

'MORE OBSTACLES THAN ACHIEVEMENTS'

**AN EXPLORATION OF THE KEY HURDLES TO GIRLS' PARTICIPATION
IN SPORT IN EUROPE AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT REMAIN**

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OVERVIEW

There is a range of literature that documents the physical, psychological, social, and academic benefits of consistent participation in sport.¹ Girls benefit tremendously from sport participation in both the short-term and long-term—and as a result, it's critical for their empowerment.²

Although girls and women are becoming more involved in sport in Europe and worldwide, **gender inequities still persist** and are entrenched in ways that are both obvious (for example, the number of men vs. women who participate in sport) and more subtle (for example, the different ways that men and women athletes are portrayed in the media).³ However, **a comprehensive analysis of the barriers for girls in sport across all of Europe does not exist.** This white paper draws upon both EU-based primary and secondary data sources to examine the state of girls' sport, looking at the barriers that hinder sport participation and the actionable opportunities that can rectify the issue.

Before discussing the methodology used in this research and our findings, we first outline both what we know and don't know about barriers to girls' participation.

¹ See, for example, Bailey, Wellard and Dismore, 2005; Brady, 2011; Kotschwar, 2014; UNICEF, 2019.

² See, for example Miller et al., 2005; Troutman and Dufur, 2007; Cornelißen and Pfeifer, 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2012.

³ COE, 2016.



ABOUT THE ADIDAS BREAKING BARRIERS PROJECT

Mental health issues among girls in the European Union (EU) are on the rise. Many girls report being less confident and happy⁴ and fewer are engaging in sufficient levels of physical activity.⁵ Sport can be a powerful force for counteracting these trends. It offers girls the chance to build confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, supporting them on their journey to becoming happy, healthy, and self-assured young women.

Still, gender inequity in sport remains, posing an ongoing challenge for sport for development organizations, or organizations that use sport to empower, educate, and protect young men and women. In response, adidas, 17 Sport, Women Win, Soccer Without Borders, and streetfootballworld have teamed up to tackle these challenges through the Breaking Barriers project, now one of the leading programs focused on improving gender equity in grassroots sports in the EU. Through this 5-year program, adidas will support 15 sport for development organizations and 100+ women-identifying and non binary leaders (hereafter referred to as 'Champions').

Overall, this capacity building training focuses on **three main angles:**

IN THE ORGANIZATIONS

Changing processes and developing strategies at an organizational level.

ON THE SIDELINES

Capacity development training for Champions at sport organizations focusing on different educational modules (leadership, communications, coaching).

ON THE PITCH

Training coaches and sport leaders to advocate for gender equity, design programs so all players feel safe and have the opportunity to participate, and seek to increase participation of women and girls in sport.

⁴ WHO, 2018; Adolescent mental health in the European Region.

⁵ WHO, 2018; Physical activity factsheet for the 28 European Union Member States of the WHO European region.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Much of the research that focuses on barriers to girls' participation in sport examines issues in the United States, the UK, and Australia. Our research team sought to investigate whether the same barriers apply **across the broader EU region**.

THIS REPORT ASKS:

What are the **most common barriers** that hinder the participation of girls in organized sport in the EU?

What **possible solutions** can we employ based on the key enablers of their participation?

To accomplish this objective, we have carried out focus **group discussions with local sport for development organizations** and distributed an EU-wide survey focused on the participation and **experiences of girls, young women, and non-binary people**. We aimed to identify the key drivers behind why women engage in sport, and why they drop out.





KEY BARRIERS

This research uncovered **three overarching barriers** that hinder girls from participating in sport.

01.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

Gender stereotypes held by those closest to them: Girls are heavily influenced by their parents, peers, and those they see online and in the media.

In that vein, parents can serve as key enablers but also key inhibitors for girls trying to play sport. When it's harder to get parental buy-in, it's harder to get the funds necessary to play.

Girls are also heavily impacted by negative feedback from peers, especially by teasing or judgment from those at school. They're less willing to play sports if they feel that they're not good enough to play in front of others. Additionally, media coverage continues to focus largely on men's teams—so girls don't have a lot of representation or role models to emulate in sport.

02.

FEWER RESOURCES

It's difficult for girls to play sport unless there are teams nearby.

Long rides on public transportation (especially at night) can be dangerous, particularly if girls' parents are unsupportive or work full time and are unable to accompany them.

But that's not all. Even when girls have access to teams in their area, they still have fewer resources available to them. This ranges from fewer women-only changing rooms to fewer sponsors for women's teams.

03.

LACK OF WOMEN-ORIENTED COACHING

Coaches are a big influence on girls' interest in staying on a team or within a sport. But coaching roles in the EU are still dominated by men.

Girls', women's and queer bodies are different from boys and men's, and training is often not tailored to meet these different needs.

IN THE ORGANIZATIONS

Distribute resources fairly

- Assemble mixed and women-only teams
- Find sponsors who believe in gender equity
- Offer incentives to join and low membership fees

Ensure fair opportunity and access

- Ensure equipment, clothing, gear and medical services are distributed equally
- Push for policies at every level that mandate inclusiveness

Update internal policies

- Encourage more representation for women
- Revisit accessibility policies & update regulations
- Appoint a woman reference person
- Appoint a contact for cases of discrimination

Recruit and communicate inclusively

- Communicate to raise awareness
- Ensure all body types are represented

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Practitioners in this space have the opportunity to address these barriers. To help guide these efforts, we have identified **practical steps** organized using the Breaking Barriers Project framework: **In the Organizations, On the Sidelines, and On the Pitch.**

ON THE SIDELINES

Normalize girls and women succeeding in sport

- Train coaches on sexism and discrimination
- Talk about women in sport

Tailor training to girls

- Create fun spaces on the field
- Show that skills can be developed over time
- Use appropriate language
- Use preventive exercises and tips

ON THE PITCH

Ensure safe spaces

- Offer safe, easily accessible facilities
- Adjust training times to fit girls' specific needs
- Reserve spaces just for girls

Create opportunities for all

- Be explicitly inclusive
- Invite players of all ages and levels of skill

Increase visibility of girls' sport

- Involve parents
- Share other women's experiences
- Occupy public spaces safely

PERSISTING HURDLES TO GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORT



SPORT MIRRORS SOCIETY

According to Hartmann-Tews & Pfister (2003), *“physical activities are always intertwined with the structures, norms and ideals of society, and they always mirror that society’s gender order and gender hierarchy”*.

Although gender inequities in regular sport participation have decreased in Nordic countries and the Netherlands, **the overall progress at the European level is still slow**.⁶ Over the past few decades, scholars, sport governing bodies, and organizations have been attempting to understand what prevents girls and women from participating in sport activities.

Existing literature suggests that **the biggest barrier to girls and young women participating in sports is gender stereotypes**. Cooky (2016) found that girls in Montenegro did not play football because it was considered a men’s sport and families chose more culturally appropriate sports for their daughters. McSharry (2017) also noted that girls in Ireland felt they had to display masculine qualities when participating in sports dominated by men to be recognized and taken seriously.

Additionally, when girls tried to access sports that were dominated by men, **they often experienced more direct discrimination**. This included pushback from peers (e.g., being told by boys to exit these spaces) and school management (discouraging them using these spaces).⁷

Beltrán-Carillo et al. (2018) also found that girls were discriminated against **because of their body types**. Teenagers reported being teased and bullied by peers, either in the changing room or the playground, for being overweight or not good at sport. According to some participants of our study, certain teachers also showed a clear favoritism toward pupils with fit bodies.

As a result, inhibition with regards to body image while participating in sport is indeed a common barrier to participation, especially for teenage girls.⁸ **Fear of being judged or embarrassed** not only because of their appearance but also because of their perceived lack of skill or physical competence are two of the most common personal barriers girls have.⁹ This self-doubt can also stem from a fear of getting hurt.¹⁰

Other common barriers include **the cost of training and the lack of financing**, funding opportunities and sponsorships for women athletes.¹¹

“WE HAVE MORE OBSTACLES THAN ACHIEVEMENTS.”

PLAYER, SERBIA

This may be particularly true for girls with a migrant background and low socio-economic status.¹² The lack of time was also mentioned as an important barrier, specifically the challenge of balancing sport and school.¹³

Finally, Seiberth et al. (2013) states that **sport clubs and organizations can also act as barriers** to participation in **the way they present themselves, their objectives, and their membership expectations**. This could explain why some participants in Basterfield’s et al. (2016) research mentioned ‘lack of a suitable club’ as a key barrier to sport participation.

⁶ Van Tuyckom et al., 2010.

⁷ Wetton et al., 2013; Cooky, 2016; McSharry, 2017.

⁸ Cooky, 2016; Cowley et al., 2021.

⁹ Azzarito & Hill, 2013; Wetton et al., 2013; Basterfield et al., 2016; Beltrán-Carillo et al., 2018.

¹⁰ Basterfield et al., 2016.

¹¹ Basterfield et al., 2016; Cooky, 2016.

¹² Hills et al. 2013; Schwenzer, 2020.

¹³ Hills et al. 2013; Basterfield et al., 2016; Wetton et al., 2013; Cooky, 2016.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Girls' and young women's needs and barriers differ according to numerous factors, including socio-economic level, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among others. Therefore, there is no one solution to ensuring or increasing the participation of women and girls in sport. However, here we present the most common barriers Europe-wide that came up in our research.



GENDER STEREOTYPES FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Prejudices, criticism, and lack of support from people close to them (e.g., family, peers, teachers) were the most common barriers mentioned by participants in our study. Some family environments still prevent girls from playing certain sports or disapprove of them doing so.

“My grandmother used to tell me to give up football, that it was a men’s sport and that I should dedicate myself to cooking and that I should wear dresses more than tracksuits and football boots” (player, Croatia).

While parents generally agree with their children playing sports, **some girls may be constrained by their parents’ (and other close relatives’) understanding about certain sports.**

For example, some parents prefer to enroll their children in sports that are considered more “culturally appropriate” for girls (e.g. dance classes, softball or netball). Such perceptions were common among those living in Eastern European countries (Croatia, Serbia or Ukraine).

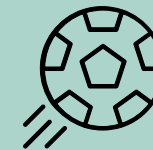
Cooky’s (2016) research in Montenegro revealed similar themes where families (in her research, particularly mothers) directly discouraged certain sports or were *“pressured by other family members to prohibit their daughters from playing sports”* due to gender roles.

“Most importantly, my parents were against it, especially my mother, because it is a sport [dominated by men], that it doesn’t help to shape a good [woman’s] body and it is too physical for a girl that needs to have manners” (player, Italy).

Many survey respondents noted **financial resources as another key barrier to participation**, ranging from club fees to transportation costs. Even if some families could afford the fees, they wouldn’t provide them if they didn’t support their daughter playing the sport. Schwenzer (2020) found that if migrant families’ resources to fund the children’s sporting activities were limited, sons’ activities were often prioritized over daughters. This barrier particularly impacted girls and young women from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

“MY GRANDMOTHER USED TO TELL ME TO GIVE UP FOOTBALL, THAT IT WAS A MEN’S SPORT AND THAT I SHOULD DEDICATE MYSELF TO COOKING AND THAT I SHOULD WEAR DRESSES MORE THAN TRACKSUITS AND FOOTBALL BOOTS.”

PLAYER, CROATIA



NEARLY
1/3

survey respondents identified family, friends, and/or community members **not supporting their decision to play sport because they thought the sport they wanted to play was for boys** as one of the most challenging barriers to sport participation.

GENDER STEREOTYPES FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Another reason parents objected to their daughters playing certain sports was **due to fear of injury**. Parents were more fearful that their daughters would get hurt than their sons. This fear, known as the frailty myth—whereby women are thought to be physically and athletically weaker than men—is unfounded.¹⁶ The reasons girls and women are more prone to certain injuries (such as anterior cruciate ligament or ACL injuries, ankle sprains or stress fractures) are not related to strength and ability, rather due to the differing physiological factors in a man's vs a woman's body.

Girls are also **impacted by discrimination from their peers** in informal 'pick-up' games and during physical education classes at school.¹⁷ In all regions where our research took place, girls mentioned that they had experienced discriminatory practices by peers in their age group.

"I was being judged for being a young girl wanting to participate in sports, I was often bullied by my peers due to me wanting to take part in sports" (player, Ireland).

¹⁶ Cooky, 2016.

¹⁷ WSFF, 2015; Somerset & Hoare, 2018.

¹⁸ Gentile et al., 2018.

They are often **excluded from games** and are subject to comments such as *"girls are not good at sport"* or *"you can't play because you're a girl"*.

When allowed to play with boys, they are often given the least desirable positions or not fully included in the game. In addition, during the focus groups, girls reported **being mocked** when they made mistakes.

"If we have to take a penalty, they choose a boy because they say that girls miss them" (player, Spain).

This was a common theme for girls in focus groups and survey respondents and seemed to have **long-lasting impacts** on their confidence to participate in sport.

"I was made fun of at school during sports. It made me not want to do team sports" (non-player, Netherlands).

Girls' lack of confidence in sport has **many causes**, from the social pressures, discrimination and teasing described above to their own perceived lack of skill or fitness—often influenced by parents' stereotypical beliefs in their children's abilities.¹⁸

"IF WE HAVE TO TAKE A PENALTY, THEY CHOOSE A BOY BECAUSE THEY SAY THAT GIRLS MISS THEM."

PLAYER, SPAIN

**NEARLY
1 IN 5**

survey respondents reported **previous negative experiences of sport at school** as one of the most challenging barriers to sport participation.

GENDER STEREOTYPES FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Many girls do not engage in sport because they **feel embarrassed or afraid of being laughed at or criticized for their perceived lack of skill**. This general lack of confidence was repeatedly mentioned by participants as the main reason why they did not engage in certain sports or why their friends and peers did not play. It was also found to be a common barrier in other studies.¹⁹

Some girls in our research reported **feeling uncomfortable with their bodies** or how they looked while playing, which was also noted in Cowley et al. (2021), who found that body image insecurities often prevented girls from taking part in physical activity.

Focus group participants reported having been criticized by strangers for playing sports perceived as 'masculine,' whether in their communities or on the sports field itself. Some girls in our research admitted to having given up sport for some time because of external pressures and prejudices.

"[I received] nasty comments from people when they saw me playing football in front of the school, they started shouting that football isn't for girls and to let go of it" (player, Croatia).

"I do not feel comfortable when people look at me while I play. I always played football as a child, but then I stopped because it seemed that all the men I played with judged me or treated me as if I was less strong [than] them" (player, Italy).

Lack of visibility and public support for professional athletes who are women and women-identifying **can contribute to girls' sport not being taken seriously** as well. Although more women are starting to be recognized and acknowledged for their athletic achievements, their presence in the public sphere is still low. Media coverage continues to focus largely on men's teams. Only 2% of reporting time on sports channels goes to women's sport in some countries in the EU.²⁰ This is significant because the media plays a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions, and attitudes about women and sport.

"We don't watch [women's] football so much on TV; it is not shown so often because it is not popular enough in our country to be shown on public television" (player, Croatia).



**ONLY
2%**

of reporting time on sports channels goes to women's sport in some countries in the EU.

¹⁹ WSFF, 2015; YST, 2016; YST, 2021a; YST, 2021b.

²⁰ Women In Sport, 2018.

LACK OF ACCESS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

“THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS THE LACK OF TEAMS AND LATE TRAINING. THE WOMEN’S TEAM IS ALWAYS THE LAST IN EVERYTHING.”

PLAYER, SPAIN

Many girls’ introduction to playing sport is not in the sport they would most like to play.

This is most often linked both to the social pressures that women are under to conform to gender stereotypes and to the lack of women’s and mixed teams in the sports club or organization they would like to join. Girls with disabilities are even more impacted by the lack of offerings adapted to their abilities.

“The absence of a women’s team was the reason why, for a long time, playing football was not an option” (player, Italy).

Another barrier for girls in sport is

location—many girls don’t have access to teams or practice close to where they live. This was a key theme among survey respondents. If adults were not able to accompany them to and from training or public transport is not available, players wouldn’t go to the training sessions.

“There are people who, for example, live far from the stadium or the place where they train and no one can bring them all the time so they do not come to train regularly” (player, Serbia).

“Even if they are growing in numbers, football clubs for women are not common in my area. When I was a kid, the closest team for women was in another region” (player, Italy). “

There are not many women’s clubs in the area, so we are forced to come to other cities for training if we do not want to train in men’s clubs” (player, Croatia).

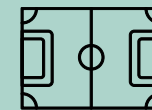
Existing research has found that the location of sports facilities and training times represent important barriers, **particularly for girls and young women from lower socio-economic backgrounds**, including migrant and refugee populations.²¹ Both Hills et al., (2013) and Schwenzer, (2020) conclude that offering sport activities in the girls’ neighborhoods or close to the participants’ homes was crucial to girls’ participation.

Just as important is timing: holding sessions at times that are convenient and fit in with participants’ other commitments (including their cultural beliefs, like prayer times).



1/3

of respondents reported **no female-only or mixed gender teams in their area** as one of the most challenging barriers to sport participation.



1/3

of respondents reported **no sports clubs/organizations in their area** as one of the most challenging barriers to sport participation.

²¹ Hills et al., 2013; Schwenzer, 2020.

LACK OF ACCESS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Some research participants mentioned that **they worried about personal safety if going alone to training sessions** that took place later in the evening or when it was dark. Based on responses from our research, we see **some correlation between parents' disapproval of girls playing sport and the physical dangers of girls having to practice far from home or late in the evening.**

"[The biggest challenge was] finishing late - my mother didn't like it" (player, Spain).

Many survey respondents reported **having to join men's teams due to the lack of mixed or women-only teams** in their areas. This could, in turn, exacerbate parents' resistance to their daughters' participation.

"I was and still am the only girl on my team. My parents don't like that to this day" (player, Germany).

Those who had previously played on a boys' or mixed team noted that men's teams were often more challenging and, **therefore, boys developed better techniques and skills**, which resulted in boys being 'better' at the game. This supports Hill et al.'s (2020) research, which found that *"boys' leagues were viewed as more challenging and of a higher standard than the available girls' football teams."*

In some countries (e.g. Serbia) boys' leagues are available from younger ages, whereas girls need to wait until they are in their mid-teens to compete. Consequently, **girls have fewer matches and tournaments than boys**, which is why they may be at a disadvantage in terms of skill level.

When teams are available, women and girls experience **unequal treatment at other levels**, too. In some sports clubs or organizations, girls have to share dressing rooms with boys. If girls associate training or the sport venue with negative feelings due to **lack of privacy**, they won't feel comfortable joining the training.

"Where I play we neither have uniforms nor changing rooms" (player, Italy.)

"I WAS AND STILL AM THE ONLY GIRL ON MY TEAM. MY PARENTS DON'T LIKE THAT TO THIS DAY."

PLAYER, GERMANY



LACK OF ACCESS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Furthermore, **financial investment usually favors men's sports teams**. Local and/or regional businesses may prefer to sponsor men's teams because the women's teams do not have large support bases. As a result, women's teams don't have the funds to buy better equipment, kits and on-site assistance. This lack of investment in women's teams sends the message that they are less worthy—and hinders progress.

Indeed, some participants felt that **there weren't opportunities for them to progress in sport**, whether on a more competitive team or professionally. We suggest that, while it may not impact women's entry into sport, the clear differences in resources and opportunities between men and women's sport teams, particularly noted by focus group participants residing in Eastern Europe, impacts girls' desire to stay in sport.

Research participants, especially those in secondary school and at university, found it **hard to juggle both the school workload and training** and felt forced to drop out of sports. The prioritization of school over participation in sport may be related to the **few paid opportunities** afforded to players that are women, or could be related to gendered parental expectations,²² but further research is needed.



²² Khattab & Modood, 2018.

POOR COACHING

“MY COACH WAS THE REASON I ALMOST QUIT THE SPORT AT AN EARLIER POINT IN TIME. SINCE [PLAYING WITH] HIM IT’S BEEN DIFFICULT FOR ME TO MOTIVATE MYSELF AND TO BELIEVE IN MY GOALS.”

PLAYER, GERMANY

Research participants also described how **poor coaching styles** made it harder for them to stay engaged with their sport. As mentioned previously, **coaches are a key stakeholder in the healthy and sustained participation of girls in sport.**

“I wish we had a better coach, who didn’t get angry and yell at us, or say negative things about us” (player, Croatia).

Many respondents in our survey said that **negative experiences with coaches** had a major impact on their desire to play sport. Some mentioned **favoritism** as an issue, and others said that coaches were **too strict or aggressive**. As mentioned earlier, girls are **highly sensitive to judgment** from their peer group and need a safe and nurturing environment in order to continue with and excel at sports.

Some respondents shared that they struggled in clubs that **only had coaches that were men**. Indeed, research shows that **same-sex role models positively influence self-perception** and can help to challenge stereotypes about gender while offering diverse perspectives and advice to athletes.²³

“The coach, being a man and being used to coaching boys of all ages, did not take into account the needs and the different physical structure of women... and also any of our “complaints” about it were seen as a weakness” (former player, Italy).

Poor team atmosphere (players being judgmental or disrespectful) **is another reason girls may abandon a sport**. In our research, this was generally linked to the ability of the trainer to keep a harmonious atmosphere within the team.

“THE COACH, BEING A MAN AND BEING USED TO COACHING BOYS OF ALL AGES, DID NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE NEEDS AND THE DIFFERENT PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF WOMEN... AND ALSO ANY OF OUR “COMPLAINTS” ABOUT IT WERE SEEN AS A WEAKNESS.”

PLAYER, ITALIA



NEARLY 1 IN 5

survey respondents reported **not liking the coach or coaching style in their local sports organization/club** as the most challenging barrier to sport participation.

²³ LaVoi, N. M., & Baeth, A., 2018.

POOR COACHING

A key theme that emerged from our research was **the lack of women coaches and women-oriented coaching** in the EU. Girls have different interests and different enablers to play, and coaches are not always aware of or attentive to these variables.

This sentiment extends to physical aspects as well. Participants in our study shared that girls may decide not to join a certain sport because **they fear getting injured**. One respondent shared that this fear also keeps them from giving full effort on the field. Knee injuries were commonly cited by survey participants as the reason they stopped playing sport, a theme that is supported by existing research that found that women athletes who participate in sports involving jumping and swift changes of direction have two to six times the risk of injury compared with athletes who are men.²⁴

Furthermore, **as women reach puberty, they get their period**. For some, it may come with pain and the inability to take part in training sessions. Many feel embarrassed to share such information with their trainers who are men when justifying their absence from regular training sessions.

**“SOMETIMES MENSTRUAL DISCOMFORT
[WAS A BARRIER THAT CAUSED] LOWER
PERFORMANCE AND PARTICIPATION.”**

PLAYER, GERMANY

Girls in our research described **good trainers as those who believe in them, motivate them, are attentive and understanding, and who teach them new skills and praise their achievements**. Trainers who meet these criteria become a source of strength for girls that helps them to overcome external prejudices.

²⁴Women In Sport, 2010.



KEY ENABLERS AND OPPORTUNITIES



IN THE ORGANIZATIONS

In our research, we have identified three main action areas that sport for development organizations can take to become more inclusive for women players.



DISTRIBUTE RESOURCES FAIRLY

It's crucial that there is **an equal distribution of resources across all teams, regardless of gender**. This includes equipment, clothing, gear, etc., but also health services (e.g. physiotherapists), since girls and women are more prone to certain injuries which can be easily prevented with professional support.

Fair distribution of resources may also require **creating policies** that mandate providing equal opportunities to play. This is applicable from the organizational level to the national level. For example, since the United States established Title IX in 1972, which legally requires that federally funded institutions (such as public schools) provide girls and boys with equal sports opportunities, the number of girls playing sports has jumped from 3.7% to 40%.²⁵



10X

more girls now play sport
since the United States
established Title IX in 1972.

²⁵ Women 's Sports Foundation, 2016.

ENSURE FAIR OPPORTUNITY AND ACCESS

Organizations can also work to **ensure that all genders have equal opportunities to play**. For example, working to ensure that for every men's team in a given age group, there is also a women's team. Women's teams have broader benefits, too: research shows that girls and young women often feel more comfortable in women-only environments, as these environments can be more friendly and relaxed than mixed teams.²⁶ Mixed teams, however, can be a positive compromise if discriminatory and sexist attitudes are addressed at the outset.

Partnering with sponsors who are committed to gender equity builds allyship. Using sponsors who believe in gender equity helps build a broader support network that can extend to other women's teams.

Reducing sports club or organization membership costs can increase engagement and retention. This can include offering incentives to current players (e.g., bring a friend and you both get a membership discount) or creating a scholarship fund for those who can't afford to play. Organizations can offer need-based scholarships, reimbursement for transportation costs, and/or donated equipment.

²⁶ Hills et al. 2013.



UPDATE INTERNAL POLICIES

Representation for women is important both on the field (trainers, referees, and game officials), and within the organization (e.g. at the managerial level and on the executive board).

Incorporating women at every level is an important step for building equity and developing practices that accommodate women. It is good practice to **revisit and update organizational policies on accessibility and inclusion** so that women players have the same opportunities to compete as men players.

Gather insights from other local and regional sports organizations with strong representation for women and, if change is needed at a broader level, encourage the federation in your country to amend regulation. Women players have the right to discuss personal issues as they relate to sport with an adult of the same gender. Having a **woman referent** in the organization, preferably on the field (as a trainer), will automatically make it easier for girls to share their problems (e.g. menstruation pains).

Players also need an **adult contact person** they can trust and turn to if they experience discrimination in school or in a sports club. This person's role should be made known to all in the organization and they should be responsible for dealing with instances of discrimination either on their own or with the support of the team. Older participants in our research have said that it is important for them to be able to openly communicate with the club and trainers. This person could, therefore, also be there to discuss any issues the girls may want to share with them, including safety issues.



RECRUIT AND COMMUNICATE INCLUSIVELY

An effective way to raise awareness for women's sports teams is by **communicating through media channels**.

When you create a team, make it clear that **women are welcome and accommodated** through online posts, information leaflets, and presentations. Include photos of women, men, and non-binary people playing to show that your team is open to everyone.

Organizations can also **engage local journalists** to promote girls' sports achievements more widely and build a local or regional network of supporters. This can help normalize celebrating women's sport achievements and lead to increased participation.²⁷ Participants in our study mentioned that reading or watching positive news about sports encouraged them to want to try them out.

Ensuring all body types are represented in information leaflets and other promotional materials demonstrates that every skill level, fitness level, or body type is welcome. The same is true for coaches. Being exposed to different body types at a leadership level is a great way for girls to feel welcome and comfortable in their own bodies.



²⁷ 'Protecting' women's broadcast sports events to be on par with their male counterparts can have notable impacts on viewership, as seen in the UK around the Women's World Cup, see Caoimhe O'Neill and Charlotte Harpur. "FIFA Women's World Cup and Women's Euros to Be Added to List of Protected Broadcast Events." The Athletic, 26 Jan. 2022, <https://theathletic.com/news/fifa-womens-world-cup-and-womens-euros-to-be-added-to-list-of-protected-broadcast-events/hORMqzTS7gUE/>.

ON THE SIDELINES

Coaches and teachers can be allies for girls playing sports. But there is a lack of understanding and awareness around gender inclusion in this group of stakeholders. Increased gender sensitivity and equity in coaching can help organizations to practice and make their commitment to gender inclusion and equity more visible.



NORMALIZE GIRLS AND WOMEN SUCCEEDING IN SPORT

There aren't enough women referents in sport. Participants in our study could not name more than two professional women athletes and some were not even able to name one. To break the prejudice against girls or women not being able to play sports, it is important that organizations **talk about women in sport** both with men's and women's teams. Mixed-gender events can be introduced as a tool for all genders to become comfortable playing with each other. Rotating players' positions or modifying rules is a good way to keep activity high and everyone involved.

Girls may experience bullying and social isolation simply because they choose to play a sport. **Regular training programs for coaches and teachers on sexism and discrimination** can help to prevent and address these issues and contribute to a judgment-free space in which all are welcome to play. Girls should feel that they have someone beyond their family circle who supports them in order to strengthen their confidence and make them feel more comfortable playing.



TAILOR TRAINING TO GIRLS

In order to correctly tailor their training to girls' needs, trainers have to get to know their players. It's important that they check in regularly on how the players feel, if they're enjoying themselves, and whether they can keep up with the intensity of the sessions. If it's not possible to separate groups based on different levels of experience, exercises can be adapted so that the most skilled players still feel challenged. Trainers can also challenge individual players to set their own personal records.

For players with less skill or experience, it's important to **foster an atmosphere** that's safe and fun for them to give the sport a try. This can mean having a girls-only team or a mixed beginners' team.

"When I was younger I just wanted to have fun playing, I was just looking for a little lightness, I wanted to see players who had more fun, instead of always and only thinking about doing well and about the result." (former player, Italy)

Although some players may naturally be more skilled in certain sports, in general, our research shows that one of the main reasons girls enjoy playing is because they like developing new skills. Showing new and potential players that **skills can be developed** is a key way to engage girls.

Trainers can be positive agents in improving women players' self-perception. Sabiston et al. (2020) found that normalizing body image concerns, building self-acceptance and **using appropriate language** to describe players (e.g. describing body size and shape as it relates to strength, not weight) had positive effects on players' body image concerns. They also suggest creating an online body image communication resource for trainers, players, and parents that includes guidance around what is appropriate and not appropriate in terms of communication and behavior.

Girls' physiology is different from boys'—and they need different exercises to strengthen and prevent injury. As a result, it's important that training is **adapted for players' bodies**.

For women, this can include exercises to improve core strength and leg strength, and tips on how girls can develop effective movement patterns (landing technique, balance and coordination). In 2008, the Swedish Football Association found that teenage girls were particularly vulnerable to knee injuries in football, so they initiated a knee control project. The study showed that a simple exercise program of 10-15 minutes significantly reduced the risk of serious knee injuries among women football players.²⁸



"WHEN I WAS YOUNGER I JUST WANTED TO HAVE FUN PLAYING, I WAS JUST LOOKING FOR A LITTLE LIGHTNESS, I WANTED TO SEE PLAYERS WHO HAD MORE FUN, INSTEAD OF ALWAYS AND ONLY THINKING ABOUT DOING WELL AND ABOUT THE RESULT."

FORMER PLAYER, ITALY

TAILOR TRAINING TO GIRLS

Another reason girls enjoy sport is that they like **socializing**. Building a team that works together is part of the trainers' job. Creating a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, building a good rapport with players, and prioritizing encouragement, motivation, and understanding were found to be key to keeping a good team atmosphere.


"Without a team there is no football. This is a team sport. It is very important. The team is like a second family" (player, Ukraine).

Our study found that, for young girls, support from those closest to them is crucial for building healthy self-worth. In addition to being supported by their families and friends, women and girls also highly value the support of their trainers.

'Good trainers' were described as those who believed in them, motivated them, were attentive and understanding, taught them new skills, and praised their achievements. Trainers who met these criteria became a source of strength for girls that helped them overcome external prejudices.

"I believe in myself now, I have confidence in myself and now I have the courage to do what I like" (player, Italy).

Trainers and teachers can be allies for girls playing sports. Feeling that they have someone who supports them beyond the family circle can strengthen girls' confidence and make it easier for them to feel comfortable playing.



"WITHOUT A TEAM THERE IS NO FOOTBALL. THIS IS A TEAM SPORT. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT. THE TEAM IS LIKE A SECOND FAMILY."

PLAYER, UKRAINE

²⁸ Fasting et al., 2014.

²⁹ Hills et al., 2013.

ON THE PITCH

To encourage more girls to play and stick with sports, it's important to create an environment where they feel safe and welcome.



ENSURE SAFE SPACES

Girls' sports should take place in facilities that are **easy and safe to access** for participants, such as school premises, community halls, and youth centers.

It's good practice **to ask participants about their experiences with personal safety around the venue** and talk to the city council if players' concerns involve poor street lighting in the area, for instance. Including parents in the conversation is also key. It's important that they're able to voice concerns and feel comfortable with their daughters' participation. Organizations should be aware of each participant's needs and appoint travel partners for girls who might otherwise be required to travel in the evening alone.

Organizations should ask players about the best timing for them to train and **adjust training times** accordingly. Ideally, men and women players should be able to train and have matches (separately if teams are not mixed) at the same time. This will reinforce the idea that both teams are taken seriously and are equally valued.



CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

A truly inclusive sports team offers a safe space not just for different genders, but for different sexualities, races and ethnicities and abilities.

Organizations should **be explicitly inclusive**, provide opportunities that are open for everyone (girls, boys and non-binary people) and ensure materials picture diversity in the broadest sense.³⁰ If girls and non-binary people can see themselves represented (or parents can see their children represented), they will receive the message that they are welcome and accepted as they are. *“There are different activities that need to be held more often, giving girls with disabilities the opportunity to play football, for example. It is important to provide opportunities for people to compete on their own strength, on their own capabilities”* (player, Ukraine).

When designing a program, it is important to have the target group in mind. For instance, Schwenzer (2020) states that some girls and young women with migrant backgrounds *“can only be reached if men are strictly excluded from the sporting activities in question, [even] as instructors, coaches or spectators, due to cultural or religious reasons.”*

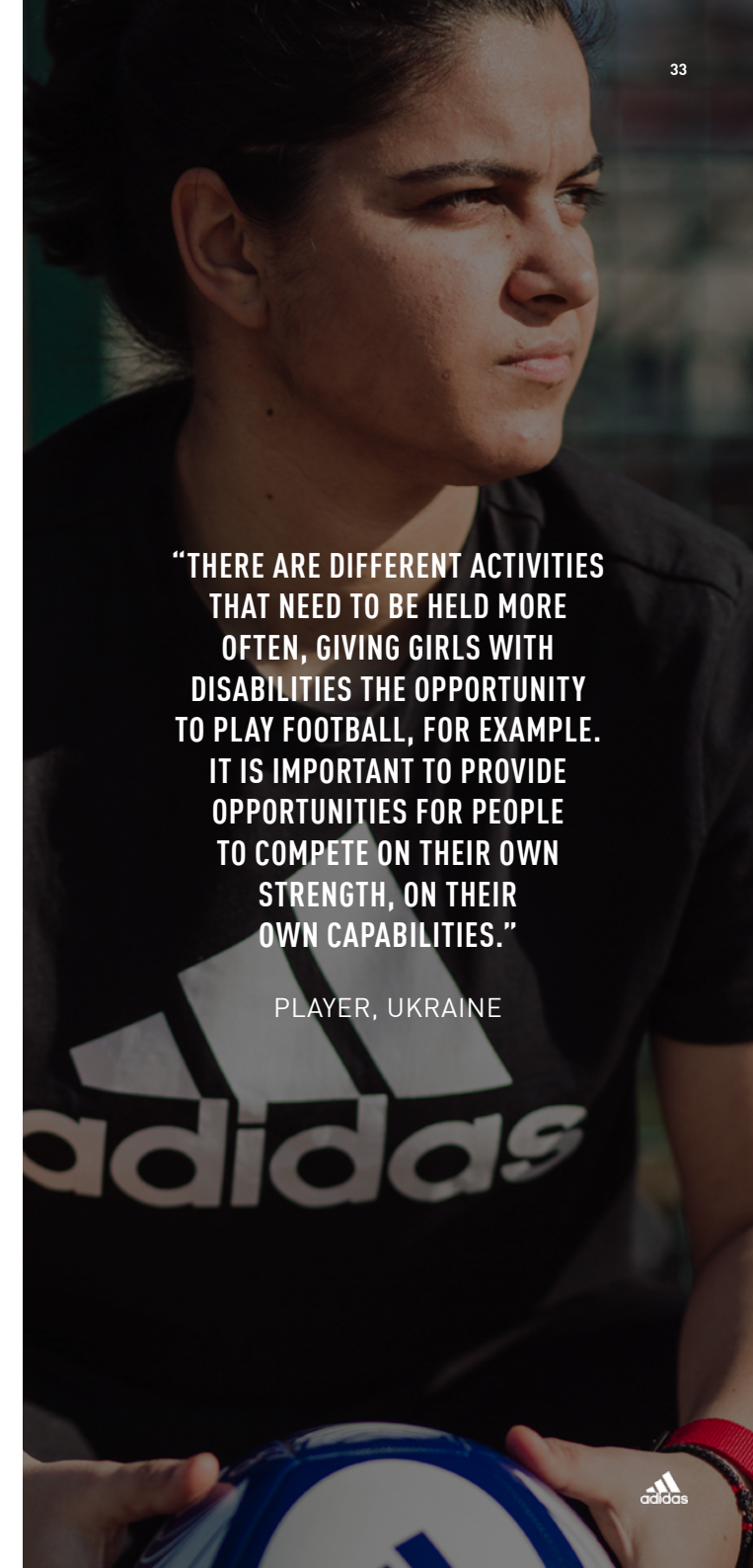
As a result, simply **picturing diversity** on a website, for instance, will not be enough to engage participants from diverse communities if an organizations’ sports offer is not adapted to their needs.

When they join a sports club or organization, girls may have little to no practice. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations **welcome players of all ages and skill levels**, even if they have no previous knowledge of the sport. For those who feel less confident with their level of ability, easy exercises or adaptations can be used so that they start getting comfortable with the game and feel less likely to be embarrassed in front of their peers.

“THERE ARE DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES THAT NEED TO BE HELD MORE OFTEN, GIVING GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY FOOTBALL, FOR EXAMPLE. IT IS IMPORTANT TO PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO COMPETE ON THEIR OWN STRENGTH, ON THEIR OWN CAPABILITIES.”

PLAYER, UKRAINE

³⁰ See Council of Europe’s resources on “Gender Mainstreaming”: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/what-is-gender-mainstreaming>



INCREASE VISIBILITY OF GIRLS' SPORT

Consistent with other research³¹, our research has shown that parents and siblings—particularly those who are men—have a big influence on girls' involvement in sport. Although they can be a barrier, they are also a key enabler for girls to start playing in the first place and their continued involvement.³²

Family support was often mentioned as a source of motivation and desire to progress. Thus, it is key to **include parents**. Offering 'taster days' that require very little commitment can help those who meet resistance at home or who are uncertain about joining. These sessions can also be used by the organization to address parents' reservations in direct conversation with them. Regular 'parent-daughter sessions' gives family members the opportunity to join a training session with their daughters and can benefit both. By seeing their children 'in action', parents are made aware of what it means for them to play, reducing their fears and prejudices. It is also important to educate parents on the benefits of sport participation. According to participants in our research,

the most common benefits of playing sport were improved physical and mental wellbeing, including 'a sense of freedom', 'stress relief' and 'feeling happy', and developing new skills applicable beyond the sports field such as 'anger management', 'courage' or 'independence'. Inviting other women and non-binary players, trainers or referees to sessions to **share their experiences with players**, explain their path, their difficulties and how they overcame them may also help players find courage to fight external prejudices. Courts in parks and other open spaces are often occupied by players who are men.³⁴ **Organizing safe, supervised sports sessions for girls in these spaces** can help break gender stereotypes not only among peers, but within the broader society. It is a way of reclaiming a space that belongs to all and helping girls feel comfortable playing in public. Additionally, women who don't play may be encouraged to join when seeing their peers in this environment. Schwenzer (2020) notes that this has been already put into practice in Austria with positive results.

³¹ Edwardson & Gorely, 2010; Cooky, 2016.

³² The findings in our study may focus on men because most participants in the focus groups play football, a sport traditionally considered masculine. However, other studies (e.g., Schoeppe et al., 2015) have confirmed the "same-sex imitation hypotheses," whereby maternal sport participation positively correlates with girls' participation in organized and non-organized sport and paternal sport participation with boys' sport participation.

³³ Dellas, 2018.



"MY DAD GIVES ME MOTIVATION, HE ALSO LOVES FOOTBALL, WE WATCH MATCHES TOGETHER ALL THE TIME AND I LOVE DOING IT."

PLAYER, SERBIA

"I THINK MOTIVATION FROM A ROLE MODEL WOULD HELP."

SURVEY RESPONDENT, GERMANY

CONCLUSION OF THE REPORT

This research provides an insight into the key barriers and enablers that influence girls' participation in sport in the EU. These findings will be used to inform the design of the adidas Breaking Barriers project, an intervention that aims to give young people access to a high impact sport for good program specifically designed to empower young women and girls in the EU and help them achieve their full potential.

Despite sector-wide efforts to increase the participation and representation of girls in sport in the EU, it is clear that there is not yet a big enough shift. Girls have a complex relationship with sport, which is still largely influenced by gender-based societal values. They are greatly influenced by the support (or lack thereof) from parents, community members, and those online and in the media, and are acutely impacted by negative comments from peers during puberty. Girls also have access to fewer resources and fewer opportunities to play sport, as well as fewer coaches who are trained to support women as athletes. There is also much less visibility for professional women's sports and athletes in the media, which can be discouraging when girls look for role models in the industry.

Interventions that introduce changes within sports clubs and organizations to ensure they're more inclusive and that resources are equally distributed is a first and important step to increase girls' participation in sport.

However, sport organizations will not achieve gender equity on their own: they must engage families and community members, increase the number of women in coaching and leadership positions and implement more diverse coaching methods to make a true difference.

It is also crucial to encourage collaboration in efforts to include more girls and young women in sport. Participants in our focus group discussions mentioned that they would like these kinds of conversations to take place more often. They thoroughly enjoyed being asked about and sharing their opinions on matters that concern them. Sports organizations or clubs should engage in open conversation with players to learn about what they need, what they enjoy and what their coach and organizations can do to further contribute to gender equity.³⁴



“IT’S COOL THAT THERE IS SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISCUSS OUR EXPERIENCE IN SPORT AND THE BARRIERS WOMEN FACE BECAUSE THEN YOU BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND OTHER PEOPLE, WHAT THEIR FEARS ARE AND WHAT PREVENTS THEM FROM [PLAYING SPORTS]. YOU CAN SUPPORT YOUR TEAM WITH THESE WORDS. MAYBE THEY USED TO BE AFRAID TO SAY WHAT THEY FELT, BUT NOW THEY SAY IT.”

PLAYER, UKRAINE

³⁴ See Women Win's guide on Focus Group Discussion facilitation for girls: <https://guides.womenwin.org/ig/community-engagement/promising-practices/focus-group-discussions> and Annex 2 for details on the Fish and Boulders methodology.

OVERVIEW

The study began in October 2021 with the start of the literature review. Focus group facilitators were trained in November 2021 and focus group interviews were conducted between December 2021 and January 2022. Simultaneously, a survey was shared between December 2021 and January 2022.

The methodology involved the following:

- An **extensive (narrative) literature review** of research studies and reports from scholars, sport governing bodies, and sport for development organizations both in the EU and globally to establish a focus and context for the research.
- **Qualitative research in countries across continental Europe** (Croatia, Serbia, Spain, Hungary, Ukraine, and Italy). These countries were selected as they are the locations of the 'Champions' (trainers) involved in the adidas Breaking Barriers project and are underrepresented in academic literature around the topic. The research aimed to explore the girls' (aged 10-16) perceptions of the facilitators and barriers to participation in sport in their communities. With an understanding of their communities and previous experience with the participants, the Champions were able to create a safe space to engage in a participatory focus group discussion.
- **Annex 1** shows the number of interviews conducted with different stakeholders in each country. Participants were recruited based on convenience and their availability at the time of research.
- **Annex 2** contains details of the focus group discussion tool used with participants.



DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis of data collected via an exploratory online questionnaire targeting young women and non-binary people aged 18-25.

The survey was shared via **Breaking Barriers partners' networks** and was available in 10 of the most relevant languages for the Europe region (English, Dutch, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Polish, Italian, Greek, and Romanian) as well as two languages common to EU-migrants (Arabic and Turkish). We measured trends across the whole sample as well as within key segments of those surveyed (for example, by country and socioeconomic status).

The analysis measured **barriers to participation** according to current active players, former players, and non-players **using a ranking system**. Survey respondents were given a list of barriers (compiled based on existing literature) and asked to rank them based on importance in their own lives and for girls in their communities.

The mixed research methodology was employed for several reasons. First, **the online questionnaire allowed participation from all age groups** (though it did target girls and non-binary people between the ages of 18 and 25). **The quantitative survey targeted both athletes and non-athletes**, while focus group discussions largely focused on currently active football players. These two methodologies produced **a diverse input of perspectives**, and focus group discussions allowed researchers to delve deeper into key themes.



LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

QUANTITATIVE DATA

- Though it was available in many languages and employed a snowball sampling methodology¹⁴, **the sample size of the online survey was small** (n=93). This was likely due to several factors, including screen/information fatigue related to Covid-19, limited access to this age group in the Breaking Barriers partnership, and the timing of the survey, which was published near the holiday season in Europe.¹⁵
- The survey was open to **non-binary youth** but **did not receive a significant proportion of answers from this population**. Thus, this research focuses on the experience of girls. Further research is needed to provide insights into the experiences of **marginalized genders**.
- Organized sport is **challenging to study across borders**, as club and school-based sport structures differ greatly within Europe. To narrow the scope of the questionnaire, we chose to focus on **non-school-based formal**, organized sport participation. While some respondents spoke about the general experience in individual and informal physical activities, this analysis does not speak to the general physical activity of women and girls in an EU context.

QUALITATIVE DATA

- The focus groups were composed of **girls currently participating in sport**, and **football** was the most common sport played. Inclusiveness can vary based on different sports, teams and coaches, so this was not an **entirely comprehensive study**.
- Because the data collected comes from current players, some caution is needed in extrapolating from the findings: while facilitators encouraged girls to speak from lived experience—including their own and their friends'/peers' who are not involved in sport (or past teammates who dropped out)—**they do not fully represent the experiences of girls excluded from sport**.

¹⁴ Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where research participants recruit other participants for a test or study.

¹⁵ For further considerations regarding online surveying, see McInroy, 2016.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The barriers to girls' sport participation are **complex and intersectional**, and thus require more research, especially to include the voices of those who this research was not able to reach and whose experiences and opinions may vary from those presented in this paper.

Notably, those that identify as **LGBTQIA+**, **gender non-binary** and those with a **migrant background**. We are also interested in exploring the impacts that role models of different levels of contact (friends, community members, and national or international athletes) have on girls and the key stakeholders that enable their participation.

Finally, further understanding how the interaction between women athletes and the sport organizations they are a part of impacts their interest in continuing in sport and/or pursuing a career in the sports sector would be valuable.



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

For more information and resources on how to help make sport more equitable and inclusive within your organization, on the sidelines or on the pitch visit the [Breaking Barriers Academy](#).

To learn more about the adidas Breaking Barriers project, visit the [Project](#) page.

To find out more about our expert partners, visit their websites linked below:



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ANNEXES



ANNEX 1

TABLE OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (FGD) PARTICIPANTS

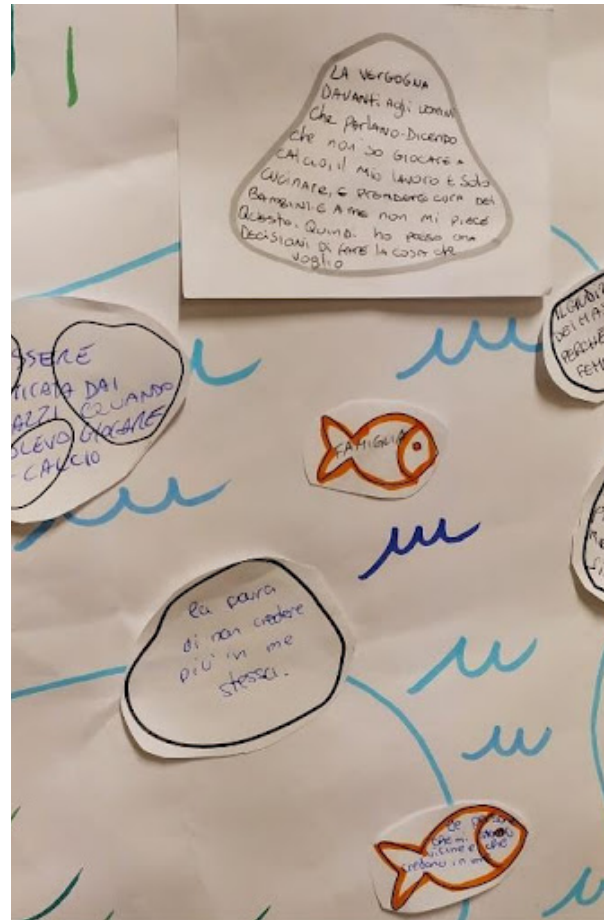
	COUNTRY	CITY	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE GROUP
FGD 1	Croatia	Split	7	14-16
FGD 2	Croatia	Split	6	14-17
FGD 3	Croatia	Split	5	12-13
FGD 4	Croatia	Rijeka	8	14-16
FGD 5	Hungary	Budapest	5	14-15
FGD 6	Italy	Turin	5	13-17
FGD 7	Serbia	Majdanpek	6	12-18
FGD 8	Serbia	Majdanpek	6	12-14
FGD 9	Spain	Badalona	6	11-13
FGD 10	Spain	Badalona	6	11-15
FGD 11	Ukraine	Ivano-Frankivsk	7	12-17
TOTAL			67	

ANNEX 2

Fish and Boulders is a participatory tool for visioning and doing a situational analysis.³⁵ In this exercise that relies on metaphor to elicit reflection, fish represent enablers (i.e. assets, resources or strengths) and boulders represent obstacles faced in reaching a goal or result. Participants can explore the 1) personal fish and boulders, 2) the system fish and boulders and/or 3) community or societal fish and boulders in reaching goals or results.

In the exercise, a river is drawn on a piece of flipchart, with one end obviously opening to a lake. The goal or result, for example, playing sport is posted on a piece of paper at the end of the river where it opens up to a lake. Participants are then asked to define, indicate and place the fish (enabling or positive forces) and boulders (obstacles) related to achieving their goal or result. The larger the boulder, the larger the barrier. Similarly, the larger the fish, the larger the enabling resource or asset. When the group(s) are done drawing their fish and boulders, the group then come together to lay down their fish and boulders. Based on these, moderators then spur conversation to talk about where participants see overlaps and areas of disagreement.

PHOTOS FROM FISH AND BOULDERS EXERCISE IN ITALY:



³⁵ See Action Evaluation Collaborative's guide on the Fish and Boulders methodology: <https://actionevaluationcollaborative.exposure.co/fish-and-boulders>

BREAKING BARRIERS FOR GIRLS IN EUROPE

[ADIDAS.CO.UK/BREAKINGBARRIERS](https://adidas.co.uk/breakingbarriers)

