

Engaging Girls in Sport

Purpose

When designing a sport programme, it's **critical to identify the girls who will be targeted** by the programme, how they will be supported throughout the programme, and how they will continue to stay engaged.

Where are you?

This section of the International Guidelines will present questions and strategies to guide you through recruiting girls, creating intentional girl-centred leadership development opportunities, and retaining participants in your programme.

In this PDF, you will explore the following topics:

- 01** Recruiting Girls
- 02** Developing Girls' Leadership
- 03** Encouraging Participation and Retention



Image Source: OWLA Program, Empodera, Brazil

01 Recruiting Girls

Step 1: Identify the Potential Participant

Identifying the target participant group is critical to designing a sport programme that serves their needs. Clear identification of the **characteristics of the “type”** of girl you are looking for builds a solid foundation for serving them.

Key questions to ask can include:

- ✓ Who do you want to participate?
- ✓ Are they HIV-affected?
- ✓ Why do you want them to participate?
- ✓ Do they have a disability?
- ✓ Are the girls from a rural or urban environment?
- ✓ Do they have caretaking duties within their family that might restrict their participation?
- ✓ How far away from the programme headquarters or playing fields do they live?
- ✓ Are they in school or does their family have enough money to send them?
- ✓ How old are they?



Image Source: Fundacion GOLEES, Costa Rica

Step 2: Assess Capacity

Once you have identified who will benefit most from your programme, **evaluate how many girls you want to be able to work with, and how often**. Think about how many girls the infrastructure can accommodate, and consider availability of coaches, time, space, uniforms, food, permits and all other necessary resources.



Be realistic. Overestimating how many girls you can serve can result in participants not experiencing the full benefits of participation. You can always recruit more girls or rely on girls to bring their friends if your numbers are low. However, it's very difficult to turn girls that you've recruited away if you find that you have overestimated your capacity.

Step 3: Create and Execute a Strategy

Recruiting girls for your programme can be extremely challenging. It's unlikely that you will just walk up to an informal game of football and find large numbers of girls waiting to join your sport programme. For reasons of safety and family responsibilities, girls are more likely to be closer to home than boys, who are often more free to travel further away from home. It helps to have a clear, **intentional plan** for how you are going to identify and recruit girls.

Effective strategies are based on knowing exactly who you want to reach, where they are, what will motivate them to participate, and who makes decisions for them if they are not permitted to make them for themselves. Every programme's recruiting strategy will be unique. For some, creating an after-school partnership with a local primary school could be effective. For others, finding a team of participants might require months of going door-to-door, building relationships with community leaders, caregivers and girls.

WHO you want to reach + WHERE they are + WHAT they want = Effective Strategy for Engaging Girls

Ideas for Recruiting Girls



Designing a strategy for recruiting girls will depend on the particular cultural context of where the sport programme takes place. However, there are some general tips that feedback from partners has shown to be relevant for sport programmes across the globe.

Recommendations



- Understand and address all barriers to participation.
- Word-of-mouth is a powerful recruitment tool. Encourage girls to bring their friends.
- Create partnerships with schools, religious institutions or other groups that serve girls.
- Host tournaments and pass out information or have current members share.
- Meet with community leaders. Ask for their influence in spreading positive word about the programme.
- Go door-to-door. Explain programme benefits and details to girls and their families. Solicit the help of trusted community women, as they might be more openly received in their neighbours' homes.
- Give financial incentives, when possible. If a girl can earn extra money by providing a service for the programme, such as cleaning uniforms or officiating, their caregivers might be more likely to support their participation.
- Advertise constantly. Post a sign outside your training facility. Wear programme t-shirts and encourage girls to do the same. Speak about the benefits of sport in the lives of girls to anyone who is willing to listen.
- When recruiting girls, rather than doing a general meeting to see who comes and signs up, advertise a try-out or selection day. This creates a sense of competition that could motivate the girls to come and feel as if they have "earned" a spot in the programme. However, this must be carefully considered since creating a competitive atmosphere could also alienate girls who have never played sports and/or have low self-esteem, even if they are already guaranteed a spot.



Consider



Ask caregivers to fill out applications or simple entry forms for girls who want to join your sport programme. This provides written consent and ensures that the organisation has contact information in case of an emergency. If photos will be taken of girls during training, make sure to include this in the consent form, as in some cases photos compromise the personal safety of participants.

02 **Developing Girls' Leadership**

Girls' leadership development can and should be an important part of programme design. Creative programme leaders and coaches find subtle ways to facilitate this process and support all forms of leadership. It's important to recognise that there are many leadership models and styles, and not all girls will demonstrate leadership in the same way. While traditional patriarchal forms of leadership rely on command and control, participants may value a more inclusive and empowering approach of shared leadership or servant leadership.

One of the most powerful ways to build leadership skills in girls is to put them in leadership roles and give them the power to make decisions collectively. When girls are expected to lead, they find power within themselves they might not know existed. This can come in the form of formal positions or informal relationships between girls. This, in turn, increases the potential for these girls to grow as leaders in their communities.



Consider

Beyond the individual and collective benefits of dedicating time to leadership development for girls, building leadership skills creates a pool of potential coaches, facilitators and female leaders for your sport programmes. To learn more about ways to entrench leadership pathways and skill building in your programme design, go to the Leadership and Economic Empowerment Guideline.



Case Study:

Watch [this video](#) to find out about how a group of young women from Women Win partner organizations in Asia and Africa came to build their leadership muscles.

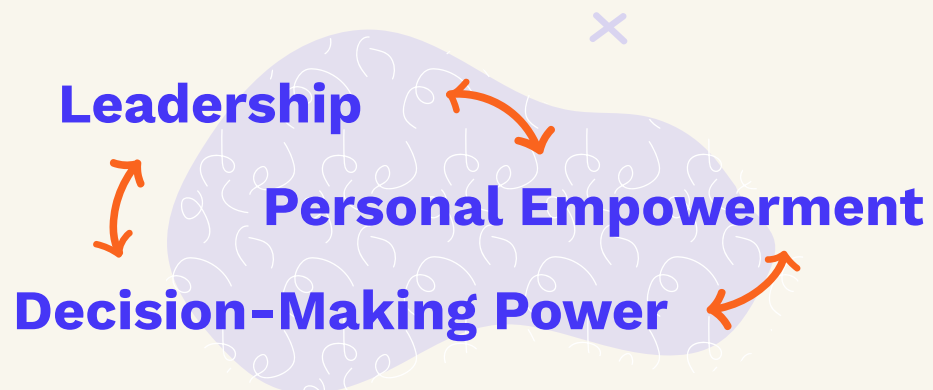


Tips for Developing Leadership

- Be patient. Leadership is a skill that is developed over time. Ask girls what they are good at and how they want to build their skills and confidence. Encourage them to lead their own development.
- Allow girls to elect their own leaders or leadership structures.
- Highlight examples of good leadership on and off the playing field.
- Let girls train others in sport-specific, practical and life skills.
- Show girls you value their opinions.
- Explicitly talk about and encourage discussions about leadership values to girls regularly.
- Support positive role modelling.
- Allow girls to choose if they want to fill leadership roles.
- Give all girls opportunities to lead during practice, not just older, talented, non-disabled or more natural leaders.
- Constantly encourage goal setting and evaluation.
- Recognise barriers to leadership, such as lack of confidence, peer pressure or poor mentoring, and address them.
- Seek to help every girl develop to their highest personal potential, as opposed to criticising or comparing girls to one another.
- Recognise quiet leadership in girls: those who are not outspoken or loud, but rather, those who will always run the extra lap with the slowest girl on the team.

Girl-Led Design

Leadership, personal empowerment, and decision-making power are closely linked. Programme partners report that when a girl feels like they have control over decisions concerning their body, their future and their environment, they begin to feel strong and powerful. It is important to **give your participants some degree of control over the design of the programme**, especially when the objective is to increase girls' self-esteem and leadership skills. **Girls are more likely to fully engage in activities that they help design.**



Tips for How to Engage Girls in Programme Design

- Allow girls to exercise ownership over their shared spaces. They can choose paint colours and create posters for the space where their sessions are held.
- Ask girls to vote on how they would like to be grouped for competitions, for example, by age, by region or by skill level.
- Give girls the choice of uniform colours and team names.
- Consult with girls and their families about time and duration of practices and training sessions.
- Ask girls to create rules of conduct for sessions and penalties for breach of conduct.
- Pick a group of girls to interview and evaluate potential coaches.
- Ask girls which sport they would like to play.
- Ask girls which life skills topics they would like to discuss.

The Power of Role Models

Girls are exposed to both positive and negative role models every day. All of these people affect how a girl views their own potential. These are the people who girls use as references for who they will become and whose behaviour they will emulate.



It helps for a girl to see confidence, leadership and accomplishment in other women in order to envision themselves with those qualities. A programme designed to empower girls must provide powerful, positive role models that reflect the diversity of the community you are working with. Strong role models can be women who are older, skilled athletes, coaches, community leaders, successful business people, celebrities, politicians, religious leaders, confident peers, or any woman whose experience will resonate with the girls.



Image source: G. Sharanya Rao

When you ask a girl who their role models are, often they will mention an international celebrity or fictional character. Although there is power in exposing girls to women who are international heroines, there is also power in exposing them to local people. A key component to presenting girls with role models is to make sure the success experienced by the role models is attainable and replicable in their minds. Research has shown that when individuals feel that a role model they look up to has attained a status unreachable to them (a celebrity winning an international prize for example), this can be demoralising.¹ If possible, find role models who exemplify an area in which girls have an interest and where they need help in personal development. Find a person who can share their personal experience with personal growth in that area. Men can certainly serve as positive role models; however, there is an inherent value in same-gender role modelling.

Tips for Creating Opportunities for Girls to Learn from Role Models

- Organise events where role models speak to girls about their experiences.
- Try to pair up individual girls with older mentors with the intention of creating long-lasting relationships.
- Take girls to see athletic events with older participants. Arrange a meet-and-greet afterwards to allow girls to interact with players.
- Set up guest coaching sessions with successful coaches from your region.
- Ensure that all those in positions of power within the organisation are serving as positive role models for participants.
- Seek role models outside of the sporting arena. Invite a successful businesswoman or female politician to come to the programme and speak to the girls.
- Consider inviting men or women with a disability to come and speak, as they often have a powerful impact on girls with and without disabilities.
- Discuss the concept of “negative role modelling” with girls, i.e., simply because a person is successful does not mean that they are worthy of being a role model. Challenge girls to evaluate virtues, values and expectations related to these role models.



Image source: OWLA Program, Empodera, Brazil

¹ Lockwood, P. & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 91-103.



Case Study: Fondo Centroamericano de Mujeres (FCAM)

[FCAM](#), an organisation based in Nicaragua, uses peer-to-peer education groups in their women's camps, which provide adolescent girls the opportunity to explore issues that affect their lives through gender, inter-generational and feminist perspectives. The objective is to open spaces for reflection so that girls can build new kinds of relationships together (peer-to-peer), based on their experiences in their organisations and as individuals, with a deep analysis of how power relationships can arise.

03 Encouraging Participation and Retention

Fundamentally, for girls to participate and stay in a sport programme, the **programme must meet girls' emotional, personal and physical needs, encouraging their growth and addressing barriers** that impede involvement and retention.

Motivation

There are countless strategies for motivating a girl to participate in a sport programme. These vary based on age, sport, geographic region, and the individual. Programme directors and coaches often want to give girls every possible incentive to play. However, with limited resources, **sometimes our partners have had to make difficult choices about which incentives will yield the greatest results relative to cost.** For example, you might have enough money in the project's budget to provide uniforms for 25 girls, but not enough money to provide transportation to competitions.



Tips for Motivating Participation



● Recognise and Reward

Publicly reward girls based on leadership, performance and initiative. Recognition can be a physical award, such as a certificate or trophy, a privilege, or simply verbal recognition in front of the group by a coach or leader. Recognition can happen informally throughout practices and sessions, or formally during a regularly scheduled event, such as an annual awards banquet. Be open and explicit about how other girls can win rewards, so they have clear and tangible goals.

● Give Girls Leadership Roles

Giving girls leadership roles in daily sessions, at events or within the organisation encourages girls to set goals and work hard to reach them. There is no better way to teach girls how to lead than to actually let them do it and learn by experience.

● Offer non-economic incentives

Offer non-economic incentives for participation such as small prizes, clothing or equipment. Some programmes provide a “membership card” that is stamped each time a participant attends a practice or a programme activity. A chart posted on the wall tracks attendance, and then the programme can award prizes for different levels of participation. Prizes such as hair elastics or pencils would require fewer participation stamps, and boots or tennis racquets could be earned for more.

● Keep it Fresh

A primary motivator for playing sport is simply having fun. Girls around the world are weighed down with daily responsibilities that require them to behave beyond their years. The practice of simply playing with peers can be incredibly healing and liberating. When you and your coaches put the emphasis on fun, girls respond.

● Provide Economic Incentives

Provide economic incentives. Giving girls a chance to earn and manage money are skills that will serve them beyond the playing field and might convince caregivers to allow them to participate. Some programmes have had success in retaining girls by offering them a chance to earn money within the programme. For example, girls can get paid small sums for cleaning, officiating, or coaching. Others have used small sums of money as part of leadership schemes. You can also introduce them to vocational training and non-formal education opportunities, and schedule practices during times when girls do not have to work.

● Make it Meaningful

Make it meaningful. Girls need to consciously see the value of a sport programme prior to making a commitment. For some, this can be simply about having fun and feeling carefree while at practice. For others, it is in making new friends, learning new skills, building physical strength or feeling a heightened sense of possibility.





Consider

Although there are many positive ways to provide economic incentives for girls to participate in sport programmes, there are also negative and harmful practices that could create a culture or atmosphere where girls only come if there is a financial incentive. Try not to hand out money just for simple participation. Girls should be there because they love sport and want to exercise. Making it easier for them and their family financially so they can participate is important, but simply providing money for showing up sends the wrong messages. Also, staff must be careful when finding employment for the girls in the sport programme, taking care not to reinforce or promote child labour or exploitation of participants.

Basic Needs

The following is a list of basic needs for a successful sport programme. Each need is discussed in terms of “the minimum” and “the ideal”. If your programme cannot ensure that each girl is receiving the minimum recommended, you need to reconsider its design so it is not a threat to your participant’s well-being.

1. Clean Water and Food

Sport participation demands that participants are properly nourished and hydrated. A girl without enough calories in their system is less likely to be able to physically perform and focus than a girl who has their nutritional needs met. In economically disadvantaged communities, girls might not be getting their dietary needs met at home; in this case provision of food and water at your sport programme is absolutely necessary.

The Minimum

Provide clean drinking water and make sure that girls have enough calories in their systems for physical exertion. If girls are malnourished or dehydrated, they should not be playing sport without being given food or water, as it can further jeopardise their health. Educate girls on the importance of drinking water and eating healthy foods when participating in sport.

The Ideal

Provide all girls with nutritious snacks, juices and clean drinking water at training sessions and events.





Case Study:

Sadili Oval

One of the participants at [Sadili Oval](#), in Nairobi, Kenya, fainted one Monday morning when they arrived to train. Until that incident, no one knew that they were living on their own. They were not able to eat on weekends, as their only source of food was at school and what was provided at Sadili Oval. Girls cannot participate safely without being given nutritious food.

2. Athletic Clothing

If a girl does not have comfortable and sport-appropriate clothing, they will not be able to fully participate in a sport programme. If they are expected to run, they need running shoes; if they are playing field hockey, they need shin guards. Beyond function and performance, uniforms often give girls a sense of pride and belonging. Often it is possible to secure donations for sportswear, but when resources are scarce, you must improvise, for example getting girls to share uniforms if they aren't playing at the same time. If there is not enough money for full uniforms, girls can wear practice jerseys over their blouses.

The Minimum

Ensure girls have functional and culturally appropriate clothing and are not in danger of injury or social ostracism for participating in the clothing they have available.

The Ideal

Provide sport-specific uniforms, footwear, bras and underwear for all participants.



Consider

Once girls reach puberty, undergarments become extremely important for sport participation. For example, a supportive sports bra is critical for girls participating in running sports. Without one, girls may experience pain from bouncing breasts and are less likely to want to run. Underwear is equally important, as it enables girls to use sanitary pads or other materials to manage their menstruation. Any sport programme aimed at serving adolescent girls effectively must address the issue of ensuring all girls have both a bra and underwear.

3. Safe Space to Change Clothes

Girls typically need to change out of street clothes and into sportswear prior to playing sport. Providing safe, private spaces in which to change is vital for participation. In the absence of such spaces, girls will either opt not to change their clothes (and play in inappropriate attire) or wear their sport clothes outside of the programme, which can put them at risk of assault or social ostracisation for breaking social codes related to gender-appropriate dress.

The Minimum

Access to a toilet and a place to change that is lockable and off-limits to males during the time the girls are using it. Ensure it is accessible to girls with disabilities.

The Ideal

A separate girls-only facility for changing and cleaning up near training/competition space.



Consider

Some girls, despite having a safe space to change and access to proper training kits, might not feel comfortable changing clothing to play sports. If the goal is to get girls to participate, it's best not to force those girls to change. Let them play. However, it can be helpful to talk with them about the benefits of wearing comfortable shoes and clothing, and explore their reasons for not wanting to change.

4. Transportation

Getting to and from training sessions can be a costly and dangerous predicament for girls. If participants do not have a safe, affordable and reliable method of transportation, the longevity and consistency of a girl's participation will be affected. Some of our partner programmes organise girls in groups so they can walk home together safely through neighbourhoods they don't feel safe in. Other organisations give girls fare for minibuses or hire buses for the girls' transportation to and from events. When considering transportation, be sure to create safe, low-cost provisions for regular training sessions as well as for games, tournaments and events.

The Minimum

Ensure that girls can travel, by foot or transport, to and from training safely and affordably.

The Ideal

Alleviate cost and safety concerns by running a programme near girls' homes or at a school that girls already attend and do not need to travel to. When this is not possible, provide necessary transportation.

5. Menstruation

There is a lot of social stigma about menstruation, and girls are unlikely to attend a sport programme if they fear the possibility of bleeding in front of others. This can be a major barrier to initial and ongoing participation for girls who don't have the means or knowledge to manage menstruation. Your sport programme can educate girls about their menstrual cycle and you should also consider providing menstruation supplies. It can be very helpful to have a health provider come and talk to participants about menstruation as well.

The Minimum

Provide education about hygienic menstrual management and bathroom facilities for girls near sport spaces.

The Ideal

Provide girls with education, bathroom facilities and sanitary pads.



6. Reputation and Effectiveness of Programme

Strong sport programmes that provide girls with role models, safe spaces and growth opportunities will continue to grow without endless recruiting efforts. If a girl is meeting their own goals, is having fun and feeling inspired by their time within the programme, they will do everything in her power to continue participating. They are also more likely to recruit other friends to join a programme that is meeting their needs.

The Minimum

Try to keep girls in the sport programme for at least an entire year.

The Ideal

Run programmes so that girls are exposed to sport and life skills for more than four years, allowing them to grow and learn in a safe environment at a critical time in their adolescence.

Consider

The duration of participation is a key factor in determining how beneficial a sport programme will be for a girl. Every girl is different, but, generally speaking, the longer a girl participates, the more opportunity they have for growth. Several programme partners agree that girls need to be involved for no less than one year to enjoy the benefits of participation.

7. Home Duties

One of the most common reasons girls leave sport programmes is because it conflicts with family responsibilities or values. Girls are often expected to care for siblings and elders, cook, clean and contribute to the family's income. When conflicts between your sport programmes and those duties arise, it's very difficult for a girl to choose themselves over their commitment to her family. Additionally, family disagreement over priorities can curtail a girl's participation in your programme.

It is critical that you think about operating programmes to fit within the context of a girl's family life. This can mean scheduling practices and events around chores and farming schedules, allowing girls to bring siblings to practice, or making sure girls have the energy to help around the house once they leave a practice. It's equally important to communicate regularly and transparently with caregivers about a girl's activities and progress, to help caregivers see the positive benefits of sport participation.

The Minimum

Be conscious of a girl's responsibilities at home and to their family, letting them leave training early or skip certain days when they conflict with their family work.

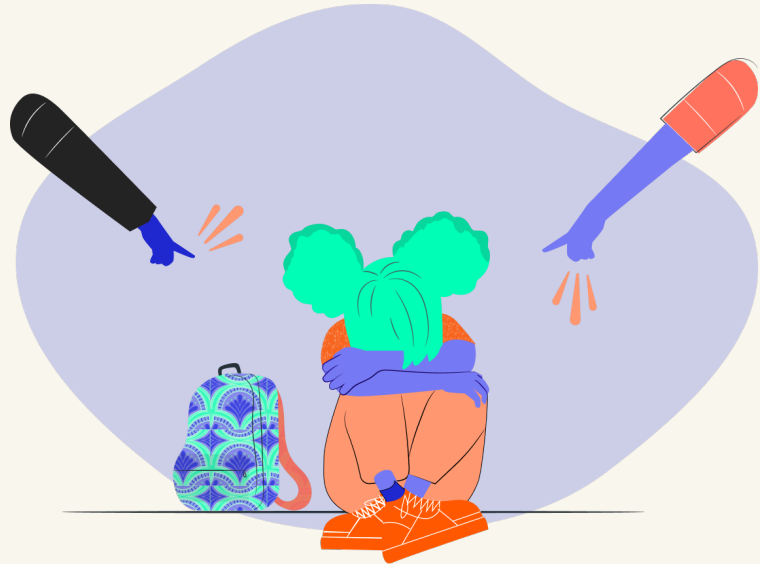
The Ideal

Schedule trainings and games around a girl's family responsibilities and chores they do at home, allowing girls to be able to attend all activities related to the programme.

Group Cohesion

An important part of keeping girls in a programme and making sure the atmosphere is comfortable and open to all is good group cohesion, or positive group dynamics. A group atmosphere in which girls feel comfortable to be themselves, say what they think, and respect all voices is ideal for any sport programme — however, this is not always as easy as it sounds.

Often, bullying and feelings of superiority can be big problems, especially if you have groups that mix social class, nationality, ethnic backgrounds, or even just different neighbourhoods and schools. If there is no group cohesion, or some girls feel threatened by others in the programme, they will not speak up or fully engage in sessions and could eventually decide not to come back, preferring to avoid the group and forget sport.



Recommendations

- Monitor girls who are more dominant in discussions and during sessions. If you see the dominance being displayed in abusive or negative ways rather than through positive and healthy ways, pull that girl aside and talk to them about their behaviour.
- Break up cliques when you see them forming, so that all girls partner or form groups with girls they do not know or are not necessarily close to during training. Play games in which those girls must rely on each other to win, forming a bond through competition.
- Help girls talk through conflict resolution.
- Stop gossip and rumours from circulating. Have a discussion with the girls about the damage that gossip or rumours cause.
- Refrain from playing favourites. It is great to reward girls and encourage girls who are natural leaders and show good behaviour; however, constantly favouring some girls over others can cause jealousy and conflict in the group.

Informal Time

Informal time before or after a training session can often be a critical period of time in which a coach can form strong bonds with their players and gain their trust. This unstructured time could be valuable for coaches to discuss life issues with players while juggling a ball, shooting hoops, or just sitting on the grass and waiting for everyone to arrive. Interviews with our partner coaches have shown that girls feel more free to open up, ask for advice and discuss things bothering them in life the more time they spend with the coach before and after practice, outside of the structured curriculum or training session. This gives the coach more opportunities to act as a mentor and give valuable advice and information to that participant.

However, unstructured and informal time is not always positive. If no one is monitoring them, coaches can take this time and use it in ways that could harm the girls, either through fostering inappropriate relationships or favouring some girls over others. As an organisation, it is important to think through creating this informal or unstructured time for your coaches and players to interact and ensure that the time is a positive thing for the players.

Recommendations

- Ensure that if there is unstructured time before or after practices, that male coaches are always accompanied by woman coaches or another female adult. Do not let male coaches meet with female players before or after practice alone.
- As an organisation, pay coaches a little bit extra to come 30 minutes before practice and stay 30 minutes after, giving them the opportunity to interact with players who come early and those who leave late.



Image source: Girl Determined, Myanmar



Game
over!