

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH SPORT

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a wider study undertaken by ODI that reflects on the work of the British Council in relation to the empowerment of women and girls between 2010 and 2015, generating recommendations on ways to improve on the existing offer through the identification of strengths, gaps and opportunities in this area.

The study analyses impact with respect to five outcome areas for women and girls' empowerment to tackle gender inequality:

- (i) increased awareness and agency
- (ii) fairer access to opportunities and resources
- (iii) dialogue, collaboration and collective action
- (iv) supportive policy and institutional reform
- (v) changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms

The brief focuses on sports-based projects supported by the British Council that contribute to achieving these empowerment outcomes.



PROMOTING WOMEN AND GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SPORT

The British Council works through sport as a way of reaching young people, and uses it as engagement tool to also address issues such as child protection, children's rights, violence against women and promoting changes in gender norms and roles by opening spaces for boys/girls and men/women to engage together in safe spaces, where a premise of gender equality is promoted, in order to play sport together. Sport can then be used in these projects as a door to education and to achieving a range of social outcomes.

PREMIER SKILLS, EGYPT (2007–PRESENT)

The British Council's major sports initiative is Premier Skills¹, a global programme delivered in partnership with the Premier League that uses football to develop a brighter future for young people around the world, primarily through training courses run by Premier League club coaches for grassroots football coaches and referees. Since 2013, the programme has run in 25 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, South and East Asia, and South America.

In Egypt, the programme engages young Egyptians and is running in various locations in the country. Since 2013, 180 community coaches have been trained (87 of them women). About 30 per cent of the young beneficiaries (13,274) participating in community projects and events are young women.² Premier Skills in Egypt has made positive inroads at the policy level. The project organised a regional policy conference that involved ministerial delegations from Egypt, Sudan and Tunisia to discuss how to empower women through football. This led to the lifting of restrictions on girls playing football in youth centres. At the grassroots level, four local football projects were recently funded by the British Council, all of them with a specific gender focus and in partnership with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Education, the Egyptian Football Association and universities.

Male and female coach educators are all working as football coaches, so gaining employment opportunities. They are cascading the activities to other females to become coaches which is seen by programme staff as promoting direct change in social norms. A beneficiary interviewed for this study stressed that, by bringing males and females together, boys listen to the opinions of girls and understand and respect them more: 'Now they know they have something of substance changing the concept and their way of looking at girls.'

A Premier Skills participant said, 'People were not used to girls playing football. They would say, "Why is she doing so? It's not proper for a girl to do so." But the community is starting to accept this gradually.' Another beneficiary highlighted that:

I gained confidence and this will be reflected in everything in my life. If my husband does not like the fact that I am a woman and do sports, I will bring up the new generation in a way that they will, changing them at home.

A trainer also noted the 'benefit of having girls trained who will then train little girls who will know that they can do this.

Findings suggest that the programme encourages collective participation, broadens perspectives, provides opportunities to gain experience, increases self-esteem and offers new theoretical information and practical experience. This implies that it is making positive contributions to three of the empowerment outcome areas: increased awareness and self-confidence for participating young women; fairer access to opportunities and resources for female coaches; and promoting changes in discriminatory attitudes and practices which used to exclude women and girls from playing football.



ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH FOOTBALL³, KENYA (2014–PRESENT)

This programme is highly regarded by partners and British Council staff alike for its uniqueness working on violence against women and girls (VAWG) while incorporating the sport for development dimension. DFID-funded (£1.5m), the programme was designed by the British Council Kenya office through consultations with authorities and members of the community.

The multi-pronged approach engages participating boys, girls and coaches through football while including training sessions on a specially designed curriculum on VAWG. The programme trains coaches who are active members of the community to help disseminate the messages of the programme more broadly. There is an advocacy component that includes a multi-media campaign, the engagement of high profile champions to reinforce the programme's messages, and a series of capacity building and coordination workshops for key duty bearers and service providers in the two regions. There are also quarterly community events with parents and community members that include community conversations to raise awareness about the risks of VAWG and provide information on prevention and responses to these issues.

The design and initial implementation of this programme is a strong example of the British Council's cultural relations approach in the area of women and girls' empowerment, given its explicit efforts to understand the context, promote partnerships and build stakeholders' trust. According to local officials in Mount Elgon, the programme is co-owned. They endorse its messages and methodology: 'The British Council came at a time when we needed them...The programme has developed all of us'. This has been instrumental in the programme's first year success.

The preliminary findings identified through this study conducted half-way through project implementation include the following.: Coaches explained that the approach to integrating girls and boys through football was useful so that they could interact in a social, non-sexualised context, while the information about protection and their bodies could keep them safe. According to a female coach, '[t]he programme has helped girls look at themselves in a way they didn't before, they have more information and that allows them to be able to talk to their parents, and also to relate to other boys.'

Girls interviewed agreed the programme had improved interaction between girls and boys, making boys more respectful during the football and educational sessions and beyond the programme's activities. They also noted that they had gained some confidence to negotiate with parents on issues regarding their safety, with one girl saying, 'I now tell my mother in the evening that I do not want to go out to the shop in the evening to buy things for her as this can be dangerous.' Boys said they had increased awareness of sex education and of inappropriate behaviour towards girls; and to respect their peers, including by avoiding physical fights.

The VAWG programme aims to have an important impact in changing social and gender norms in the community that perpetuate violence; to improve the local policy and institutional environment through its work with authorities, who have become actively engaged with the programme; and ultimately, to strengthen girls' individual power and agency with greater self-confidence and active knowledge about their rights and the risks they face, enabling them to protect themselves better. Work with boys seeks to involve them in creating an environment of respect and safety, while also teaching them about their rights and responsibilities. Therefore, while still early in the process, the VAWG programme is in line to meet two of the outcomes in the framework: increased awareness and agency of women and girls, and changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms.

¹ www.britishcouncil.org/society/sport/current-mes/premier-skills

² UK statistics from Premier Skills in Egypt since August 2013 provided by Susanna Carmody, British Council Senior Project Manager.

³ <https://www.britishcouncil.co.ke/vawg>

DOSTI, PAKISTAN (2015–PRESENT)

DOSTI⁴ aims to create a difference by breaking social barriers and promoting community cohesion by making sports an integral part of the social life of youth in Karachi. It works in eight centres in Karachi and recently won an International Peace Award.⁵ DOSTI did not target girls specifically. In fact, the participation of girls was unanticipated, according to an external evaluation that reported that coaches and youth workers did not expect many girls would get involved in the groups.

The promotion of sports for both young men and young women resulted in important positive changes in participants. One young female participant interviewed explained that project activities had resulted in her increased confidence: ‘Now I am confident to speak to anyone.’ Activities promoted by the project that involve games to swap gender roles were also highlighted as changing their perspectives on what women can or cannot do: one girl said, ‘If men can cook, then women can also drive and go out like men.’

The girls participating in the discussion in Karachi highlighted that one of the main problems they faced in their community was the fact that girls did not have freedom, and they benefited from less opportunities than boys and were less valued than them. When asked how this could change, they agreed the DOSTI programme was one way to address this but also that parents must be targeted with awareness-raising trainings. One girl said, ‘Our minds have changed but our parents need to understand what we are going through. Something needs to be done for parents.’

Although the DOSTI project did not target girls specifically and while the impact of the initiative on empowerment outcomes for girls is limited in scope, it is a good illustration of a programme that attracted girls’ involvement because they saw it as a safe space to broaden their freedoms and promote their equality with boys. In this way, DOSTI contributes to strengthening their individual empowerment and agency.

The examples presented illustrate how the British Council has consciously integrated women and girls’ participation into a number of sports projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia. These programmes have been working to subvert gender stereotypes and contributing to change discriminatory social norms in environments where girls may not commonly participate in sports. It has also been able to promote participants’ awareness, agency and self-confidence. By working in partnership with local organisations, these projects can also directly influence policy – particularly at the local level – and build capacity for sports development.

In terms of the cultural relations approach, the British Council builds on models drawn from the UK. These include community development work done by some Premier League clubs that tackles vulnerability and violence – including gender-based violence – among youth in local UK communities or by International Inspiration, which links schools in Ethiopia with schools in the UK. This is interesting for some of the British Council’s partners in developing countries, since they see that the problems and approaches to solving them are universal in nature but adapted to local needs.

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⁴ <https://www.britishcouncil.pk/programmes/society/dosti>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/british-council-dosti-project-wins-international-peace-award>