

## Women's Empowerment within the Framework of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Case of “Girls on the Field”\*

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### Research Article

Received: 28.08.2023

Accepted: 14.10.2023

DOI: 10.25307/jssr.1350536

Online Published: 31.10.2023

### Abstract

In Türkiye, efforts to eliminate gender inequality, barriers to access to sport and cultural norms in sport are increasing by the day. The aim of this research is to the empowerment of girls and women through football within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5) using the “Girls on the Field” platform as a case. According to the findings, the 'Girls on the Field' platform as been seen as an exemplary platform that "prioritizes sustainability in terms of its founding purposes" and adopts empowerment activities in sport through football. As a result, the “Girls on the Field” platform is seen as an exemplary organization in establishing similar platforms in Turkey and the world to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development goals, Girls on the Field, Gender equality, Football, Türkiye

## Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Amaçları Çerçevesinde Kadınların Güçlenmesi: “Kızlar Sahada” Örneđi

### Öz

Türkiye'de de toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğinin, spora erişimin önündeki engellerin ve sporda kültürel normların ortadan kaldırılmasına yönelik çalışmalar her geçen gün artıyor. Bu araştırmanın amacı, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri (Hedef 5) çerçevesinde kız çocuklarının ve kadınların futbol yoluyla güçlendirilmesini "Kızlar Sahada" platformu örneđi üzerinden incelemektir. Elde edilen bulgulara göre "Kızlar Sahada" platformu, kuruluş amaçları itibariyle sürdürülebilirliği ön planda tutan ve futbol aracılığıyla sporda güçlendirme faaliyetlerini benimseyen örnek bir platform olarak görülmüştür. Sonuç olarak, “Kızlar Sahada” platformu, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedeflerine ulaşmak için Türkiye'de ve dünyada benzer platformların kurulmasında örnek bir kuruluş olarak görülmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Sürdürülebilir kalkınma hedefleri, Kızlar Sahada, Toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği, Futbol, Türkiye

\*This research has presented as oral presentation on 4 th International Recreation and Sports Management Congress, 17<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2023

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## INTRODUCTION

"Sustainable development" is a development model that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The basic formula of sustainable development is to ensure that everyone equally benefits from opportunities by evaluating the interaction between the economic and social structure and the environment in a holistic manner (UNGA, 2015). The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 and set out to achieve 17 priority targets by 2030. These goals define the steps needed for an economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable future (UNGA, 2015). Gender equality is one of these development goals.

The goal of gender equality has been on the agenda of many national and international policies in recent years, especially in the fields of sports. The empowerment of girls and women in and through sports is the subject of much research (McDonald, 2015; Meân, 2012; Theberge, 1987). In this context, a clear relation is evident between sports and the concept of women's empowerment, which is considered as a global issue both nationally and internationally, and sports. Various institutions and organizations are working to the development and enhancement of women's empowerment through sports.

Efforts to eliminate gender inequality in sports, barriers to access to sports, and cultural norms are increasing day by day (Kay, 2009; Kwauk, 2022). In this context, SDGs are important in sports as in many other areas. Accordingly, within the framework of SDGs the "Kızlar Sahada (Girls on the Field)" platform, one of the most important initiatives aiming to empower girls and women through football was analysed in Turkey. In the context of these objectives, the "Girls on the Field" platform aims to understand strategies to end gender inequality in sport. Thus, the study analyzes the "Girls on the Field" platform, which works in parallel with SDGs on gender equality (Goal 5), reducing inequalities (Goal 10), quality education (Goal 4), peace, justice, and strong institutions (Goal 16), and partnerships for the goals (Goal 17).

The Sustainable Development Plans entered the world agenda towards the end of the 20th century and became a global implementation plan with international agreements signed in the 1990s (UNGA, 2015). Furthermore, the "increasing contribution of sports to the realization of development and peace" (UNGA, 2015) is clearly identified in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Declaration represents a significant milestone for sport. It also represents an opportunity to build on previous commitments and progress made by the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and other international, national, and local stakeholders. This guidance supports this effort by providing direction to government policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that sport makes the highest possible contribution to sustainable development (Kjaerulf et al., 2016; UNGA, 2015),

One of them, Goal 5, aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This objective refers to striving to promote gender equality in sports, in addition to taking advantage of opportunities for gender empowerment through sports. It can be evaluated that the possible contributions of developing sport-based policies to the Global SDGs as direct and related contributions (Lindsey & Chapman, 2017).

*Direct Contribution:*

Target 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against women and girls everywhere.

Target 5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and social life.

5.c. Adopt and strengthen sound policies and legally enforceable legislation to advance gender equality and empower women and girls at all levels.

*Linked Contribution:*

Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spaces, including trafficking, sexual, and all forms of exploitation.

Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices such as child marriage, early marriage, forced marriage, and female genital mutilation.

Globally, important steps are being taken to break down gender stereotypes or change gender norms. In this context, sport is considered a crucial tool in solving gender inequality. Governments continue to target women for health improvement, with a growing interest in women's participation in sports (Miller et al., 2017; Sport England, 2015). Furthermore, many projects have been undertaken worldwide to break down gender norms through sports (e.g., This Girl Can) (Sport England, 2015). Moreover, efforts have been made to empower girls and women especially in the field of football (Skogwang, 2023).

In Türkiye, gender inequality prevails in every branch and field of sports (KASFAD, 2021). Research has indicated that male and female athletes face difficulties in their chosen sports as a reflection of gender (Kavasoglu & Anderson, 2022, Kavasoglu & Yaşar, 2016). In particular, football is traditionally seen as a sexist and men's stronghold, and female football players are subjected to various gender-based discrimination (Kavasoglu, 2021; Nuhurat, 2022; Öztürk & Koca, 2015; Öztürk & Koca, 2020). Despite policies such as reducing and eliminating gender inequalities in football (European Football Association, 2017), gender discrimination and unequal power relations continue to significantly shape football in Türkiye. When we compare the number of women playing licensed football within the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) with the country's population, the number of female football players is almost non-existent (Women's Football Across the National Associations, 2019). In Türkiye, football is the sport with the highest rate of male athletes (99.06%) and the lowest rate of female athletes (Koca, 2020, p.38). Therefore, football is one of the sports in our country where it is most necessary to take concrete and sustainable steps toward girls' and women's empowerment.

"Girls on the Field" is a dedicated women's football platform founded in 2013. "Girls on the Field" has a unique place in the Turkish football conjuncture, both structurally and ideologically. It is not affiliated with the TFF. It is not a project, a women's football club, or an association but a social initiative. In addition to football clubs and associations, it is in contact with many private institutions, public institutions, social enterprises, and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, it designs various programs for the empowerment of women and children in society against discrimination. It works with people of all ages and

genders who are interested in football and development. "Girls on the Field" is a platform where people of all ages can find a place for themselves (Kızlar Sahada, 2022).

"Girls on the Field" tries to break gender stereotypes through football, one of the sports that girls and women are least likely to participate in and challenges the "You Cannot Do It" discourse that girls and women are exposed to from an early age. It invites women and girls to take to the field, to believe that they can do what men can do, and to a world where they are not isolated it advocates that sports and every profession are for everyone (Kızlar Sahada, 2022).

Since 2013, "Girls on the Field" has been organizing the Istanbul Cup, the first and still the only dedicated women's football tournament for women in Türkiye. Since 2015, it has organized the Youth Cup for high school girls every year (Kızlar Sahada, 2022). As of 2022, Visa Girls on the Field Football Schools (Adana, Ankara, Erzincan, Istanbul, Kayseri, Kocaeli, Soma, Ordu, and Şanlıurfa) and Kotex Girls on the Field Football Player Development Programs (Denizli, Kayseri, Malatya, Ordu, and Samsun) continue their activities in Türkiye. This program has conducted a project development program with creativity and trainings from sports to arts as well as entrepreneurship to technology to produce solutions to the problems of young women university students. With the selected project ideas, it was planned to create "Girls on the Field" spokespeople at universities and carry out activities within the framework of sports and gender equality (Kızlar Sahada, 2022).

The platform also provides corporate trainings. They provide trainings for corporations, educational institutions, and sports clubs, where diversity management, team building, inclusion, dialogue development, and inclusion processes are experienced on the football field. As the sole representative in Turkey, the football method, which is used in more than 150 institutions in more than 85 countries worldwide, it provides practical for women, men, children, youth, and participants of all ages and profiles (Kızlar Sahada, 2022).

Volunteering activities are also supported under this platform. In line with the needs of the "Girls on the Field" team, people can voluntarily join the team for operational jobs in the field, as trainers in trainings, and for desk jobs such as translation, social media, and visual design. In this context, in addition to the "Girls on the Field Volunteer Trainer Certificate," the aim is for them to gain privileges in many areas such as coaching and networking opportunities. Additionally, football and social development camps and football and psycho-social development training programs are organized for children with various backgrounds from all over Türkiye. In these programs, activities are exclusively designed for girls or mixed groups of girls and boys to empower special groups (refugees, socio-economically and culturally disadvantaged groups, etc.) and raise awareness regarding gender equality (Kızlar Sahada, 2022). This research aims to examine the empowerment of girls and women through football within the framework of the SDGs (Goal 5) through the example of the "Girls on the Field" platform.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Model**

The study preferred a qualitative research method to understand how people create their social lives, better perceive the world they live in, and reveal their experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). The research design was determined as a case study. A case study is a method in which a single situation or event is examined in-depth longitudinally, data are collected systematically, and what happens in the real environment is examined. (Ruane, 2005).

### **Study Group**

The study group was selected through the criterion sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. This method enables in-depth research information-rich situations by selecting people or institutions with certain qualities appropriate to the research topic (Ruane, 2005). Since the current situation was analyzed through the example of the "Girls on the Field" organization, the study group included a co-founder, a trainer, an instructor of trainers, and a project consultant. Participation in projects, trainings, and activities based on SDGs carried out by the "Girls on the Field" organization were determined as the criteria for the participants.

The age range of the participants was between 23 and 52 years. The co-founder among the participants has been involved in key roles in all processes for the development of "Girls on the Field," in which she has been involved since 2014. The participants who contributed to the study as project advisors and trainers are academicians at the Faculty of Sports Sciences and board members of the *Association of Sports and Physical Activity for Women (Kadınlar için Spor ve Fiziksel Aktivite Derneği, KASFAD)*, who have contributed important research on gender in sport to the literature. The trainer instructor participant is a graduate of the Faculty of Sports Sciences, takes part in various volunteering programs, and is interested in gymnastics.

### **Ethical Approval**

Before starting the research, the researchers obtained an Ethics Committee Approval Certificate as a result of session number 08 dated 9.09.2022 from the Ethics Committee of the Kırıkkale University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee. In addition, researchers presented the necessary information about the research and the principles of volunteering to the participants in advance, and they had participants sign a consent form.

### **Data Collection**

As a data collection tool in the study, the researchers prepared an information form containing various demographic information such as participants' age, occupation, and the time of their introduction to "Girls on the Field." In addition, the study used a semi-structured interview technique within the scope of qualitative research. With the proliferation of qualitative methods in research involving sports and cultural contexts, researchers are increasingly using interviews to collect data (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Data collection occurred through a semi-structured interview form prepared by experts. The interview questions were prepared in line with SDG 5, which is "Ensuring Gender Equality," by academics working in the field of gender. In this context, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with participants who had made various contributions to the "Girls on the Field" initiative about what has been done and what will be done in line with SDGs.

Interviews were conducted with the participants via the Zoom application for a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 50 minutes. Interviews were audio and video recorded with the permission of the participants.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred through the content analysis method. The aim of content analysis is to reach the concepts and relationships that can explain the data obtained by examining the files and documents reflecting the views of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Maxwell, 2008; Pope et al., 2000). In this direction, the researchers recorded the audio and video recordings of the interviews with the participants in writing. Accordingly, the research team used the original information obtained from the participants to determine the vision and mission of the “Girls on the Field” platform from the SDG framework and create the necessary themes. Three qualitative researchers who are experts in the fields of gender and sport assisted in determining the codes and categories in the study. Through the analysis of the research data, two categories and codes defining these categories were determined. The codes and categories were then organized, and the findings were interpreted.

### Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is crucial as they spend time in the field, directly interview participants, and gain experience in using the perspective gained in the field to analyze the data obtained. Being close to the sources of information, talking to the relevant people, making observations, analyzing relevant documents, and getting to know and understanding the subject matter closely have a significant place in qualitative research (Ruane, 2005). In this sense, the fact that the researchers’ fields of study are parallel to the subject is considered a positive effect. Moreover, the researchers were actively involved in the semi-structured interviews and the analysis process from start to finish.

## FINDINGS

This study, which analyzed “Girls on the Field” within the scope of SDGs (especially Goal 5), reached two themes (luxury and inappropriate field, equal and powerful). The themes and sub-themes generated as a result of content analysis are presented.

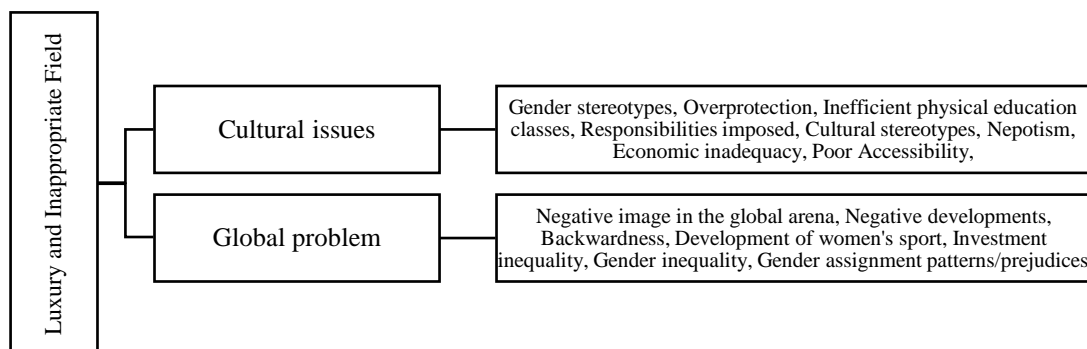


Figure 1. Luxury and inappropriate field



Researchers observed that the co-founder and other participants of “Girls on the Field” are in this organization because they believe that there is a cultural and global bias against girls and women in the national and international arena. “Sport is a luxury and unnecessary/inappropriate field for girls and women.” It can be said that this awareness forms the fundamental strength of the “Girls on the Field” project. In the sub-theme of cultural issues, it was found that women in Türkiye are aware of issues such as gender prejudices, overprotectiveness against girls and women, economic injustices, and favoritism of men in sports.

Trainer instructor Esra stated, *...One of the biggest reasons for this is the tradition, culture, cultural norms, even religious and patriarchal codes in our country. For example, when a girl wants to do sports, of course, this may vary between central and provincial or eastern and western regions, but her father may not allow it, a family member may not allow it.*

Founding member Betül stated, *...I do not think we, as Girls on the Field, need to express how bad the current situation is. Even if you present 3 research results, you will not need to write what I say...*

It is seen that the roles assigned to women in society and family culture patterns negatively impact girls' participation or continuity in sports. For instance, Fasting and Pfister (1999) observed that the low age of marriage in Türkiye and, therefore, the responsibilities that young women take on related to the home form at an early age, the burden of motherhood at a very young age, and the authority of male family members are barriers to participation in sports. Similarly, in a study conducted on female athletes, Kavasoglu and Yaşar (2016) determined that problems such as stereotyped value judgments of society, family pressure, the view that the responsibilities of marriage belong to women, and economic inequality cause serious problems in their sports lives. They also determined that the reflection of social presuppositions in sports, which attribute the basis of physical activities to power and power to the natural privilege of men due to the perception that the field of sports belongs to men, also itself in football. This is also supported by the trainer instructor's opinion in this study.

In line with the findings of the research, it is understood that people find it is not appropriate for women and girls to participate in the world of sports due to the stereotypes produced by the cultural structure and male hegemony. At this point, sports for women and girls are perceived as an unnecessary luxury. The results of the research and the literature are parallel in this regard. Im et al., (2012) emphasized that sport is seen as a luxury in the lives of girls and women and that girls are always of secondary importance in sporting activities due to their physical characteristics and traditional reasons. Furthermore, men are more likely to participate in sports activities than women. Schedler and Wagstaff (2018) stated that the responsibilities attributed to women in society lead to inequalities and discrimination among men. In fact, Koca and Bulgu (2005) argued that as a global problem, the people who control women's sports are men. Moreover, they mentioned the fact that some sports branches are closed to women subordinates and excludes women. Again, even when sports activities in school environments are considered, researchers have argued that in physical education classes, female students are considered suitable for gymnastics and volleyball because of their gender, whereas male students are considered suitable for football and basketball branches. Otherwise, these students are not considered normal (Koca et al., 2005). The perception that sport is a male domain is one of the main pillars of the ambivalent position of women athletes in this field. The projection

of social assumptions that attribute the basis of physical activities to power and power to the natural privilege of men in sports manifests itself in football (Kavasoğlu & Yaşar, 2016; Öztürk & Koca, 2019; Öztürk & Koca, 2020).

Founding member Betül stated, *...sports is not considered a profession for girls. Then we start school, and in physical education classes, the group that receives the ball is the boys. Girls, you guys hang out, jump rope or play volleyball... This causes girls' and women's participation in sports to decrease and disappear from daily life...*

The study findings indicate that families, who should be in a position to guide and encourage children, singled out their children in sports based on their gender. A report published by Women's Sports Foundation (WSF, 2020) revealed that families (32.2%) consider boys to be more talented in sports than girls and that this is a situation that prevents girls from playing sports. The same report determined that middle-income families provided more opportunities for boys (34.7%) to watch football matches than girls (26.4%). This situation, which one can define as the invisibility of experience, is also emphasized in the quote of the instructor in the study and is in parallel with the study.

Ferda, the Girls on the Field Project Advisor, and Pinar, the Instructor, stated that not only cultural norms were influential in the emergence of this formation.

Project advisor Ferda stated, *...We already know that girls and women are disadvantaged in terms of accessibility in sports compared to boys and men in our country and all over the world*

Trainer Pinar stated, *.... Girls on the Field is a platform based on football. Men are more interested in football. Boys are much more likely to be taken to matches than women. In that respect, I think women are one step behind...*

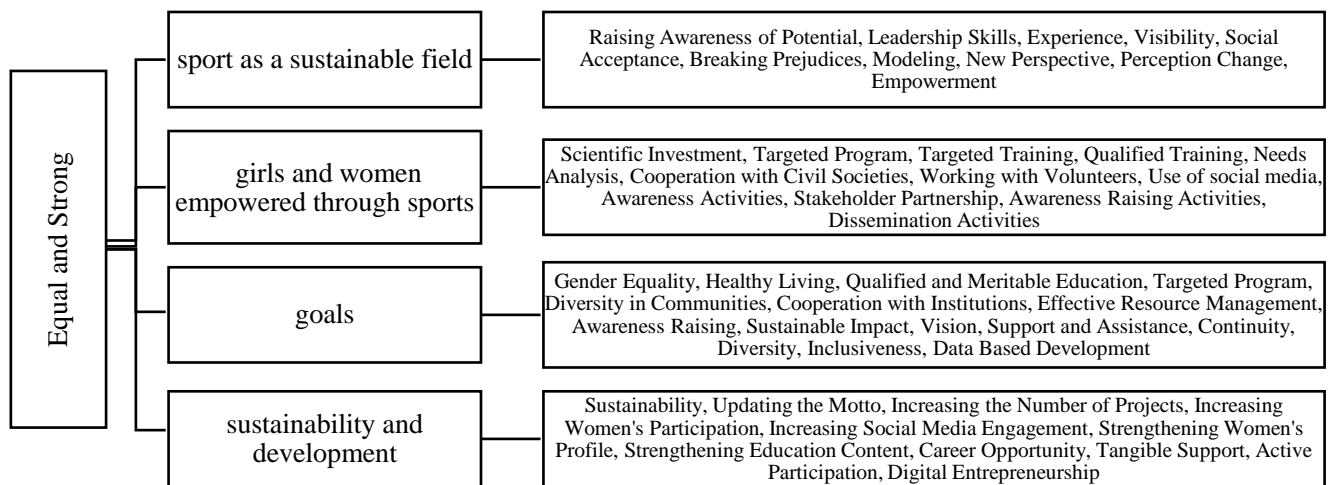
The starting point of sustainability is awareness. People are involved in this project to be effective in shaping a better future and create change along the way. This awareness makes the project sustainable in creating a social impact for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), founded in 1974 by Billie Jean King to raise awareness and empower girls for a better future through sport, is an organization dedicated to ensuring that all girls and women have equal access to sport and the enormous lifelong benefits it provides (Zarrett et al., 2020). The organization is instrumental not only in enabling girls to play sports but also in supporting them through champion organizations. So, it enables them to find the confidence, strength, and sense of belonging that they need to grow at the community level over the years and throughout their lives (Staurowsk et al., 2022).

In the globalized world of sports, in many countries, there are campaigns for gender equality in sports participation, and people even prepare declarations on this issue. For instance, in the 1970s and 80s in the US, the WFS was established as a national organization to promote girls' and women's participation in sports, and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity helped to increase women's participation in sport. In the 1990s, many international organizations were established for the same purpose. Again, at the First World Conference on Women and Sport held in Brighton, England in 1994, decisions



were taken to increase international organizations to increase the participation of women and girls in sports (Jeanes et al., 2021; Meier, 2005).



**Figure 2.** Equal and strong

According to the research findings, the “Girls on the Field” project has reached four sub-themes in the formation of equitable and empowered women within the scope of sustainability. Within the sub-theme of sport as a sustainable field, codes such as increasing the potential awareness of girls and women, providing experience, high visibility, breaking prejudices, and changing perceptions through sport were identified. In this context, achieving sustainable gender equality, especially through sport, is seen as a crucial field in building a stronger and more equal world. The 2005 World Summit on Social Development emphasized the importance of social development (UNGA, 2005). A study conducted by UEFA, the governing body of football in Europe, reveals that young girls who play football report higher levels of self-confidence than those engaged in other sports (UEFA 2017).

Childhood is an ideal time to build a solid foundation in critical awareness of discriminatory practices and develop to the transferable skills necessary for building a more just, critical, and egalitarian society. Here, the concept of “effective equality” or similar social categories constitute the educational process through sport, which takes the form of practices in which learning is the goal. Thus, this potential awareness can influence perception change (Hortigüela-Alcalá et al., 2021).

Founding member Betül stated, *...we also saw that one of the participating companies had a CEO that played football in the team. And this team had stores, and one of the sales consultants working in the stores was the captain of the team, and within the team, the CEO followed the guidance of the sales consultant. Now I do not know where else such an experience, such leadership skills, such management skills would be available...*

Trainer Instructor Esra stated, *...Women's football in Europe is still not in a position to be compared with men's football, but despite this, the momentum it has gained in recent years, the work done, the developments in this field ... the World Championship in 2019, the European Championship, etc. shows that IT EXISTS NOW. The demand is high, there is a big audience,*

*the quality of the game is good, experts and journalists state that, compared to men's football, it is technically more watchable, more exciting...*

However, within the framework of the women empowered through sports sub-theme, ensuring sustainability is subject to certain conditions. Ensuring scientific investment, conducting programs toward the target, providing targeted training, providing qualified training, conducting needs analysis, ensuring cooperation with non-governmental organizations, working with volunteers, increasing the use of social media, increasing awareness-raising activities, ensuring stakeholder partnership, and increasing awareness raising activities and dissemination activities represent acts related to the empowerment of girls and women through sports.

In the global sports world, many organizations are collaborating to positively change girls' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors through sport, such as the UN's Girl Up, Plan International Girls Get Equal, and the Nike Foundation's Girl Effect. Researchers have claimed that these programs are seen as an opportunity to change the perception of the world (Grosser & van der Gaag, 2013; Mitra, 2021). The campaign objectives identified in the media content are addressing the traditions of early marriage, increasing access to education, and providing trainings to eliminate gender-based violence. At this point, examining the “Girls on the Field” platform according to the concept of international sports goals, one can say that it is an effective structure for the empowerment of girls through football and the removal of barriers to prevent discrimination.

In a study of 18 young women's personal experiences in participating in sports and physical activities in Pakistan, Laar et al., (2022) determined that development plans can be designed based on the experiences of young women and girls in identifying resistance factors that prevent sports participation in domestic and foreign policy areas. It was also emphasized that policies should consider the attitudes of families and others in communities toward women who play sports and participate in physical activities, especially in public places. Based on these experiences, one can argue that strategies and structures should be formulated to ensure equal rights for young women to play sports in public spaces where men are present. At this point, within the scope of sustainability for development, the achievability of the objectives is seen as an important criterion. The “Girls on the Field” project consultant also noted that individual empowerment is also important in this sense.

Project consultant Ferda stated, *..when we look at accessibility to sports in general, not in terms of the branch, it is against women and girls...I think that individual empowerment is very important, but unless we choose collective empowerment, the sustainability is not enough in terms of women's football and at the same time the reality of strengthening the field in women's football...*

In addition, the “Girls on the Field” project has shown that sustainability goes through goals. We can see this in the other sub-theme, “goals.” Participants defined the sustainability of this project as gender equality awareness, healthy living awareness, understanding of quality and qualified education, preparation of targeted programs, consideration of diversity in communities, cooperation with different institutions, awareness regarding effective resource management, awareness regarding raising activities, vision for sustainable impact, support and

cooperation, continuity, diversity, inclusiveness, and data-driven development. The most fundamental of these goals is gender equality, one of the SDGs.

Founding member Betül stated, *our team, works directly with goal number 5 since the purpose of "Girls on the Field" is to ensure gender equality. In doing so, we also serve other goals with the tools we use and the way we work.*

Trainer Pınar stated,... *Now these trainings we received were primarily aimed at raising awareness. So, thanks to the trainings, I learned many things I did not know. There are also many events. We often receive invitations. In terms of sustainability, events are actually being organized in such a way that they "will continue"...*

One can observe that the Western countries of the sports world have initiated studies to raise awareness to increase the participation of girls and women in physical activity (Brady & Khan, 2002). Foremost among these are studies on the health benefits of sports. Sport has also, under certain conditions, provided opportunities for girls and women to increase their self-confidence and develop their identities (Brady, 2005). In the UK, the Premier Skills program, organized by the British Council since 2007, has partnered with the Premier League and works with coaches and trainers from many countries worldwide to help girls and vulnerable young people build better lives through the power of football. They also serve as positive role models for young people and future educators (Morgan, 2010).

The Premier Skills project has trained more than 32,000 coaches, referees, and trainers in 29 countries. The research on 14 young female football players in Zambia, Jeanes, and Magee (2013) found that non-governmental organizations are a useful tool to support the broader development goals of gender equality and women's empowerment in football-related sustainability efforts. It was emphasized that apart from the sports institutions of the countries of Norway and the UK, global companies such as Nike had the opportunity to provide financing and that the goals were achieved together with NGO employees. In addition, in his study with a focus group interview with 17 sports leaders and coaches and 24 young athletes, Larsson (2021) emphasized that the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) gives girls and boys equal opportunities and conditions to play and lead sports, giving them a voice and ample opportunities to influence the activities they are part of.

In Kenya, the Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Through Football program used football to address some of the behaviors and attitudes that lead to violence against women and girls. In this framework, studies were conducted through trainers to provide knowledge, attitudes, life skills, behaviors, teamwork, fair play, and self-confidence trainings relating to football and education on gender equality and behaviors to participants aged 10-20 (Newbatt & Punton, 2018). In Egypt, the Premier Skills "1,000 Girls 1,000 Dreams" project, in partnership with the Egyptian Ministry of Youth and Sports, used football as a tool to provide opportunities for girls and coaches to develop their skills and better integrate into society (Premier Skills Egypt, 2018)

Another issue mentioned by the interviewees was sustainability and development. Furthermore, it is important to strengthen the motto of "Girls on the Field" day by day, increase the number of projects, and the number of women participants. One can observe that the platform is more and more involved in social media and that the training content it provides is

updated. Moreover, they value digital entrepreneurship opportunities. They also work to create career development opportunities for girls and women.

Founding member Betül stated, *...We will keep working until equality is achieved in every opportunity to improve and develop every situation until every woman is free in this country, this is our point of view...*

Founding member Betül stated, *...People say that men's football is no longer enjoyable, that matches are played with very well-known set-ups. But when we look at revenues, sponsorships, and broadcasting, there is still a long way to go in Europe too. If we ask ourselves, "Where is Türkiye in this?" I do not want to say at point zero, but women's football in Türkiye is still in its infancy...*

With the popularization of the use of today's media tools, the success of female athletes who can be successful in international sports is encouraged and made visible on social media. For example, female athletes such as Yasemin Adar - wrestling, İrem Yaman - taekwondo, İlke Özyüksel - pentathlon, and Eda Erdem - volleyball, who have received or are likely to receive a quota at the Tokyo Olympics on behalf of Türkiye, inspire women by sharing their sports achievements and sporting careers on their social media accounts. For sportswomen who are underrepresented in the mainstream media, social media has become a means of creating their own brands, finding sponsor support, communicating with their supporters, and becoming visible (Koca, 2020). The social media initiative, which offers new distribution platforms for sports that receive little media attention, offers people new hope by reducing sexism (Coche, 2014). With the use of the Internet and social media bringing a new kind of interactivity, new platforms allow direct access to women's sports and participation in sports (Hutchins, 2011). However, the popularity and influence of sports in Western society are growing, and the most visible of sports remains professional men's sports, which dominate the media. This indicates a tendency to reinforce gender inequality (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2005).

## CONCLUSION

Physical activity and sports are important for lifelong health, but in many societies, women's role is limited to the home and the household, which can hinder their access to sports. Therefore, girls and women are not able to appreciate the health and other positive effects of participating in sports (Eime et al., 2010). As football is a male-dominated sport that excludes girls and women, civil society organizations (e.g., KASFAD in Türkiye) and projects (FIFA, 2023) have focused on this area. These organizations and projects emphasize that football belongs to everyone. In Türkiye, it is possible to talk about a platform similar to these organizations, which is unique within the country, "Girls on the Field." The platform is the only one in Türkiye that aims to eliminate gender inequality, access barriers, and cultural norms in sports through football. They work to eliminate gender norms in sports that almost every woman and girl in Türkiye has internalized (Kızlar Sahada, 2022).

Pfister (2015) stated that research-based knowledge, implementation projects, and an exchange of experiences are crucial to facilitate the advancement of women and girls in various football-related roles and positions. Thus, the "Girls on the Field" platform was chosen as an example because of its efforts to empower girls and women through football and because it is a pioneer

in Türkiye in the field of research, project design, and implementation. In addition, the fact that the platform prioritizes sustainability with its founding objectives and adopts sports empowerment activities through football was reflected in our research as another selection criterion. In conclusion, the "Girls on the Field" platform is seen as a model organization for the establishment of similar platforms to achieve SDGs in Türkiye and worldwide.

This study was a case study, one of the qualitative research designs. Future studies can utilize different qualitative research designs and the data to be obtained through using different data collection techniques to enrich the previous findings. Similarly, it is advisable to conduct mixed-method research by supporting the related topic with quantitative research. The fact that this research only examines the "Girls on the Field" platform reveals the limitations of the research. Research examining similar platforms or organizations would provide a better understanding of the context. In addition, comparative cross-cultural studies, including different country contexts, can contribute to a better understanding of inequalities and sustainable efforts in girls' and women's sports.

**Conflicts of Interest:** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Authors' Contribution:** Research design FMK., and AU., Data collection GK, FMK., Statistical analysis FMK., and GK, Preparation of the article, AU.

### **Ethical Approval**

**Ethics Committee:** Kirikkale University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee

**Date/Protocol number:** 19/09/2022-08



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