowledge that barriers are context specific but in general a number of key themes are repeatedly voiced by girls: (i) a lack of time, support and energy[13], (ii) gender norms[14], (iii) self-confidence and body image[15], and (iv) a lack of choice of sports[16].

24. Environmental factors also impact upon participation rates. In one recent systematic review, low socioeconomic status was observed to be associated with: i) girls' poorer perceived outcomes of sport participation, ii) lower perceived parental support, and iii) greater barriers to participating in sports.[17]

25. Specific interventions such as the "Make Space" initiative was developed in response to recent findings by Women in Sport, showing that 49% of girls surveyed did not feel safe exercising in their local park while 79% indicated that access to appropriate changing facilities and toilets had a direct impact on their decision to participate in sport or not.[18]

26. Other examples include, Girls on the Field, which is a social initiative striving to break gender stereotypes through football, by providing leadership training and opportunities for volunteering.[19] Grassroots Soccer uses a football-based life skills curriculum to target adolescent girls at risk for HIV, violence, and reproductive health issues.[20] Findings from these interventions include improvements in gender equity, self-esteem, and participants' perceptions of power. Organisations such as these exemplify that football interventions can make meaningful contributions towards the empowerment of women and girls.

27. Why is this important beyond football? A significant body of research has indicated the importance of doing more to empower women and girls as gender equality is a "keystone of a prosperous, modern economy that provides sustainable inclusive growth".[21] At the individual level, female empowerment leads to improved health, [22] reduced poverty,[23] and increased economic growth.[24]

[9] See **Hozhabri, K., Sobry, C. & Ramzaninejad, R. (2022)**. 'Sport for Gender Equality and Empowerment' In *Sport for Sustainable Development: Historical and Theoretical Approaches*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 55-66.

[10] See **LeCrom, C. (2022)**, 'An overview of Sustainable Development Goal 5'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Sport and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge p.119.

[11, 19] See **Kara, F., Ugurlu, A. & Karaca, G. (2023)**, 'Women's Empowerment within the Framework of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Case of "Girls on the Field"', *Spor Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(3), pp.775-791.

[12] See **Giulianotti, R. (2012)**. 'The sport for development and peace sector: an analysis of its emergence, key institutions, and social possibilities'. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 18(2), pp.279-293.

[13] See **Zelenović, M., Manić, M., Stamenković, A. et al., (2021)**. 'Barriers to physical activity in adolescents: A systematic review'. *Turkish Journal of Kinesiology*, 7(1), pp.22-30.

[14] See **Bevan, N., Drummond, C., Aberly, L. et al., (2020)**. 'More opportunities, same challenges: Adolescent girls in sports that are traditionally constructed as masculine'. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(6), pp.592-605

[15] **Rosselli, M., Ermini, E., Tosi, B. et al., (2020)**. 'Gender differences in barriers to physical activity among adolescents'. *Nutrition, Metabolism and Cardiovascular Diseases*, 30(9), pp.1582-1589.

[16] **Mitchell, F., Gray, S. & Inchley, J. (2015)**. 'This Choice Thing Really Works?? Changes in Experiences and Engagement of Adolescent Girls in Physical Education Classes, during a 61 School-Based Physical Activity Programme'. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 20(6), pp. 593-611.

[17] See **Hopkins CS, Hopkins C, Kanny S, Watson A.** A Systematic Review of Factors Associated with Sport Participation among Adolescent Females. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Mar 12;19(6):3353. Doi: 10.3390/ijerph19063353. PMID: 35329041; PMCID: PMC8950299.

[18] Women in Sport (2024)- <https://womeninsport.org/resource/make-space-for-us/> Last Accessed 24 October 2024.

[20] See **Merrill, K., Merrill, J. Hershow, R. et al., (2018)**. 'Linking at-risk South African girls to sexual violence and reproductive health services: A mixed-methods assessment of a soccer-based HIV prevention program and pilot SMS campaign'. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 70, pp. 12-24.

[21] See **OECD, (2018)**. 'Gender equality: Gender, institutions and development database 2009'. OECD Social and Welfare Statistics database. Last accessed 10/10/24 from: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/data/oecd-social-and-welfare-statistics/gender-equality-gender-institutions-and-development-database-2009-gid-db_f3947736-en

[22] See **Reshi, I. & Sudha, T. (2022)**. 'Women Empowerment: A Literature Review'. *International Journal of Economic, Business, Accounting, Agriculture Management and Sharia Administration (IJEBAAS)*, 2(6), pp.1353-1359.

[23] See **Nadim, S. & Nurlukman, A. (2017)**. 'The impact of women empowerment on poverty reduction in rural area of Bangladesh: Focusing on village development program'. *Journal of Government and Civil Society*, 1(2), pp.135-157.

[24] See **Duflo, E. (2012)**. 'Women empowerment and economic development'. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), pp.1051-1079.

28. Additionally, a ‘women’s disempowerment index’ has helped to produced evidence to conclude that countries with the greatest disempowerment have worse economic performance, worse governance, more conflict, and slower social progress.[25]

29. CFO(s) and independent football charities aim to generate a positive social impact, which has been described as “all consequences that have a direct or indirect impact on people’s lives... and alter the way in which people live, work and generally cope as members of society”.[26]

30. CFO(s) and independent football charities carry immense potential for advancing and enabling SDG5 by engaging girls and women through football. CFO(s) and independent football charities can provide powerful settings for reaching adolescent females and can provide a positive space for meeting like-minded people in a safe and accessible environment.[27] CFO(s) and independent football charities can further enable SDG5 by engaging adolescent females, who might be put off by the competitive focus of traditional sports clubs and school physical education.

31. Despite the plethora of studies on CFO’s, by comparison very little research has focused upon independent football charities and/or independent football charities that specifically focus upon altering opportunities and life chances for girls and women through football.

32. One small-scale, qualitative study of a programme delivered by an independent football charity located in several inner-city boroughs in London found that football operates as an effective “hook” to engage “at risk” youth populations.[28] A further study highlighted the effectiveness of “Street Games”, delivering sport on the doorsteps of young people in communities across the UK.[29] Despite the reported effectiveness of ICFC, most research in the UK has focused on crime prevention, increasing access to employment and fostering citizenship.

	Organisation Type		Targeted Female Age Group (years)			Program Format		Intervention Style Type			Football Type		Partnerships	
	FCCT	ICFC	12-14	14-16	16-18	Single sex	Mixed gender	Football	Personal Skills	Mental Wellbeing	Education Training	Competitive	Recreational	Links with schools
CFO 1	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓
CFO 2		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
CFO 3	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 4	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 5		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
CFO 6		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
CFO 7	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 8		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
CFO 9		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
CFO 10		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 11		✓		✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 12		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓
CFO 13		✓	✓			✓		✓				✓	✓	✓
CFO 14	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 15		✓			✓		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓
CFO 16		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
CFO 17	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
CFO 18	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Types of intervention offered by each community football organisation (CFO) in London

[25] See Hudson, V., Bowen, D. & Nielsen, L. (2020). ‘The First Political Order: How sex shapes governance and national security worldwide’. New York: Columbia University Press.

[26] See Fiandrino, S., Scarpa, F. & Torelli, R. (2022). ‘Fostering social impact through corporate implementation of the SDGs: Transformative mechanisms towards interconnectedness and inclusiveness’. Journal of Business Ethics, 180(4), pp.959-973.

[27] See Ubert, T., Forberger, S., Gansefort, D. et al., (2017). ‘Community Capacity Building for Physical Activity Promotion among Older Adults - A Literature Review’. International journal of environmental research and public health, 14(9), pp. 1058.

[28] See Parker, A., Morgan, H., Farooq, S. et al., (2019). ‘Sporting intervention and social change: Football, marginalised youth and citizenship development’. Sport, Education and Society, 24(3), pp.298-310.

[29] See McCormack, F. (2010). ‘Sport for good. Streetsport in Stoke-on-Trent. In Examining sports development, Oxon: Routledge, pp.211-224

33. Table 1 emerged from analysing official webpages of 18 CFO in London and reviewing annual reports, programme descriptions, and any published research related to the organisations' activities.

34. Of the 18 CFO, 38.9% (n=7/18) were football club community trusts and affiliated with English Premiere League teams. 61.1% (n=11/18) were independent football charities, thus evidencing a mix of organisational structures operate in London.

35. The demographic data of participants evidenced that 88.9% (n=16/18) of the CFO delivered programmes for 12–14-year-old adolescent girls, 83.3% (n=15/18) for 14–16-year-old adolescent girls, and 72.2% (n=13/18) for 16–18-year-old adolescent girls. This breakdown shows the age-specific focus of the programs and displays that most CFO cater for a range of ages of adolescent girls.

36. 88.9% (n=16/18) of the CFO delivered single gender programmes for adolescent girls and 22.2% (n=4/18) delivered mixed gender programmes.

37. When looking at the style and type of intervention 77.8% (n=14/18) of CFO offered competitive football programmes. 88.9% (n=16/18) offered recreational football programmes for adolescent girls.

38. Alongside football, 55.6% (n=10/18) of CFO delivered interventions which involved personal skills development, 22.2% (n=4/18) incorporated mental wellbeing in interventions and 61.1% (11/18) combined education in programmes.

39. 72.2% (n=13/18) reported having partnerships with local London schools.

GIRLS UNITED SURVEY FINDINGS

40. The Girls United Survey was distributed through Girls United to adolescent girls enrolled in a programme in London. Prior to any data being collected ethical clearance was secured through the University of Edinburgh ethics review process. Both parental and participant consent were collected.

41. All participants lived in London and were adolescent girls (aged between 10-19 years)[30], with a mean age of 13.1 years.

42. 63.6% of participants had been enrolled in a Girls United programme for more than one year, 9.1% for 6-12 months while 27.3% had been enrolled in a Girls United programme for less than 6 months.

Physical Activity Levels

43. Physical activity levels were self-reported on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "a lot."

44. The average rating for physical activity levels before starting the Girls United programme was 5.9; and after joining the programme the average rating of physical activity rose to 9.0.

45. This displays an average increase in physical activity levels of 34.4% due to engagement in Girls United programmes.

[30] UNICEF defines adolescence as the second decade of life, from the ages of 10- 19.

Reasons for Engagement

Why do you do the program at Girls United? (choose all answers that apply) 11 ⓘ

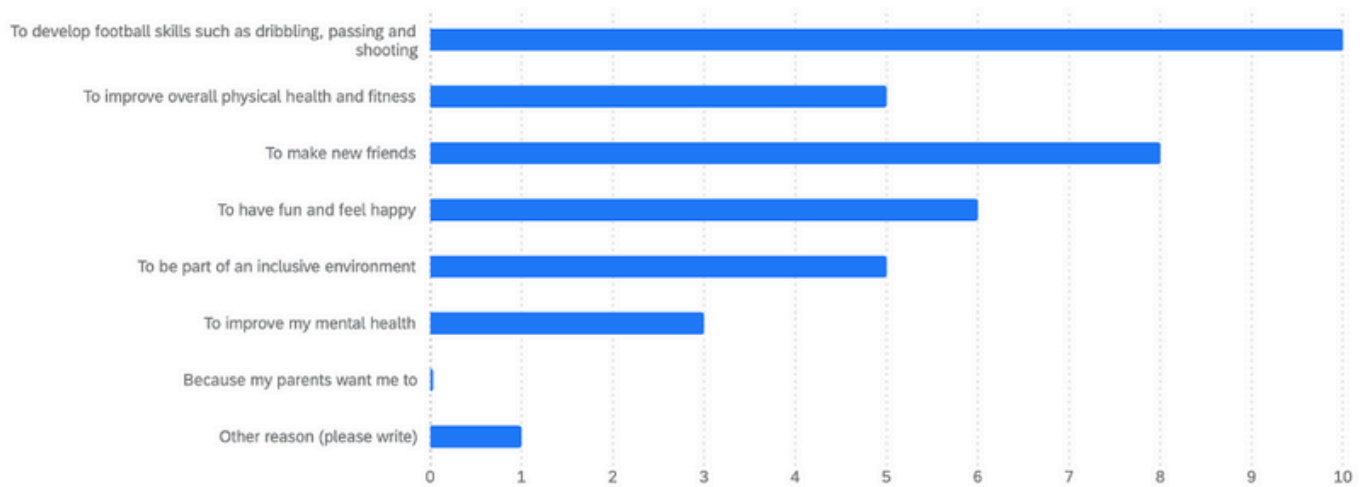


Figure 1: Reasons for Engagement

46. The most common reason for engagement cited by participants was wanting to develop football skills (90.9%). The second most popular motivator for engagement was to make new friends (72.7%). This was followed by to have fun and feel happy (54.5%).

47. Other reasons included being part of an inclusive environment (54.5%), to improve overall health and fitness (54.5%), and to improve mental health (27.3%). 0% of participants cited engaging in Girls United programmes because their parents wanted them to. One participant cited their desire to play football (9.1%).

Reasons for Engagement

What challenges have you faced when doing physical activity? (choose all answers that apply) 11 ⓘ

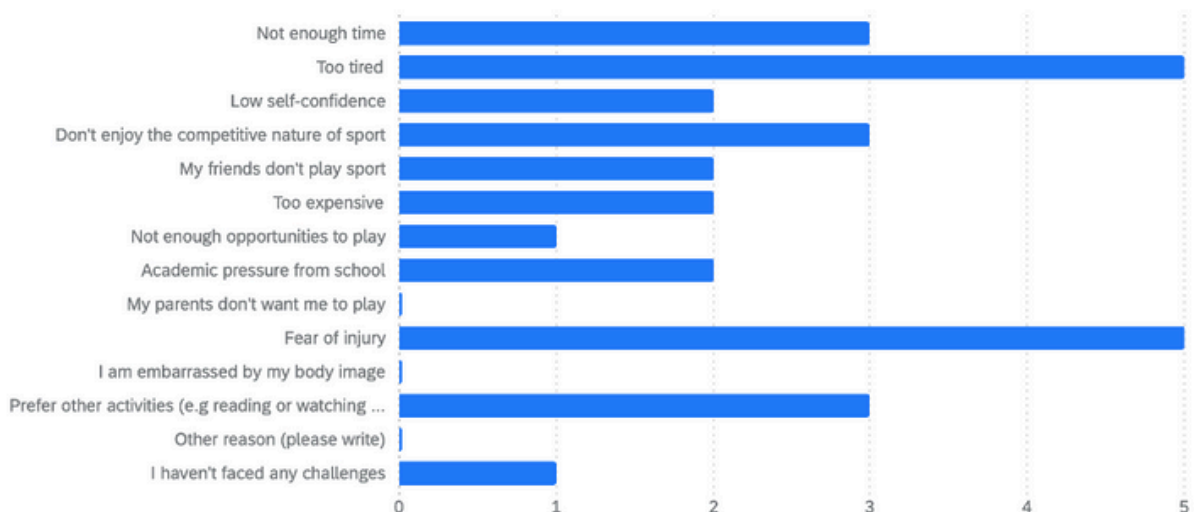


Figure 2: Barriers to Participation

48. The most commonly cited barriers to physical activity were fear of injury and being too tired (both 45.5%). This was followed by a lack of time, not enjoying the competitive nature of sport, and a preference for other activities (all 27.3%).

49. A smaller percentage cited low self-confidence, not having friends who play sport, financial barriers, and academic pressures (all 18.2%). 9.1% highlighted not having enough opportunities to play.

50. 9.1% stated that they haven't faced any challenges when participating in physical activity.

Development of Life Skills

51. 1. Participants rated their development of three key life skills—confidence, leadership, and teamwork—on a Likert scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "a lot."

52. The highest reported skill improvement was teamwork with a mean score of 8.3, followed by confidence at 6.6, and leadership at 6.3.

Feedback and Improvements

53. Survey participants were invited to share their favourite thing about the Girls United programme and provided with a space to offer any feedback.

54. Answers relating to the social element of the programme included: "friendships" and "meeting new people". Answers relating to the football element of the programme included: "enjoying playing sport" and "playing football". Answers relating to the personnel included: "the people", and "the coaches and players".

55. Participants were invited to share their improvements for the Girls United programme and provided with a space to write their feedback.

56. One player stated, "different types of training and a diverse technique practice". Another said, "more training in training". "More players" was also mentioned.

57. Many participants cited "nothing" or did not answer.

GIRLS UNITED STAFF VOICES

58. Girls United staff voices explored a range of themes with Girls United staff members about the use of football as a development tool. 75% of participants interviewed were female and 25% male. The mean duration of employment at Girls United was 4.4 years. 75% of staff were based at Girls United London, and 25% were at Girls United Mexico.

59. The themes included:

- The global impact of football
- Football at a community level
- The challenges and opportunities for change through football
- Recommendations for community football organisations
- The challenges faced by Girls United to engage adolescent girls
- Organisational challenges

Feedback and Improvements

60. The scale and reach of football globally and locally continues to be documented. Reports on both the Future of Sport and the Future of Football regularly comment on the growth of women's football being a key driver. Girls United staff members recognise the scale, accessibility and potential of girls and women's football:

- “there's very little other sports that have that kind of a buy-in from society and across cultures.”
- “Football is the most accessible sport in general,”
- “Potential is unrivalled by any other sport. ”
- “Football has real positives in the sense that it has so much reach. It has such a big audience, male and female. And I think it can really have a global impact”.

61. Using football as a tool for development is not without its limitations and staff recognise that more work needs to be done:

- “Football can be quite limiting because of the history of football”
- “It needs to be made more accessible to girls purely because of the impact that it had managed to have globally already”.

62. The sport continues to require “passionate people within this football space in order to continue to drive change.”

Football at a Community Level

63. Football at the community level is talked of as being a powerful force, a traditionally a male dominated space, and an area where perceptions need to continue to change. Staff members talked of:

- “The way that football is perceived is very powerful... we live and breathe and there is such an excitement around football that doesn't exist around other sports.”
- It's a “traditionally male-dominated space,” which presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Integrating girls and women into football programmes can “change perceptions in a real ingrained manner,”

64. Girls United is but one example of pushing back against gender stereotypes and expanding the possibilities for female players in a setting that not only empowers participants but also contributes to changing perceptions and contributing to the reshaping of societal views on who belongs in the world of football.

65. Girls United football offers significant tangible and transferable benefits to participants, both physically and mentally. As one staff member commented on, football helps to build “resilience, teamwork, and perseverance,” which are skills applicable in everyday life.

66. In these and other ways, football becomes more than just a game; it becomes a tool for personal development and social change at the community level. A safe space that actively strives to enable, engage and empower girls .

The Challenges & Opportunities for Change through Football

Involving the wider community

67. Community football organisations, like Girls United, are uniquely positioned to not only promote sport but also drive broader social change by engaging the entire community. In the words of one staff member:

- “We try to create a real community around what we do to promote gender equality more broadly. So that girls can become agents of change within their communities. But different stakeholders like schools, venues, parents are all bought in, creating supportive networks for the girls.”

68. This approach goes beyond offering football programmes—it involves building a strong, supportive ecosystem to empower girls. This underlines the fact that community football organisations have an opportunity to drive change by extending their social impact beyond their programmes to create broader legacies, development opportunities and choices.

Involving the wider community

69. One challenge in driving change within community football organisations is ensuring diversity within the coaching team. A diverse coaching staff plays a critical role in creating an inclusive environment where all participants can thrive.

70. When girls and non-binary players see themselves reflected in their coaches, it fosters a sense of belonging, inspiration, and empowerment. As one staff member commented:

- “Hugely important is making sure that we have a diverse coaching team and that we have a lot of female coaches and non-binary coaches who the girls do see themselves in and that can be role models.”

The Challenges & Opportunities for Change through Football

Tailoring the programmes to the girls

71. Girls United staff emphasised the importance of collaborating with participants to co-create football programmes that are truly tailored to the needs of girls and women. This approach focuses on moving beyond merely replicating the male version of the sport and, instead, designing initiatives that reflect the unique experiences of female players. In their own words:

- “Not replicating the male game but creating something new. So, designing programmes that are catered for girls and women is very much the key to making sure there are genuinely more opportunities, not just more opportunities on paper.”

72. By doing so, community football organisations can create authentic opportunities that genuinely serve female participants.

73. Additionally, staff commented upon the importance of fostering player autonomy and agency.

- “Opening spaces for dialogue... making sure that there is a lot of space for player decision making and player agency, and they have to be a part of making decisions and leading sessions.”

74. Co-creation of programmes and provision is an important principle of policy and practice. Girls United involve players in decision-making and foster a culture of participants taking on leadership roles in sessions and as an organisation ensure that the programmes not only meet the participants’ needs but also give them a sense of ownership and control.

75. The underlying philosophy:

- “We do believe that the solution to getting more girls active and getting more girls into football is giving them a space in which they feel fully comfortable... and there are programmes that are specifically designed for them and their needs.”

76. By creating spaces where girls feel fully comfortable and tailoring programmes to their specific needs, community football organisations can help more girls become active participants and build long-term engagement in the sport.

Cultivating safe spaces

77. The physical environment where girls engage in football programmes plays a crucial role in their overall experience. A well-chosen venue not only ensures safety but also fosters an inclusive atmosphere. As one staff member stated:

- "I want them to have a space where they feel safe and... we want a space for them to feel included and like they're able to be whoever they want to be".
- "For a girl, it's important that the pitch is safely accessible and that the lighting is good because then they feel safe to walk into the pitch".
- "We are very conscious about making sure the spaces that we hold are sessions in are safe and appropriate for female participants, whether that be making sure there is accessed for appropriate changing spaces, making sure the programmes are in areas that are safe to travel to and from, making sure our coaches are aware of all the safe guarding protocols that they need to make sure it is an appropriate environment."

78. This attention to the physical environment is crucial for promoting long-term participation and creating a truly inclusive football experience.

Training supportive coaches

79. Girls United coaches emphasised the importance of providing coaches with the right level of training and a deep understanding of the environment required to empower girls. A well-prepared coach plays a crucial role in creating a space where girls can feel confident, supported, and capable of achieving their potential. Ensuring that coaches understand how to foster this environment is essential for encouraging long-term participation and growth.

80. Good coaches are not only valuable for their technical skills but also for their position as role models and agents of change. One staff member talking about coaches noted:

- "Adults that join the organisation, they're the ones driving that change and become agents of change within their communities."

Establishing partnerships with schools and funders

81. Girls United staff emphasised the effectiveness of partnering with schools to engage adolescent girls by meeting them in familiar environments:

- "Our schools programme allows us to reach a group of girls in an area where they're already at and go to them and engage the girls in kind of an intervention where for them, we are not asking much of them to have to go to a new place or have to actively search it."

This approach allows Girls United to "meet them where they are and just foster a love for football."

- "A lot of what we do is trying to take football to the players themselves; we go to schools ourselves and put ourselves out there in the community.
- "Working with organisations that allow us to grow and help us to do that. Whether that be the London FA or Nike," helps Girls United access essential resources and funding.

82. These collaborations enable Girls United to have a greater impact, reinforcing the importance of community engagement in promoting football among young girls.

The Challenges & Opportunities for Change through Football

Overcoming historical barriers

83. Girls United staff highlighted the challenges of promoting football programmes among girls against a long history of gender inequality within football.

84. As one staff member noted, “I think the main challenges really is the years of inequality and years of having football being such a male-dominated space. Whereby, girls and young women have the idea that football, and those spaces aren’t for them.”

85. This enduring perception creates significant barriers for girls, making it essential for initiatives like Girls United to actively work to challenge and change such narratives.

Overcoming barriers relating to body image and stereotypes.

86. Barriers such as confidence, body image, and comfort in one’s body significantly impact adolescent girls’ participation in football.

- “Some of the barriers are around confidence and body image and comfort and in one's body. And gender limitations around what they deem to be sporty, how they feel, if they are kind of feeling like there's people watching.”

Additionally, negative stereotypes can emerge from the immediate environment:

- “We've had some dads say ‘no, she can't play, she's a girl. Won't she get hurt?’

87. The work of Girls United also often involves “bringing the parents on that journey of making sure they understand the value of playing.”

88. Staff also highlighted broader challenges when promoting their programmes for adolescent females:

- “General things like financial barriers, stereotypical barriers, like these kids' schedules now, like compared to my schedule, when I was a kid, I thought I was busy. But these are so busy.”

89. Addressing such barriers is crucial if the sustained involvement of more girls engaging in football is to be provided for.

Organisational Challenges

Investigating the difficulties of delivering community football programmes.

90. Girls United staff emphasised that organisational challenges, such as funding and space, need to be addressed for the sustained growth and effectiveness of football programmes.

- “Funding is a big challenge... because our approach is so individualised and so bespoke, it requires a lot of resources.”
- “A challenge in London is finding the right spaces at the right times. You know, pitch spaces are limited, and slots are competed and it's very expensive.”

91. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring that football programmes can continue to thrive and effectively serve their communities.

Recommendations and Observations

- RO1 Physical activity levels are enhanced from being involved in Girls United programmes.
- RO2 Life skills, particularly teamwork, are positively impacted through programme participation.
- RO3 Maintaining and promoting diversity throughout the programmes remains crucial to creating an inclusive environment. Diversity at all levels of the organisation (participants, coaching, staff) should continue to be pursued both in terms of scale and breadth of diversity and intersectionality.
- RO4 Programmes can facilitate cross-class interactions that support economic mobility, offering participants opportunities for broader social engagement.
- RO5 Safe spaces and supportive environments are essential to ensure high quality programmes.
- RO6 Securing sponsorship is important to increase coaching investments to support further recruitment, mentoring, and training of women and girls as coaches.
- RO7 Continue to work with non-sport organisations that demonstrate readiness for collaboration and can help with scale and building capability around Girls United planned outcomes.
- RO8 Track and report on school-based participation data by those involved in Girls United Programmes.
- RO9 Continue to ensure that women and girls receive strong, affirming messages that they belong in sport and that sport is a natural part of their lives.
- RO10 Further encourage governments and programme deliverers to understand the varied needs of women and girls and intentionally design sport programmes that address these requirements.
- RO11 Use digital platforms and merchandising channels to share Girls United's success stories, driving community conversation. Girls United have many good news stories that should be a key element of growth and impact. Community based model of growth has proved to be successful in the USA.
- RO12 The opportunity exists to expand community engagement by increasing visibility within the community, such as in schools, youth centres, and local events, something that Girls United is actively pursuing.
- RO13 Small, targeted interventions can have a meaningful, positive impact on participants' experiences and programme outcomes.

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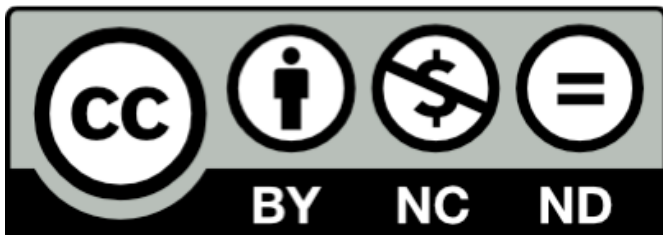
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