

VULNERABLE GIRLS, YOUNG WOMEN AND SPORT RESEARCH REPORT FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT (VRU)



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1. INTRODUCTION

Girls and young women constitute between 20-30% of young people involved in offending and serious youth violence as victims and / or perpetrators which has resulted in limited research and insight as more emphasis has historically been placed on boys and young men. Moreover, there is limited insight or evidence specifically about girls and young

women's involvement in interventions as a form of prevention, early intervention or diversion including in community sport in this context.

This research was commissioned in Autumn 2020 by the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit to explore this knowledge gap in order to inform future practice.



2. METHODOLOGY

This research had two aims:

1) To develop a better understanding of the contribution that sport can make to working with vulnerable girls and young women at risk of or involved in Serious Youth Violence.

2) To develop better insight into how to engage vulnerable girls and young women at risk of or involved in Serious Youth Violence into community sport programmes

The data was collected by conducting: (see Appendix A for the breakdown of the data collection)

- Two focus groups involving seven LTOs (Locally Trusted Organisations) - the first focus group took place at the beginning of the project and the second focus group took place

after the interviews had been conducted and analysed.

- Ten semi-structured phone interviews with eight LTOs
- Two semi-structured interviews with referral agencies (one statutory and one voluntary organisation)

As the research was conducted during the period of January 2021 to March 2021, when England was in lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was decided not to interview girls and young women as they were not physically engaging with their projects, but it was recognised that this would be important for future research. It was also decided not to focus on the effects of the lockdown for this research although it is acknowledged that this was important for the context of some of the findings.

Ethical approval was obtained from Loughborough University. Ethical consent was provided by all the

participants of the focus groups and interviews. A total of thirteen participants took part in the research which involved taking part in either individual interviews or both interviews as well as the focus groups. The interviewees and a summary of their involvement in the research can be found in Appendix A.

The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then analysed using thematic analysis based on firstly, themes identified from the literature review and secondly, from new themes which emerged during the analysis process. The interim findings were presented to the LTOs at the second focus group for checking and validation and for the identification of any further issues that were significant for consideration in this research.

The two referral agencies involved in this research have been anonymised to ensure confidentiality. It was, therefore, decided not to include a profile of these two referral agencies

in order to protect their anonymity. However, one interviewee worked for a statutory referral agency and the second interviewee came from a voluntary referral agency. The eight LTOs involved in this research have also been anonymised to protect the confidentiality of the interviewees and the young people and their families that the projects have been working with.

The shared features of LTOs working with vulnerable girls and young women included:

- Based in the local community and well known and trusted by the local community
- Delivery staff that reflected their local community
- Female project management and delivery staff with 'lived experience'

The profile of the eight LTOs has been summarised below in Table 1 (over the page).

Table 1: A summary profile of the LTOs

PROJECT CODE	DESCRIPTION OF LTO	THE ROLE OF SPORT FOR THIS PROJECT	GENDER PROFILE OF PROVISION
Project A	• CiC¹ working with girls and young women affected by abuse including domestic violence, sexual abuse, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and gangs • Works with young women who may or may not be known to the criminal justice system • Receives regular referrals from statutory agencies	• Use of a range of sports activities to support issue-based workshops. • Main focus on engagement, relationship building, mentoring and support • Use of issue-based workshops to build confidence and empowerment	• Female only staff • Female only sessions
Project B	• Well-established NGB sports club based in a deprived inner-city community	• Boxing as the main sport • Provides other sports activities including gym and fitness	• Main provision is mixed-gender • Now providing female-only sessions run by female staff
Project C	• Well-established Football Trust providing a wide programme of youth sports activities working in deprived communities • Receives referrals from statutory agencies	• Football as a main activity • Provides other sports • Provides issue-based workshops and support to young people	• Mixed gender provision • Female only playing sessions with mixed gender staff

¹ CiC is a Community Interest Company

Project D	Well established NGB sports club (traditionally female sport) providing a wide programme of activities including in schools	Female sport as main activity	- Female only sessions - All female staff
Project E	Established community football club serving the South Asian community	- Football as the main sport - Provides other sports - Provides issue-based workshops and support	- Female only playing sessions - All female staff
Project F	Well-established martial arts project	Martial arts as the main activity	- Mixed gender sessions - Mixed gender staff (always with a female member of staff)
Project G	- Voluntary youth organisation - Runs a wide range of projects in disadvantaged areas for boys and girls	- Football - Includes other activities including arts and crafts to support engagement of girls and young women	- Female only session - Mixed gender staff
Project H	- CiC working with young people living in disadvantaged areas - Receives mainly referrals	- Uses different sports to engage - Uses issue-based workshops	- Female only - Female staff

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 'VULNERABLE' AND 'VULNERABILITIES'

There was agreement that the definition of 'vulnerable' was 'hard to pinpoint' as it was so wide ranging. Although there was no shared definition of the term 'vulnerable', it was agreed that language was important. Even though it was a term used by professionals, this proved to be a dilemma as there were mixed views about whether the term 'vulnerable' should be used directly with girls and young women. One view was that practitioners should ask the girls they were working with how they felt about the term and another view was that it shouldn't be used by practitioners and should only be used between professionals and practitioners as exemplified in the following quote:

'I asked a girl once, she said, I'm not vulnerable, And I said, Well, what would you like me to call you, you know, when I'm discussing your case, or trying to help you, she said, Well, I'm the

girl in progress. That's brilliant. So let's just go along with that. So if we're working with individuals, we can tailor our work to whatever language that young person wishes us to use. But when we're working with professionals, we're talking about at risk and people when they are at risk and they are vulnerable.'

(Project A, Director)

The same LTO that was working with very vulnerable girls and young women who were referred as a result of involvement in gangs, county lines and child sexual exploitation observed that in some contexts, it was appropriate to use the term 'vulnerable' when discussing issue-based work.

'I think it also depends on what kind of work you're doing... So when we do have referrals, and young girls and women come to us, they know that they've been either a victim or perpetrator in some kind of exploitation or, or exploitative behaviour. So, they know that they are coming along

to a specific project to do a specific piece of work around vulnerabilities and being at risk. So, I suppose in that context, we do say what can we do to prevent you from being at risk? What can we do to prevent you from being vulnerable? And how can we, you know, put a support network around you to help improve things. So, we do use that kind of language.’ (Project A, Director)

Nevertheless, there was a shared view that the term ‘vulnerable’ was often viewed by girls as a ‘stigma’ and a negative label which has also been identified in other research studies (Ellis, 2018). This reinforced the feeling that they were ‘damaged goods’ which had the potential to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

‘I work with a lot of girls that are in the care system, and the stigma that’s attached to that. So, some of the comments from the girls is that they feel uneasy about words like that [vulnerable], because ‘I’m always classed as vulnerable to

professionals and practitioners because I’ve been in a certain situation’, and how are they going to break the cycle of deprivation if they’re always seen as vulnerable, just about how we can move them, you know, from the vulnerable stage and move them forward?’ (Project A, Director)

Referral agencies and LTOs identified a wide range of ‘vulnerabilities’ as listed in Table 2 (over the page) which were used to define the term ‘vulnerable’ in the context of working with girls and young women. These built on the vulnerabilities for children identified by Bright (2017) but added a new dimension specifically around girls and young women.

LTOs emphasised that it was important to look at the whole picture so that they could provide the right kind of support but that this was often complex and could take several months to establish.

Table 2: Vulnerabilities identified by LTOs for girls and young women

• Being female including gender and racial discrimination
• Poverty
• Living in a deprived area
• Being in lockdown ²
• Stress and poor mental health
• Low confidence
• Lack of friends
• Being bullied, including at school
• Wanting to belong
• Poor relationship with parents / family
• Domestic violence
• Low / no engagement in education
• Being out on street / park if drinking with friends
• At risk of a forced marriage
• At risk of criminality
• A risk or danger to yourself or people around you
• At risk of exploitation including child sexual exploitation
• Lack of awareness and understanding about healthy relationships including the consequences of sexual relationships
• Being part of a gang

² As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

'Young people who, for example, have disclosed like.....they've been drinking, use of drugs.. underneath the surface of that as well, there was some aspects of exploitation in there.... finding out what's happening, who's around, because, for example, it was the quote unquote, grandfather, or uncle...So mom said it was okay and everything, but, then it turned out that he wasn't actually a grandfather, it was like mom's friend.' (Project A, Manager)

The 'dynamic', changing nature of vulnerabilities was recognised as a challenge for practitioners. It was highlighted that, for some girls, their 'initial' vulnerability led to new, increased vulnerabilities which placed them in very serious situations with the potential to lead them into the criminal justice system. Referral agencies and LTOs described this as a 'sliding scale' of vulnerabilities.

There was shared agreement about the 'invisibility' of vulnerable girls and young women as they were often overlooked. It was highlighted that the

focus was usually placed on boys if they were involved in crime and yet LTOs highlighted that boys' involvement in offending always had an impact on the whole family.

'What's actually focused on is the boys. And their involvement in say, like knife crime, gun crime, gang violence, Street, just that, that type of stuff. But nobody really tends to think of the roles or the impacts that that lifestyle has on their mother, sisters, their girlfriends....sometimes their [boys] behaviours will manifest and they will take it out on people they are close to, because it is that kind of safe space, if that makes sense. What they would deem as a safe thing, very problematic' (Project A, Manager)

The additional 'invisibility' of black girls and girls from Asian communities was identified as a major challenge and acted as a form of 'double invisibility', the result of the intersection between gender, race and culture.

'We know that they focus on the black boys. And [the focus on] sexual exploitation tends to be, generally speaking, white girls....

in terms of what is faced by black girls from sexual abuse, CSE [Child Sexual Exploitation] is really, there's a bit of a big failure

in the system when it comes to that. They are kind of failed by the system in that way.' (Project A, Manager)

Table 3: An example of the sliding scale of vulnerabilities for girls



3.2 THE REFERRAL SYSTEM AND 'VULNERABLE' GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

3.2.1 The views of the referral agencies

The interviewees agreed that girls were viewed as having specific vulnerabilities which were used to explain their behaviours in different ways to boys and that this had implications for referrals. It was agreed that overall referral rates for

girls and young women seemed to be low and needed further investigation. This low referral rate included the lack of referrals from schools at the early intervention stage where it was noted that this was a different referral pattern from boys.

'Boys' behaviour prompts a referral, prompts a concern... because it's a little bit more outward, a little bit more ...Some

of the girls' behaviour isn't so obvious, and sometimes the referrals into the system aren't so quick to happen' (Referral Agency, A)

This was also reflected in young people's involvement in county lines, where one referral agency described boys' involvement as being seen as 'criminal' whereas girls' behaviour was

primarily seen as 'sexual exploitation'. This had significant implications for referrals as girls were often referred to intervention programmes around sexual exploitation rather than wider issues around involvement in county lines and gangs. The typical age of referred vulnerable girls and young women was between 13 and 16 years. The range of reasons for referrals is outlined in table 4 below:

Table 4: Reasons for the referrals of vulnerable girls and young women

•	Girls stopped by the police
•	Low level offending in some cases e.g. shoplifting
•	Vulnerable to exploitation
•	Girls with a boyfriend involved in offending
•	Involvement in gangs/ county lines

Referral agencies confirmed that when they were working with very vulnerable girls and young women, they adopted a holistic approach to interventions and worked closely with other agencies to support the whole family. Table 5 shows an example of this approach.

The priority of referral agencies was to make referrals to positive interventions that would help young people to avoid involvement in serious youth violence. They considered that the matching of a young person's interests to the type of intervention was important for the engagement

process and that sport was not always the answer if the young person didn't like sport.

Referral agencies were positive about the potential use of sport as an intervention for working with vulnerable girls and young women.

Benefits included:

- Sport can really 'grab' you and help in terms of vulnerabilities
- Can help to control your emotions
- Female role models
- They can go along with friends
- It can be local and offer a 'community vibe'
- Provide clear boundaries
- Approachable staff
- Opportunity to benefit from the Commonwealth games that is coming to Birmingham

Table 5: The development of a holistic package

1)	Initial concern about a young person based on vulnerabilities, friendships, relationships, behaviours, gang involvement etc
2)	Referral of young person
3)	Flagged by the referral system
4)	Use of exploitation screening tool and gathering more information from school etc
5)	Home visit to the young person and their family
6)	Consider options for interventions and develop a holistic package for the young person
7)	Onward referral to provider(s) of intervention
8)	Establishment of case meetings if appropriate
9)	Young person's engagement at the intervention – sometimes there is no further contact between the referral agency and the provider, sometimes there is regular contact, depending on the circumstances

However, referral agencies also identified a number of challenges around the referral of vulnerable girls and young women to LTOs which included:

- Lack of awareness and understanding by some LTOs about the vulnerabilities of girls and young women by some LTOs and in particular about exploitation
- Lack of understanding by some LTOs about safeguarding issues in the context of very vulnerable girls and young women
- The need to be aware of situations when grooming or 'peer deviancy' training might be going on between girls both at and outside the session
- Difficulties faced by referral agencies for sharing data with LTOs to help them to manage risks i.e. data protection issues
- The referral agencies' need for reassurance that the needs of the referred girls

and young women would be catered for at some LTOs

- Although LTO staff have the right intentions and want to do their best, they are not always well-informed or supported to manage ACEs and trauma which is important if young people behave in certain ways
- Lack of understanding by some LTOs about when and how to refer young people to Children's services
- Concerns about whether the matching of girls to mentors at some LTOs is done well enough to meet their needs
- The use of casual/ sessional and part-time staff is an issue as they are often responsible for the face-to-face delivery work with the girls and young women, they do not have adequate knowledge or training and are not able to go 'above and beyond' when girls need support

3.2.2 The views of LTOs about the referral of vulnerable girls and young women

LTOs working with vulnerable girls and young women often received few or no referrals and sometimes found the referral process difficult to understand.

'I have found it quite difficult! Like, it's not that they've [referral agencies] not been willing to engage or anything, I think it's because there are so many other people involved in these agencies and you only speak to like one person, so that sort of drip-feeding of information, so sometimes things get lost or they don't come back to you in the right way and ... yeah, it's ... it takes a lot longer ... I thought would be a very simple process of oh we're doing this, have you got anyone? Oh yeah, here you go.... So for example at the family hubs, you've got so many social workers who each have their own caseload, so we talk to like the hub manager or someone, then they still need to talk to all the different social workers.' (Project G, Officer)

LTOs that were most likely to receive referrals were those that offered specialist provision for girls and young women involved in exploitation or high profile LTOs such as Community Trusts. These referrals were often received from the Police, CAMHS and individual social workers. Some LTOs received their referrals directly from the first referral agency such as social care or the police. However, this was not always the case and the nature of the referral pathway from the first referral to the LTO was often complex which made it difficult for LTOs to receive appropriate and up to date information to support the girls and young women that had been referred. This agrees with academic research into the use of referral mechanisms which has identified that the 'appropriate exchange of information is one of the more tricky areas around collaborative and partnership working' (Robinson, 2014, p 210).

Table 6: Example of referral pathway

1) School makes a referral to EIS hub
2) Onward referral to police
3) Police make a referral to a larger organisation with a range of interventions appropriate for working with girls and young women
4) Larger voluntary organisation refers girls/ young women to an LTO
5) LTO receives the referral

The need for a holistic approach to working with referral agencies was confirmed as a priority for working with very vulnerable girls and young women but it was observed that this could also be time consuming and could be difficult if the key member of staff was a volunteer, sessional or part-time coach.

The majority of LTOs relied on self-referrals and their own local intelligence and outreach work in 'hot spot' areas where they knew there were issues around gangs and grooming. Having access to their own 'on the ground' local knowledge emerged as an important factor for their work with very vulnerable girls and young women:

'We have to think, OK, are they in a relationship with a male currently? And like we have to, kind of, road map. and say, where is that male from and where is the female from, because that can cause altercations. There was an incident where one of the females we was mentoring, without getting into it too much, her boyfriend also got referred to us, and he was involved in kind of ... I guess in a gang, but that kind of led to her being approached and attacked on a bus as well by males.' (Project F, Director)

LTOs agreed that the vulnerabilities experienced by each girl or young woman were different. Some girls were not in the criminal justice system but still needed to be supported:

'A lot of the female that will come to us ... when we have got referrals in the past, it's been ...low self-esteem, the low confidence, maybe they're getting bullied in school. Self-harm's been a resounding theme as well. So, it's not all that are involved in kind of criminality but they are still vulnerable' (Project H, Director)

Vulnerabilities of the girls and young women that LTOs were working with included:

- Poverty and low income
- Low self-esteem
- Low confidence
- Bullied at school
- ADHD, autism
- Being in the care system
- Domestic violence
- Trauma – experienced by up to 90% of girls
- Poor mental health including anxiety
- Self-harming
- Suicidal
- Cultural issues including forced marriages

- Easily-led and on the periphery of being in a gang
- Involved in gangs, including boyfriends in gangs, grooming, honey traps
- In court for offending including for aggressive behaviour
- Victims and witnesses of crime

Whilst working with girls and young women, some LTOs made referrals back into the system to agencies such as social care and CAMHS for additional support and to address safeguarding issues as a result of disclosures.

3.3 ENGAGEMENT OF VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

The engagement of vulnerable girls and young women was not just considered as engagement within the sports activities but in a much broader way reflecting a youth-based approach to engagement. As not all LTOs received referrals, some relied on their

own outreach workers to start the engagement process and to work with very vulnerable girls and young women out in the community, starting to develop relationships and trust so that they could link them into their projects. This tended to vary depending on the level of vulnerabilities and included the following types of engagement for very vulnerable girls and young women:

- Initial contact with a key staff member of the sports intervention either as part of the referral process or by outreach work before attending the intervention
- Continued contact with the same staff member to start to build the relationship and develop trust before attending the sports intervention
- Starting to attend the sports intervention and continuing to build the relationship with staff members at the sports intervention
- Relationship building with the other participants at the sports interventions,

including developing new friendships

- Continued attendance at the sports intervention
- Active involvement in the sports activities as a participant or volunteer
- Active involvement in any group work or discussions at the sports intervention
- High enough levels of confidence and trust to make disclosures if appropriate

Referral agencies noted that any kind of engagement was a positive outcome in itself as it was the starting point for building confidence and resilience and for reducing the risk of criminality. However, they maintained that referrals to sports interventions and engagement could be problematic for a number of reasons:

- Some girls and young women don't want to engage with the referral agency itself or any of the referral opportunities
- Some girls think that sport is only for boys and will need to

be told about the benefits
about feeling and looking
good

- A key family contact is often needed to support engagement although some families do not always support engagement
- Some girls don't want to do something that their friends aren't doing and will need the opportunity to go along with their friends

LTOs working with girls and young women who were less vulnerable, still maintained that initial engagement for recruitment to their project was important and should be based on a personal connection:

'And if you just give a leaflet to every single girl in that session, they don't feel like you actually see them. Instead of actually having that conversation with them and then saying, oh do you want to come along to this sports session, I think it would be good. And then you'll find that they actually do turn up!' (Project D, Coach)

One LTO used arts and crafts activities for the initial engagement of the girls and young women at their mixed football project. This helped to develop the relationship with the staff leading the football sessions and acted as a bridge to participation.

'I think with arts and crafts, you can kind of just get on and do your own thing, so it was easier for them, I think, to come in and do that activity without having to worry about, oh well I don't really know you and, I'm not sure who we're doing those activities with. And it's just a nice way to get them talking and build up that relationship, and find out exactly what those barriers are for them participating in sport....We had a couple of young [football leaders] as well who would come to the arts and crafts and help out there and then get them involved in the football. So I think knowing the leaders obviously helped loads because they'd already had that relationship.' (Project G, Officer)

Even when girls and young women had started to attend the sports intervention, it was important to take a 'softly' approach towards engagement in sport by gradually building up to

playing more sport and providing a wider choice of activities especially if they had low confidence or body image concerns. Some LTOs reported how some girls and young women had initially said that they didn't want to play sport but after a few weeks, they were enjoying playing sport and wanted to continue.

LTOs reported that lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their engagement and that re-engagement would be their priority when the lockdown was lifted.

'We have noticed that the number of girls has dropped recently over the lockdown, which we're sort of trying to look at, at the moment.'
(Project D, Manager)

LTOs reported that gaining support from parents was important for engagement. This has also been identified by academic research into community sport which identified that delivery staff including coaches needed to have meaningful engagement with young people's caregivers (Van der Veken et al., 2021). LTOs reported that this involved making contact with the

parents and getting to know them so that they could reassure them about the sports interventions. This was highlighted as especially important for one LTO working with a South Asian community as they needed parents to be aware of how the sports intervention catered for their daughters' cultural needs in order to address specific concerns about becoming 'western' in terms of clothing, behaviour and activities (Toor, 2009). It often needed extra time to build this relationship as some LTOs had found that parents tended to react differently when it was a daughter rather than a son and could be more apprehensive and cautious. This was reinforced by the experience of another LTO who confirmed that parents needed to know 'who you were, and what you are doing' so that they felt comfortable letting their daughter attend, especially for evening sessions during the winter when it was dark outside. The relationship with the parents was not always straightforward as sometimes they had different views to their daughters. An example of this was a mum who was a

single parent, who wanted their daughter to have a male mentor as a positive male role model even though this might not have been what the daughter wanted. LTOs reported that their engagement with parents was not

just for joining the sports intervention but also for providing feedback about achievements and receiving feedback from parents about positive changes at home.

CASE STUDY NO.1: PROJECT E - ENGAGEMENT WITH PARENTS

This well-established football project is run by local volunteers based in a south Asian community in a deprived area of the west Midlands. They work with girls and young women who have been experiencing the type of vulnerabilities highlighted below:

‘A lack of opportunity due to cultural issues or cultural barriers. So the girls that we work with are vulnerable at risk of either a forced marriage, domestic abuse, honour-based situations...you know, situations that may occur in their life, really restricted in terms of understanding, you know, how to seek further education, university...Amongst them are young parents, they're very young parent, 18, 19, 20 year old girls who've been married, you have gone through, you know, abuse, domestic abuse.’ (Manager)

The project runs female-only sports sessions with a focus on football. These sessions include time to play sport as well as sharing food together afterwards as part of group discussions which provide advice, guidance, and mentoring. The sessions are run in an all-female environment which ensures that the girls and young women feel comfortable.

‘They feel that they want to come and participate in a sport or an activity where they can be them, they can take off their scarf. They feel, you know, if a male is there, they don't want to, they don't want to do that.’ (Manager)

Engagement with parents which includes building their trust and dispelling myths emerged as a key factor for enabling the girls and young women to join the project. One of the ways that the project engages with the parents is to hold an annual celebration event

where they are invited to come along and see what their daughters have achieved. This engagement with parents has helped to:

- Dispel myths about football and sport not being appropriate for girls
- Provide reassurance that it is a female-only environment which is safe, secure and local
- Support girls and young women to broaden their horizons from a focus on preparation for marriage to include going to College and having a career

3.4 THE DESIGN OF SPORTS INTERVENTIONS

3.4.1 The types of sports interventions

The types of sports interventions provided by LTOs working with vulnerable girls and young women included:

- Regular single sport group sessions with informal support, advice and guidance.
- A multi-sport approach integrated into every session or a different sport each week.
- Group sports sessions with group discussion or issue-based work either before or afterwards
- Issue-based discussion group work sessions using sport to support their work when appropriate

CASE STUDY NO.2. PROJECT H - ISSUES-BASED GROUP WORK USING SPORT

Girls and women were referred into a two and half-hour session each week for twelve weeks but there were issues with the referral process.

‘We had some really challenging issues that were just thrown up at us onceand actually I was like, we know nothing about these girls, you know.....so we brought in a referral process to allow us to do that early digging around, so we weren’t going to be caught unawares.’ (Director)

Types of vulnerabilities experienced by the girls and young women included poor mental health, low self-esteem, sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Project staff emphasised positive experiences, resilience and building aspirations rather than being described as a sport and physical activity programme. The project was run by a minimum of two local, trained female staff who had lived experience.

‘They [the female staff] are just people that have had really bad lives, that want to now give something back now they’re in a far better place..... they were the girl that they’re sitting opposite facing, it’s like they’re talking to their fifteen year old selves. And that is the key bit that makes it work.’ (Director)

The first priority was to build relationships and develop trust with the girls and young women. In addition to group work, one to one support was offered both inside and outside the sessions. Social elements included providing food and refreshments.

‘We always start the session with food..... how much conversation goes around when you’re eating a bit of pizza or some crisps and sandwiches together is brilliant. That’s where all the good stuff comes out isn’t it?’ (Director)

Staff focused on different issues identified by the participants and introduced different sports to complement issues each week. For example yoga was used for working on anger management and self-defence for concerns about personal safety.

‘The sport comes second to the other stuff, but it has to for the kind of girls and young women that we get.’ (Director)

This approach helped to build confidence about playing sport so that the girls and young women were more willing to take part in sport as the intervention progressed. Halfway through the project, they started to focus on youth social action to put into practice the skills that they had developed. By the end of the project, the girls and young women had developed very close relationships with the staff and the other participants and wanted to continue their involvement and access positive support.

'When they leave, that's the one thing that they all say about is making new friends, trusted friendships. And don't forget, a lot of these girls are referred to us for unhealthy relationships.' (Director)

The LTO was successful in securing funding for an ongoing social session which acted as an informal exit route for the girls and young women that they had been working with so that they could continue to develop healthy friendships.

'We run these girls' nights in. So where we still informally advise on these kind of issues, but it's more about just a coming together, a safe space, secure environment for girls to carry on building these friendships that they've made.' (Director)

However, the LTO recognised that they would have been able to achieve even more with longer term funding.

Specific sports emerged as popular for girls and young women and included both individual and team sports. This included boxing, martial arts, football, rounders, netball, basketball, yoga, dance and walking. Although the reasons for the popularity of these sports requires further investigation with girls and young women themselves, LTOs were able to identify a wide range of reasons for the selection of these sports which included:

- Previous playing experience at school or in the local community

- Popular with the girls and young women they were working with
- Availability of local facilities e.g. outdoor basketball courts
- Able to use a specific sport such as boxing to express anger
- Able to use specific sports to find a release from everyday stresses
- Able to use specific sports to progress and develop skills
- Able to use specific types of sports such as martial arts

for self-defence and protection

3.4.2.Addressing poverty and low income

All the LTOs reported that poverty and low income were major concerns for the girls and young women and that sessions needed to be free of charge otherwise they would not be able to attend. However, the impact of poverty and a low family income extended further than attendance and needed to be addressed for clothing and kit. This required LTOs to have a budget to provide clothing such as sports bras, football boots and kit which were seen as essentials and potential barriers to engagement and taking part in sport. For projects that provided kit and equipment to be borrowed at sessions, the COVID-19 pandemic had made this more problematic.

‘There’s lots of elements, bringing COVID-19 into it, they’ll say, I can’t wear those gloves cos individuals have had them on, we can’t touch that pad because someone else has touched that pad.’ (Project F, Manager)

Food poverty was also an issue which affected engagement at sports

sessions as some girls and young women turned up and were clearly hungry. This demonstrated that providing food as part of the sports intervention was an essential feature for some projects.

‘Some of these young people, they’re not eating properly, I know some parents are entitled to food parcels but if they’ve got substance misuse realistically, it’s not going the way we would deal with it ourselves. Like when they come to our sessions, if they haven’t eaten that day, they’re not going to just come out and say unless they’ve built that major, major rapport with you.’ (Project F, Manager)

3.4.3 Gender of staff and participants for sport interventions

The approach taken by LTOs varied and often reflected the gender profile of the sport and the availability of staff. As an example, boxing and martial arts were usually played in a mixed gender environment and needed to rely on both male and female staff. The importance of creating an environment that was welcoming for girls and young women was confirmed by traditionally male sports where they had invested in

changing the culture by developing more female coaches and officials and running activities specifically for female participants.

'The club is like a big family. And everybody gets on with everyone. And they help each other, even outside of the floor of the gym. So, making something fun to be around. And something not intimidating when you come in. Because I have found over the years, that girls within the area didn't want to come to the boxing club. Because it was it was male dominated. But we've changed our approach' (Project B, Manager)

Traditionally female sports such as netball found it easier to provide female-only sessions in a female environment run by female staff. Some LTOs running football-based projects were able to deliver sport in a female-only environment with female staff whereas others still needed to rely on a mixture of male and female football coaches to support female-only sessions in a mixed environment.

'I'm the only female working [at the project] which works with young people, schools, youth offending, county lines. To be the only girl [staff] it's difficult to get

all female coaches on a girls session and the girls definitely take better to it... What we've had in the past is their own pitch, for their own working environment, they're around boys but they've got their own working environment and at least that is there.' (Project C, Officer)

However, one LTO found that having both male and female staff running a mixed football session worked well.

'I think it worked really well actually because ... especially with ... with it being football, the sort of integration with the girls and boys because the boys leant on the male coach a lot more and the girls sort of leant on me a little bit more' (Project G, Officer)

Nevertheless, the overriding view was that sports interventions should be female-only provision which was run by female staff.

'A girl opening up to a female coach, just feels more comfortable. This is where I've tried to get more female coaches involved.... if we get women involved who do know, that vulnerability, or whatever been there, then they'll have a better

understanding' (Project B, Manager)

This was seen as essential for girls and young women with multiple and complex vulnerabilities and in particular when their experiences had involved abuse, violence or exploitation by boys and men as mixed sessions had the potential to trigger trauma and for the sports sessions to feel like an 'unsafe' space. Female-only provision was also essential for projects working with vulnerable girls and young women from Muslim communities as this met their cultural needs and enabled them to take part. Female staff as positive role models were viewed as important for engaging and retaining female participants.

'They like having a role model around that will support them and does believe in them. And that's definitely what helped me and that's why I'm still playing this sport now, ten years on!' (Project D, Coach)

However, not all LTOs were able to provide female-only sessions even though they felt that this would be more effective. Reasons included not having enough female staff to run

sessions, being based in a mixed environment such as a boxing club, martial arts club and not having enough participants to run the sessions if they relied solely on girls and young women.

It was agreed that female staff also faced significant challenges in becoming qualified sports coaches especially in sports which were not viewed as traditionally female.

'I feel that to work in this environment you've got to be confident and bolshy, if you ain't got anything about yourself, you ain't gonna get very far. You know and I feel it's a shame that you have to be confident and cocky to work in this field or else it's not going to work. So much stigma attached to female coaches in particular, it's really difficult.' (Project A, Director)

LTOs observed that for girls and young women who were less vulnerable, then mixed sports interventions could still be appropriate. In these cases, LTOs agreed that there should always be a female worker at the session available to support the girls and young women. The qualities of female staff for working with vulnerable girls and young women included:

- 'Lived' shared experiences
- Positive role model
- Non-judgemental
- Open and easy to talk to
- Understood girls and young women's emotions
- Able to build a trusting relationship
- Consistency – always there
- Skills and experience appropriate for the context

'Lived' or shared experience emerged as the most important quality as it meant that the project staff understood how the girls and young women were feeling and were able to be non-judgemental, were able to empathise, and understood the journey ahead of the most vulnerable girls and young women.

'I have a colourful past, and I do self disclose to young people. So I have been the victim of CSE as a young person..... I actually say I'm vulnerable, I was at risk. And these are the steps I had to take to come out of the other side of things and try and break that cycle in my own life. So, I feel it is important sometimes to be able to share those experiences, and talk openly and honestly, with

girls to say, actually, you're not damaged, because you just went through an experience.' (Project A, Director)

LTOs recognised that involving male staff in the delivery of projects was also important when it was appropriate:

'I also feel that we do have to demonstrate as practitioners and professionals that there are some amazing male role models, male sports coaches, male youth workers and those girls need to know there are some amazing male role models in the world. It's not all dark and gloomy, and I talk from experience as a victim of abuse.' (Project A, Director)

One LTO commented that in some situations, a male member of staff might be more appropriate especially if there had been relationship issues between mother and daughter.

'I've seen it both ways. I've seen it where girls who are higher risk, have better relationships with the male staff and will listen to the male, they're able to build that rapport where they might have had issues prior say, for example, with their mom or something, which is a barrier to them being able to engage in the same way with a woman.' (Project A, Manager)

The qualities of male staff for working with vulnerable girls and young women included:

- Good listener
- Positive and supportive
- Conscious of their words and actions
- Understanding the issues that girls talk about
- Understanding of exploitation, abuse, trauma etc
- Positive male role model
- Must be comfortable talking with girls about emotions, boys and periods

Based on their experience of working with girls and young women, LTOs described their view of the qualities of male staff.

‘Yeah, just generally being sort of approachable ... And then just I’d say clued up on women’s issues, so don’t get someone who feels

gross talking about periods. Because these are those conversations! And yeah, just generally like understanding. So you know you can ... talk about you know if they’re having boy trouble, you’re not going to make fun of them for having a boyfriend or wanting a boyfriend, you’re just going to listen to them and help them out.’
(Project G, Officer)

‘A sound understanding of safeguarding, sound understanding of CSE and the different ways that different behaviours can present. And also not just CSE, also child abuse. And that’s in addition to in-house training in terms of managing harmful sexual behaviour’
(Project A, Manager)

As LTOs observed, the gender profile of sessions and staffing was not straightforward. A summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the different variations can be found in table 7.

Table 7: Gender options for sports sessions involving girls and young women

STAFF GENDER	Female only staff	Female and male staff	Male only staff	Only male staff	Female and male staff
PARTICIPANT GENDER	Only female participants	Only female participants	Only Female participants	Mixed session - female and male participants	Mixed session - female and male participants
ADVANTAGES	• Appropriate for very vulnerable girls and young women especially if they have been a victim of male abuse or exploitation or if a disclosure needs to be made • Shared understanding by female staff with lived female experience • Important for girls and young women with specific cultural needs • Easier to engage female participants	• Female member of staff available for engaging and talking to girls and young women, providing support and acting as a positive role model • Male staff as a positive male role model • Some parents are more likely to support attendance by their daughters if there was a positive male role model • Enables sports sessions to be run if	• Enables sports sessions to be run if no female coaches are available • Male staff as a positive male role model • Some parents are more likely to support attendance by their daughters if there was a positive male role model • Some girls and young women might be more likely to listen to a male staff member if they are	• Enables sports sessions to be run if not enough female participants or female coaches are available • Male staff as a positive male role model • Potential for issues to be seen as needing to be addressed by both girls and boys • Potential to support the development of healthy relationships between girls and boys	• Female member of staff available for engaging and talking to girls and young women, providing support • Enables sports sessions to be run if not enough female participants and not enough female coaches available for female only session • Both female and male staff as positive role models • Might reflect the nature of the sport and its environment

	Female staff as positive role models	not enough female coaches are available Some girls and young women might be more likely to listen to a male staff member if they are talking about being exploited/ groomed	talking about being exploited/ groomed	Some girls and young women might be more likely to listen to a male staff member if they are talking about being exploited/ groomed	- Potential for issues to be seen as needing to be addressed by both girls and boys - Potential to support the development of healthy relationships between girls and boys - Some girls and young women might be more likely to listen to a male staff member if they are talking about being exploited/ groomed
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DISADVANTAGES	• Lack of positive male role models • Doesn't help to develop healthy friendships between male and female participants • Doesn't reflect society	• Male member of staff needs to have training, good understanding and skills for working with girls and young women • Having a male member of staff might not be appropriate for very vulnerable girls and young women	• Might be difficult to engage girls and young women and to gain trust • Male members of staff need to have training, good understanding and skills for working with girls and young women • Might not be appropriate for very vulnerable girls and young women • Potential serious safeguarding issues for male staff and participants, especially for one to one work.	• Potential for girls and young women to experience negative banter from the male participants and to be excluded from playing • Potential for girls and young women who have a negative body image to drop out of the session • Might be difficult to engage girls and young women and to gain trust • Male members of staff need to have training, good understanding and skills for working with girls and young women	• Potential for girls and young women to experience negative banter from the male participants and to be excluded from playing • Potential for girls and young women who have a negative body image to drop out of the session • Might be more difficult to engage girls and young women and to gain trust • Male members of staff need to have training, good understanding and skills for working with girls and young women
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				• Might not be appropriate for very vulnerable girls and young women • Potential serious safeguarding issues for male staff and participants if one to one support is provided.	• Might not be appropriate for very vulnerable girls and young women • Potential serious safeguarding issues for male staff and participants if one to one support is provided.
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3.4.4 The right style for working with vulnerable girls and young women

Fun and variety was important for the style of the sessions as well as being supportive and having 'a nice feel'. The ability of the girls and young women to choose the activities and to shape the sports intervention emerged as important and was considered to be a starting point towards empowerment. Sports interventions were all based on playing sport although some included opportunities for volunteering and mentoring.

The LTOs needed to adopt a flexible approach and adapt the sessions to 'the mood and the vibes of what was going on, letting the girls lead'. However, they also agreed that providing a structure for group sports sessions was important for working with girls and young women:

'Yeah, I mean again, strict boundaries, structure is key. Girls much prefer structure to boys. Girls don't just want to play the football, they would be the ones that would quite happily ... you set up a load of drills and a load of mini games before you get

to the end goal and they will follow those set procedures, and they like the coaching, which is why girls pass better on a field and things like that, they're not so selfish.....you know, quite set...with flexibility to obviously go off and you know if needs be..... and the girls like it.' (Project H, Director)

3.4.5 Creating a safe space

This emerged as the foundation of the sports interventions and was seen as even more important if girls and young women were very vulnerable otherwise they would not engage in the project. A safe space was not just a physically safe space but also emotionally safe so that they felt comfortable and could be 'who I am', not judged and not watched. This reflected academic insight which had identified the importance of understanding the social dynamics of neighbourhoods for the consideration of unsafe and safe spaces for taking part in physical activity (Clark, 2015). The choice of the gender of staff and participants at the sports intervention and the wider environment was a key factor in

creating a safe space. Feeling safe was also connected to the location of the sports intervention which was in most cases, local, so that it was part of the local community, they could walk there and just 'pop in'.

'Having somewhere local to them we've found works best, again, it's a lot easier for them because I think it doesn't seem as much of a big deal as it's somewhere they sort of see every day and it's like, oh well I know where that is, so I can just pop in and if I don't like it, I can leave because my house is only round the corner. So that they feel comfortable, I think that's the key thing. Like most of the times girls don't engage probably because they don't feel comfortable doing it.' (Project G, Manager)

3.4.6 Sport as a 'physical' activity involving the body

LTOs working with the most vulnerable girls and young women highlighted the importance of having an awareness of

the potential effects of having experienced abuse. These LTOs were concerned that physical contact in sport had the potential to act as a trigger for repeated trauma. It was acknowledged that working with very vulnerable girls and young women required a sensitive approach by the coaches which should be based on being trauma-informed and consent, constantly checking that girls and young women were feeling comfortable and if not, providing them with safer alternatives. Sports which involved physically touching and holding sporting partners such as boxing and martial arts whilst being popular and having significant benefits, were particular sites of concern.

'With Jiu jitsu, as a martial art, it's very personal, up close, a lot of grappling involved in it, there has to be a lot built in there about consent.' (Project F, Director)



CASE STUDY NO.3 : PROJECT F - CARING FOR VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN AT A MIXED MARTIAL ARTS PROJECT

This well-established martial arts project ran regular mixed gender sessions for young people in their local communities. The project was working with more vulnerable girls and young women over the last twelve months especially those with gang involvement. As more girls and young women had started attending their sessions, the project started to train more female staff so that they could offer female-only sessions as well as mixed sessions in the future.

'I probably could pick from twenty male coaches just off the top of my head right now, there's probably two female ones that I can think of in the city, so there's not a whole lot of female coaches really, which we're trying to change.' (Director)

Although the project was able to run female-only sessions with male coaches, they felt that this would not be appropriate due to the trauma experienced by many of the women and due to safeguarding concerns.

The project staff were very aware of the significance and the context of the vulnerabilities of the girls and young women that they were working with. This sense of awareness was developed in response to previous experiences of working with young people involved in gangs.

'There was an incident where one of the females we was mentoring, without getting into it too much, her boyfriend also got referred to us, and he's kind of ... he was involved in kind of ... I guess in a gang, was in xxxx, but that kind of led to her being approached and attacked on a bus as well by males.' (Director)

The project benefited from having a staff team who lived locally and who were aware of the tensions and gangs in the different neighbourhoods. Their staff meetings often collated this local knowledge so that they could ensure that they were able to keep the girls and young women safe.

‘‘We have to kind of be mindful... take into consideration different relationships they might have within the city, because that allows us to keep them safe, but also address some concerns that might come up ... If we hear certain things ... if they’re from a certain area but they’re having a lot of relationships with people outside of the area, maybe in a rival area, that could lead to problems within their area....’
(Director)

The project staff were committed to making sure that the girls and young women were emotionally safe by adopting a trauma-informed approach at their martial arts sessions and they integrated it into both the planning and delivery of sessions.

‘And I think again, when you’re dealing with people that have been through trauma, you don’t know what’s going to be triggering for them, so... we make sure they’re not so much where they’re going to get triggered. So you have to be conscious of anything ... and if it’s a mixed class as well, that brings different challenges because you have to then be, again, you’re conscious of everybody in a class anyway, but when you’re partnering them up and it’s like okay which moves next ... so you just have to make sure it’s all appropriate, you have to really think ten steps ahead of what could and what might and what that leads to.’ (Manager)

The nature of martial arts as a contact sport was important for providing vulnerable girls and young women with the opportunity to give their consent for physical contact which was important in the context of possible physical and sexual abuse and exploitation.

‘We do a physical contact sport, are they comfortable with that? We have to ask the question, ‘are you okay for us to touch you?... You lead it so it’s in their control.’
(Manager)

The project staff were committed to supporting the positive development of the girls and young women that they worked with but acknowledged that it needed to be part of a holistic approach.

‘I think it’s meeting individual person’s needs to be quite honest with you.... being honest, doing things to the best of our ability, being willing to learn but also knowing when things are out of our calibre, where we are not counsellors, we are not support workers, but ensuring that we make sure that that individual young

person gets what they need. So it's helping them on their development and growth, no matter how little or huge that may be.' (Manager)

Safeguarding and a trauma-informed approach was considered of utmost importance for mixed sessions as LTOs recognised that there was often an underlying context of boys' and men's exploitation of girls and young women's bodies which needed to be considered when pairing young people together of the opposite gender.

Body image also emerged as an area of concern which prevented girls and young women from wanting to take part in sport. This included being overweight with the worry that they wouldn't fit in as well as for others wanting to play sport whilst wearing make-up and not damaging their nails (i.e. acrylic nails in particular).

'They [girls and young women] always complain about the way they look, the clothing that they wear, how another girl's got a pretty face and they don't feel as though they're pretty. So, it's about empowering them, and making them feel amazing as individuals.' (Project F, Manager)

Clothing emerged as an area of concern for girls often based on their previous experiences of PE at school where they were not allowed to wear comfortable clothes to take part in sport. Reflecting findings from academic research about clothing and the body (Clark, 2015), LTOs were aware that wearing shorts and vest tops was seen as normal for boys but that this was often sexualised and discouraged for girls which had a negative effect on their body image.

'They [PE teachers] should not be forcing girls to cover themselves up because of what other people may say. Like I think that really damages a girl's confidence, and it's really upsetting to hear that it's still happening. And just because you think that a girl may be sexualised by the way that she's dressed, but you should be talking to the boys who are doing that, because that's where it is wrong.' (Project D, Coach)

LTOs had found that they had to give clear messages about all types of clothing being appropriate for their

sessions including wearing leggings, shorts and vest tops.

3.4.7 Social aspect

Including a social aspect within sports interventions was an important feature. For some girls and young women this meant taking a friend with them to support their engagement at the session. Referral agencies were aware of the need for this and would refer a friend at the same time where necessary. In cases where friends were not a positive influence, the referral agencies would work with the intervention provider to support the development of new, more positive friendships.

‘Actually sometimes what we do is ... to get the buy-in, to get the engagement, we will let them go with a friend, even though they sometimes can be a negative influence, and then we’ll work with the sports provider to say, right, don’t put them on the same teams, get them engaging with other people... don’t break their friendship, but break them apart within the activities if you can, and do it that way.’ (Referral agency, A)

Providing a structured social element to the sessions helped girls and young women to get to know each other and to develop friendships with ‘girls like me’. It also helped to develop the relationship between the delivery staff and the girls and young women. LTOs considered this to be an essential tool to support the development of healthy relationships for the girls and young women. Some of the LTOs provided food and drink to support the social aspect either at the start or end of the sports sessions or group discussions as it was an effective way to start conversations, ready for listening and asking.

3.4.8 Providing additional support

LTOs described how they provided support to the girls and young women at the sessions as well as outside the sessions. Support was provided at the sessions by informal conversations, making space and time to talk and listen to them. However, for LTOs working with very vulnerable girls and young women, they would also provide group discussions or workshops to give them the opportunity to think and

talk about specific issues in more depth. LTOs valued group work and discussions as it helped vulnerable girls and young women with similar experiences to hear from others like them, learn strategies from each other and support each other.

LTOs would often give one to one support both at and outside the sessions, often as part of a holistic approach. Areas for additional support included:

- Home and family
- School
- Friends
- Mental health
- Setting goals, aspirations, careers and thinking about the future

This additional support was particularly important for the more vulnerable girls and young women. LTOs working with very vulnerable girls and young women who been involved in gangs or county lines tended to use sport and physical activity as a supporting activity with the main focus on group discussions. An

example of this was one project where they focused on a different topic each week and chose an activity that complemented it such as yoga for dealing with anxiety. However, it was emphasised that LTOs were only able to provide a certain level of expertise and support and that they were not counsellors. On some occasions, it was necessary for LTOs to refer the girls and young women who they were working with to welfare services such as CAMHS and social care for additional support and disclosures of abuse and exploitation.

'We've seen a number of girls make disclosures, domestic abuse, we've had so many disclosures, where we've been able to signpost them to relevant services. [knowing how and where to signpost them] is based on my [professional] experience working in this sector professionally for the last five years. I work in the youth sector....So as soon as something is identified, I have the contacts and networks so I know where to go to.' (Project E, Manager)

3.5 CHALLENGES FOR WORKING WITH VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

LTOs agreed that working with vulnerable girls and young women was different to working with boys and young men. Some LTOs acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to work with girls and young women but that this shouldn't be a reason not to work with them. This was reinforced by a female LTO worker's own experience as a teenager where she recognised that she had also been difficult as a teenager.

'It would have been year 8 she was in and pretty much she had behavioural problems, I was literally like looking in the mirror when it came to her.....

So I'm looking at her thinking, wow, you are very difficult. And then it made me go back to myself, thinking, well, you were like that and no one gave up on you because if people had given up on you, like you wouldn't be in the position where you are today. And I think you've got to look at it that way, that everyone deserves a chance. Yes, girls are very difficult ... in general!

(Project D, Manager)

Setting boundaries for group work with girls and young women was important which included being aware of behaviours and the need to step in to calm down situations. LTOs described how girls and young women tend to wear their heart on their sleeves and might act up in front of their friends but that for some LTOs, mainly female staff, it was easier to work with girls and young women than boys and young men who often hid their feelings and often externalised their behaviour.

They also acknowledged that friendships between the girls needed to be treated sensitively as they would 'argue one day and be best friends on the next day'.

Patience and perseverance were seen as being important features so that support could be provided at the right time:

'But I think it's key that you observe and listen and just be there ... be there for whenever that individual's ready to say, you know what I'm done fighting, I'm done fighting, like I'm ready to talk now, I'm ready to ... And I think lived experience does help a lot because you can see signs of

like you know ... what an individual may be going through because of the way how they're probably like closed off or you know they're not attending sessions.'

(Project D, Manager)

It was acknowledged that integrating new participants into existing groups was often difficult. As an example, one LTO had decided not to allow new participants to join an intervention of 12 weeks after the third week. This was in contrast to regular ongoing sports sessions where it was easier to put strategies in place to ease new participants into the sessions. Creating

a safe, local space and developing trust was seen as essential for positive group work with girls and young women as this provided a space which enabled them to talk about the difficulties that they were facing. It was pointed out that group discussion work as part of the sport intervention gave girls and young women the opportunity to share their experiences which built a sense of solidarity agreeing with the learning from academic research (Arnall & Eagle, 2009). LTOs acknowledged that it was important for the group facilitator to keep it on track so that there was a positive outcome.

CASE STUDY NO.4: PROJECT D - CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR AT GROUP SPORTS SESSIONS

This well-established LTO ran regular sport specific sessions for girls and young women in the West Midlands in a community with high rates of poverty. The majority of the coaches were former participants at the sessions and were all female. The sense of altruism was a key factor in the retention of their volunteer coaches which provided the continuity necessary for establishing good quality long term relationships with the participants. This was complemented by the lived experience of these coaches which was recognised as being essential for the success of their work with their girls and young women.

'I personally would not change what I'm doing at all, I would not move from girls' sport at all, because I've been in it, and I understand the girls and I can actually connect to them because I've been in their situation.' (Coach)

Some of the girls and young women at their sessions sometimes displayed challenging behaviour, especially when they first joined. This included behaviours such as swearing, acting up in front of their friends, not listening, being disruptive and being 'annoying'. The coach emphasised the importance of trying to understand what was going on in that girl's or young woman's life which was leading to this behaviour.

'Sometimes it can be they're acting up to their friends, so they want to play off this whole, oh well I'm not that bothered and they'll like play up to their friends and be that naughty one in the session and like act as if they're not really bothered....But they're doing that for a reason and you know that. It's just about trying to get through to them. Because all of their behaviours are for a reason, it's not just for nothing.' (Coach)

The lived experience of the coach was important for not judging this behaviour and for understanding that their role was to continue to make the effort and to make the connection and build the relationship.

'I feel like as a girl and as a woman, people judge very quickly on what girls' sport is and how girls are, just because they can be difficult sometimes, it's not necessarily difficult, it's just not trying hard enough.' (Coach)

Although the sessions were outwardly focused around playing sport, the coach was clear that they had a supportive role:

'Just try and build this trust over however many sessions we've got and really try to get through to that girl and have one to one conversations, like ask how they are because we're not just delivering sport sessions, we're actually there for them as a person.' (Coach)

Challenges for the coaches included being a similar age to the participants and trying to provide one to one support whilst running a group sport session:

'So it can be hard, but I think that's just what you do as a coach, like you've got to be able to have very good people skills and be able to manage some individual time between each participant in the group.' (Coach)

Building a good quality relationship in this context was essential and included making sure that everyone was involved in the session and that the coach always made personal contact with everyone during the session:

So, if then, they're all playing a game...and there's people on the bench, getting them involved as well. Having a certain type of banter with them. Because if you just walk around and don't say anything to them, they're just going to think, oh I [the coach] can't be bothered to do this, you've got to be able to bounce off them and get them involved ... so having those little conversations, when you can obviously!' (Coach)

An additional unexpected challenge for one LTO was dealing with offensive social media posts as a result of celebrating the achievements of the girls and young women at one of their projects publicised on national and regional media outlets. This had attracted far right, offensive comments on social media which they had found very hurtful. This had led to a more informed discussion at the project about the advantages and disadvantages of publicity for their achievements and for strategies for dealing with offensive posts in the future.

3.6 BENEFITS OF SPORT FOR WORKING WITH VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Referral agencies and LTOs identified similar benefits for vulnerable girls and young women taking part in sport.

This included:

- Enjoyment whilst taking part in sport, having a laugh and forgetting about stress
- Improved health and well-being – looking good and feeling good

- Supporting their mental health - helping them to control their emotions
- Providing a positive focus and giving them something of their own, not anything to do with their boyfriends, not being a victim
- Providing a safe space, a second home
- Building trust is easier if they take part voluntarily and the interventions are not run by statutory welfare agencies
- Building confidence
- Improved self esteem
- Building new friendships at the projects and in the community, preventing them from being isolated
- Positive female role models
- Able to work on areas of personal development through sport without realising
- Opportunities to learn, achieve and receive affirmation
- Able to make and see small positive changes, taking tiny steps
- Helping to develop their identity as an individual, a sense of self
- Receiving positive support e.g. mentoring
- Thinking about the future e.g. a career, goals, returning to education/ PRU

3.7 LIMITATIONS OF SPORT FOR WORKING WITH VULNERABLE GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Referral agencies and LTOs recognised that sport was not able to do everything and that it needed to be part of a holistic package. It was emphasised that it was important to know what the role of the LTO was and to recognise that the project was not always able to address issues. As an example, the need to access external support, when appropriate, such as counselling for the girls and young women was viewed as essential rather than being provided by the LTO. It was also emphasised that not all girls and young women liked sport and

that it wasn't for everyone and other interventions such as arts and music might be a better intervention. Nevertheless, a major limitation was not the nature of sport as an intervention but the lack of funding and in particular, the short-term nature of funding of sport interventions.

'You're expected to do a level of work in such a short period of time, it's not really realistic, you need to get to know and build that bond with somebody before they decide to disclose the information with you, you know. So you can't be around someone for two months and you see them once a week and expect them to be telling you their life story, it's not going to work.' (Project F, Manager)

This was even more problematic for LTOs working with very vulnerable girls and young women who often needed to engage with them on an individual basis and to develop the relationship before they were ready to take part in a sport intervention. As this could take several weeks, LTOs were sometimes only able to offer a limited number of weeks for a sports intervention. As many of these girls

and young women had complex needs, LTOs were also not always able to provide the longer-term support that was required by vulnerable girls and young women or achieve the outcomes that were needed.

'When funders say, oh you know we're giving you eight weeks' worth of money, you're like, well ... yeah, I'll just have to ... for eight weeks' worth of funding, I will just literally have to go to the usual suspects that are already attending all my other sports stuff then. If it's a numbers game for you, which it inherently is, that's what you're going to have to deal with. But actually if you give me three years' of funding to really get working with these groups, I can make a real difference.' (Project A, Director)

Some LTOs identified that it was increasingly difficult to find funding for their work and that this had the potential to put their existing projects at risk.

'I should probably talk about the under resourcing of finances available. Yeah, it's difficult. It's so difficult.... You know, our support to females, the mentoring, engagement, so many different things. Like it doesn't even scratch the surface of the

amount of resources that's required behind it. The biggest challenge is finding the funding....if we can't secure something next year, the girls'

activity does not exist. Just me being honest with you, does not exist.' (Project E, Manager)



4. CONCLUSION

This research study was designed to explore the involvement of vulnerable girls and young women in community sport interventions as a form of prevention, early intervention and diversion in the context of violence reduction. The findings highlighted the need for a gender-sensitive approach to community sport interventions whether they were offering mixed gender or female-only provision. This research also suggested that LTOs needed to have a broader view of safeguarding which included considerations about the vulnerabilities experienced by girls and young women in both policy and practice. The findings identified a wide range of considerations for designing and delivering community sport interventions specifically for vulnerable girls and young women which needed to be embedded into funding policies to ensure that the appropriate level of resources was available to LTOs. The findings also confirmed the need for the

development of a specialist training programme for LTOs which would have been particularly beneficial for delivery staff including coaches. The recruitment of vulnerable girls and young women to community sports interventions needed to address the issue of 'invisibility' which emerged as a significant problem. This work also required closer collaboration with both referral agencies and statutory welfare agencies to be able to meet the needs of vulnerable girls and young women more effectively. Although the research study did identify a number of limitations to the use of community sport interventions, the overriding view of both the referral agencies and LTOs was that community sport interventions were able to offer vulnerable girls and young women positive opportunities with a wide range of benefits and for those who had experienced multiple vulnerabilities, sport was well-suited as a tool for empowerment and moving forward for the future.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND FUNDERS

1. Longer term funding of at least three years is needed for sports interventions working with vulnerable girls and young women including for engagement work both at and outside sessions and to support work with referral agencies as part of a holistic package.
2. Alongside longer term funding the adoption of a sliding scale for funding programmes which recognises that the more vulnerable the girls or young women, the more resource and time is needed for interventions is needed.
3. Funders should include specific funding requirements around the monitoring of the involvement of girls and young women in targeted community sport interventions which identifies the level of need based on their vulnerabilities as well as their cultural needs in order to address their 'invisibility' and 'double invisibility' of these participants.
4. Refinement of the referral process for vulnerable girls and young women is needed to increase the number of referrals and to provide appropriate levels of information to LTOs to ensure that they can provide effective support.
5. Additional research is required in order to build on the limited evidence base in order to identify the impact of well-designed sports interventions for working with vulnerable girls and young women and to identify which types of sports interventions are most effective.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

1. Closer collaboration with referral agencies is needed to ensure that appropriate sports interventions are available as referral opportunities for vulnerable girls and young women.
2. Responding to the concerns of referral agencies about the design of sports interventions is needed including an improved understanding of the vulnerabilities experienced by girls and young women, less reliance on sessional sports coaches and better training around safeguarding concerns for the planning and delivery of sports interventions in this context.
3. Ensuring that the planning and delivery of sports interventions for vulnerable girls and young women is gender-sensitive and based on their needs.
4. Developing mechanisms for LTOs to enable their delivery staff to access external support services for the vulnerable girls and young women that they are working with.
5. Provision of specialist training for male workers working with vulnerable girls and young women
6. Provision of a programme of specialist training for LTOs around the development and delivery of sports interventions for vulnerable girls and young women in the context of both mixed gender and female-only provision.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

ORGANISATION	THE INTERVIEWEES	INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESEARCH STUDY
Referral Agency A	Manager	Phone interview
Referral agency B	Manager	Phone interview
Project A	Director	Focus Groups 1 and 2
	Manager	Phone interview
Project B	Manager	Phone interview
		Focus group 2
Project C	Officer	Phone Interview
		Focus Group 1
Project D	Manager	Phone interview and Focus Group 2
	Coach	Phone interview and Focus Group 1 and 2
Project E	Manager	Phone interview
		Focus Group 2
Project F	Director	Phone interview and Focus Group 1
	Manager	Phone interview and Focus Group 1 and 2
Project G	Officer	Phone Interview
		Focus Group 1 and 2
Project H	Director	Phone Interview



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