Wilton Park

مؤسسة قطر
Qatar Foundation

Report: Sport for development in the Global South: advancing female empowerment, inclusion, and accessibility

14 – 16 September 2026

In partnership with

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Monday 14 – Wednesday 16 September 2026

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Summary

"Participation brings girls into sport, but pathways keep them in it."

Despite compelling evidence that participation in sport improves confidence, mobility, leadership capacity, educational outcomes, employability and wellbeing, women and girls still face systemic barriers that limited their ability to engage fully and safely in sporting environments. These challenges are intensified for those from marginalised groups, including women and girls with disabilities, who encountered additional obstacles to access, visibility, and opportunity.

The dialogue co-convened and co-hosted with Qatar Foundation, explored how enabling access to sport for women and girls across the Global South has the opportunity to strengthen social and economic development.

This dialogue brought together policymakers, leading figures from the realm of sports, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational development banks, private investment firms, philanthropies, and development experts to identify practical strategies to expand access, address social and structural barriers and create enabling environments for participation and leadership. By doing so, the event explored how inclusive sport contributes to wider development outcomes – from improved learning and health to strengthened human capital and community cohesion.

The dialogue aimed to catalyse collaboration, generate practical insights and shape the global policy agenda on inclusive sport for development.

For sport to fulfil its potential in advancing female empowerment, inclusion and accessibility across the Global South, the following points were advanced during the dialogue:

- access to sport must be safe — safe not in participation alone, but also in the preconditions to maximise potential for wider benefit;
- participation is only a starting point: pathways, not one-off access, are what keep girls and women in sport and allow them to progress into coaching, leadership, policy and other roles;
- representation must move beyond visibility to genuine decision-making power — who makes decisions, holds budgets and sets priorities matters more than who is simply seen; visibility is a starting point;
- structural and governance-level change is needed within sport institutions themselves — including concrete mechanisms, such as additional votes or funding support tied to female representation, rather than relying on visibility or informal change alone;
- local knowledge, local leadership and context-specific design are essential — models cannot simply be transplanted between regions or communities without local considerations;
- traditional and cultural sporting heritage should be treated as an asset in its own right, not overlooked in favour of imported versions;
- educating and equipping the next generation to support the wider sport ecosystem — as coaches, officials, administrators and advocates, not only as athletes — is essential to sustaining progress;
- investment in women and girls in sport must be early, sustained, and tied to long-term outcomes, not measured by medals or single moments of visibility;
- financing needs to diversify beyond grant dependency, drawing in private, philanthropic, diaspora and blended sources, while remaining accountable and evidence-based;
- disability inclusion in sport requires a shift from a charity mindset to a rights-based approach, recognising the inherent value of people with disabilities being present at the table;

- women and girls across the Global South are already leading, often with limited resources or recognition — the task is to recognise, resource and connect that leadership;
- good practice should be shared and adapted rather than continually reinvented – through a genuine "network of networks" and cross-sector coalition — recognising that the scale of this challenge is too large for any single actor;
- the macro impact of sport for development comes from the accumulation of many minor, micro-level actions — individually, and through localised networks.
- There is an opportunity to make small changes that may not seem significant at the time, but can carry a large cumulative impact over a longer, even generational, timeframe; this must be paired with urgency, since much of this work is needed now, even as some of the deeper cultural shifts involved may take a generation, or longer, to fully materialise.

"Sport is a catalyst for the building of confidence, inclusion, social mobility, leadership, and opportunity, and this is particularly true for women and girls in the Global South."

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Introduction

1. Wilton Park, in partnership with Qatar Foundation, convened a dialogue on Sport for development in the Global South: advancing female empowerment, inclusion, and accessibility, bringing together policymakers, leading figures from the world of sport, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, and development experts.
2. The individual sessions addressed: setting the scene on why women's participation in sport matters for development outcomes; breaking systemic barriers through representation, empowerment and diplomacy; moving from commitments to action; sport for development in the Global South and identifying opportunities to overcome barriers to access; traditional sport, heritage and identity; investing in women and girls through sport; and advancing inclusion and accessibility in sport, from disability rights to practical action — closing with a session on pathways for action and commitments that outlive the convening.
3. This dialogue created an active network between participants, described by one participant as a "squad," providing space for continued cooperation and collaboration beyond the dialogue itself, and opening the door for further discussion and coalition-building across the sector.
4. The dialogue concluded with a call to action for participants to join a global cross-sectoral coalition dedicated to promote, advocate, support and amplify the role of sport for development, with a particular focus on the inclusion of women and girls in sport.

The power of women in sport for development outcomes

"How can we create conditions around girls where sport can become a pathway to lead into education, participation and leadership positions? This is the real question."

5. Participants recognised the potential of sport to change people's lives — developing leaders and opening doors for people who may not otherwise have had the opportunity. However, sport does not automatically invite change: it should not be treated as providing "black box" solution. To succeed, sport for development initiatives must be intentional and who designs a programme, and who decides its content, matters.

6 Experience from a cricket programme in Cameroon offered two reflections. First, that arriving with a sport is not enough without understanding community context — parental attitudes and local barriers for example, can shape whether a programme can be effective. Second, the need to 'zoom out' to understand the roader societal outcomes: the real question is not only the safety of girls in a programme, but whether her participation can unlock other opportunities. Both point to the same conclusion — understanding local context requires trusting local knowledge, listening to context and putting local people in the lead.

7 Experience from Jamaica illustrated sport as a route out of economic hardship and poor infrastructure. Training can lead to a scholarship, but a lack of resources can also create unsafe situations, particularly for girls, making safe sport a central concern.

- Athletes often receive no nutritional or other support, and the wider ecosystem around them — agents, coaches — is often poorly trained, so that by the time an athlete reaches the podium, the hardest part of the journey is already behind her. Investment should therefore not be measured only in medals, but in an athlete's trajectory afterwards, whether in sport, education or community leadership.
- Good practice: Pocket Rocket Foundation: A foundation, inspired by a tangible investment made in one speaker's own education, covering education and equipment, now supports children who are largely not Olympians but active community leaders, offering evidence that tangible investment in women and girls "makes sense."

8 Investing early is critical, since pathways cannot be created retrospectively. Women and girls must be involved in decisions made about them from the outset. Visibility matters, including for athletes returning to competition after childbirth, since seeing women in these positions makes it believable for others.

9 Meaningful participation goes beyond simply taking part: it means being a beneficiary and being involved across every angle of a programme. Citing the $2.3 trillion global sports economy discussed at the World Economic Forum, the questions were raised: what is being done with this money, where it goes, and whether it gives local communities genuine agency.

10 Participation can be motivated by many things, and often that joy alone is a legitimate reason for a girl to take part, but starting points may differ. Local context includes understanding what participation looks like. Can girls play safely? Are the facilities safe? Can she return home safely? Are there female coaches? Will her family accept?

11 The central question is therefore not whether a girl played, **but what changed** because she participated. This holds particularly during adolescence, a period of transition in which sport can be a strong positive influence, including in refugee contexts.

12 A shortage of appropriate infrastructure and trained coaches as a persistent barrier. Coaches do not need to be former athletes — teachers were highlighted by participants as an underused resource.

- Good practice: Qatar Foundation's flagship program, Creating Pathways, provides a clear progression route for girls to move from their first experience of sport into structured development and high-performance competition. The program combines talent identification, coaching, and development opportunities with strong connections to the wider sporting system, creating clear and sustainable pathways for girls to remain engaged, develop their skills and advance their sporting ambitions.

13 The discussion widened to the broader ecosystem around women's sport, questioning how many photographers, videographers, journalists and contract negotiators working in this space are women.

- Good practice: FIVB Volleyball Foundation project: Photographers were expected to visit a public school, but none were available from the school or community. At this event, no female photographers were initially proposed, but a member of the project community was asked to take the pictures herself, with good results — illustrating that a safe sport environment can open doors for girls in roles beyond athlete, without needing external expertise/cost brought in.

14 Financial sustainability was raised as a recurring concern: sport – for development works best, and lasts longest, when designed with the discipline of a sustainable business model rather than relying solely on external funding.

15 Public-private partnerships-collaboration between governments and the private sector is key to unlocking sustained investment in women's sport combining public reach with private resources and grounded in local needs.

- Good practice: Work by the Yunus Centre pointed to three critical windows across an athlete's life course where investment matters most: early adolescence (10–14), when participation and confidence begin to fall; the transition from school to livelihood, where sport can bridge into employment; and the transition out of competitive sport, where female athletes often reach the end of their careers with discipline but little network or income to build a second livelihood. Yunus Sports Hub's Athlete Business Accelerator is working to close this gap.

"Access without safety is not access at all. It simply shifts the risk onto the girls we are trying to reach."

16 A girl who plays sport is more likely to stay in school and to develop confidence carrying into the classroom, family, workplace and community. Women globally remain around five percentage points less active than men, and the WHO finds 85% of adolescent girls do not meet global activity guidelines, compared with 78% of boys.[1] UNESCO estimates 49% of girls drop out of sport during adolescence — six times the rate for boys — precisely the age at which early marriage, domestic labour and unsafe journeys to school also begin pulling girls out of education. Yet the sector remains better at telling compelling individual stories than at providing funders with rigorous, comparable data on outcomes and cost.

17 Duty of care goes beyond safety measures and policies. It is about creating a culture of safety, where women feel protected, respected, and able to speak up. This means embedding care into everyday practice, leadership and behaviour, so that safety is lived rather than a tick box exercise.

18 Local and cultural context was raised repeatedly as decisive: what works in one region can differ significantly from another, and models cannot simply be transplanted between contexts.

- Good practice: In Kenya, building the necessary sporting ecosystem required leadership expertise, and it was considered important that this role be filled by a woman, given the lack of historical female leadership and need for safeguarding women in the sector.

[1] World Health Organization, "85% of Adolescent Girls Don't Do Enough Physical Activity: New WHO Study Calls for Action," March 4, 2022.

- Good practice: A rugby programme in Fiji uses the country's national sport to prevent negative behaviours among youth, and challenge gender stereotypes through a 50/50 gender parity policy to normalise women in sport leadership roles.

19 Local context is essential to defining outcomes and correctly interpreting data on monitoring, evaluation and learning. The need to better articulate the broader societal impact of sport through more comprehensive metrics and storytelling was highlighted by participants as essential.

20 The most influential figures in an athlete's development are often not the athletes themselves but those who work with them, such as coaches, and the most consequential moments come early, before an athlete reaches their peak. This points toward investing and focusing effort at grassroots level, rather than concentrating resources at the elite end.

"I don't want the next generation of girls simply to see women succeeding in sport, I want them to grow up expecting women to be the people making decisions about sport, and I want them to see themselves in those roles."

Breaking systemic barriers

21 Women may be increasingly visible in sport, but visibility is not the same as agency or power. Real decisions are often made by those who have influence over institutions, money, rules, media rights and sponsorships — spaces too often beyond the reach of women in sport.

- Good practice: Kenya — simply changing the number of women on the field was not enough; the structure of governance itself needed to change. A target was set for women's representation across sport and its institutions, with transparent appointment processes, including elections managed by an independent electoral commission to ensure fair play. Sustainability was supported by a mentorship policy built on structures that already existed, and leadership camps for young female athletes brought in role models — including from outside the sport world — to speak on self-esteem and financial literacy, partly in response to cases of women athletes being harmed by their partners.

22 While attention rightly focuses on the Global South in this discussion, participants noted that underrepresentation of women in decision-making is an issue that cuts across regions — progress is more likely when all regions work together, since sport is a global common good. On why excellence on the field rarely translates into leadership off it: it was noted that women athletes are not automatically trusted to lead.

23 In many sport environments, female athletes, particularly women of different race, religion or cultural background, may still find themselves as the “only ones who look like them”. How do we go from the kid who see themselves represented, the one who was told she was not good enough, to winning an Olympic Medal?

24 Representation needs to move beyond participation: women need to be represented as leaders at federation level, as investors and as policymakers, so that a girl can see herself as a coach or decision-maker, not only as an athlete. This requires intentional pathways — access to networks, mentorship and traineeships — since athletes already develop many of the qualities aligned with leadership, but a clear bridge rarely exists.

"Participation brings girls into sport, but pathways keep them in it."

25 Barriers exist within sport culture itself, not only in wider society — in the gaps between visibility and influence, and between authority on and off the field. This impacts athletes, journalists, referees, coaches and officials alike. Programme design varies in response: some give no consideration to gender at all, others apply a gender-neutral approach that treats everyone the same, and fewer take a genuinely gender-responsive approach that adapts to need — raising the question of what a gender-transformative approach, capable of challenging the system itself, would look like. Responsibility for that transformation sits across governments, funders, commercial partners and broadcasters as much as sport institutions, requiring shared vision and meaningful consultation with those affected.

26 This matters particularly for the Global South, where discussion often focuses on barriers rather than the leadership women already exercise there, frequently with little recognition or resource. The future of women's sport should be designed and led by communities, not designed for them. This momentum is not only about transforming sport for women and girls, but for everyone — evidence elsewhere shows that when women hold positions of power, many systemic issues that also harm boys and men are addressed.

- Good practice: World Rowing has achieved close to equal representation of men and women on the executive committee, councils and commission chairs — not through quotas, but by recognising and empowering women already prepared for these roles. The sport has had 29 consecutive years of female presidency. Structural mechanisms include additional support for federations that bring more than one woman to Congress, and an additional vote granted to active members who, over a four-year cycle, ensure at least 25 per cent of the crews they send are of the opposite gender.
- Good practice: Inclusion was front and centre during the FIFA World Cup 2022 games in Qatar. Stadiums and fan zones were equipped with sensory rooms, wheelchair accessible pathways and families with special needs received targeted services through specialized access passes. Women were visible from the management of the event to the news anchors, photographers, and volunteers, challenging stereotypes of Arab women in sport.

27 This session highlighted two important points: first, the need for rigorous enforcement of equity practices, and secondly, the role sport plays in embodying hope and possibility. The challenge raised was how a "network of networks" could be built to enhance that opportunity.

28 Participants further discussed women's sport as a form of diplomacy, considering what comes after a breakthrough moment – whether there is a strategy for long-term sustainability, and what genuine follow-through looks like over time, rather than treating a moment of visibility as an endpoint. This included questioning whether partners are engaging in a genuine two-way relationship with local communities and grassroots organisations or are primarily interested in broadcasting a moment.

29 In considering genuine investment from gender-washing or sponsorship dressed as partnership: participants discussed the alignment of values, and the importance of looking at whether frameworks and policies are actually implemented, rather than existing only as a standalone policy for show. A double standard was also noted in what is expected of women's sport diplomacy compared with its male counterpart.

30 For Global South female athletes, diplomacy should prioritise safety and wellbeing. Noting here that infrastructure and cultures are critical to enforcing safeguarding — both physical and social. Since visibility is not always possible for some athletes, given safety concerns or country context, the idea of ambassadors representing those who cannot be visible themselves was raised, alongside mentorship, education, and breaking generational cycles. What should not be on that agenda: a monolithic identity imposed on Global South athletes or communities, and one-off payments treated as meaningful engagement. Questions were also raised about who holds decision-making power, and what state a community or partnership is left in once external partners leave.

- Good practice: The Basketball Without Borders programme focuses on making talent identification more systematic, rather than leaving it to chance or 'mistakes', and therefore allows for more support throughout the process for those who do not achieve elite player status.
- Good practice: BAL Basketball Africa League is run explicitly as a business over a charity, operates in partnership with pan-continental governments since its launch in 2019 while building a pathway from grassroots to elite level.
- Investing in infrastructure was described as necessary to scale, and investing in people as an investment in leadership and skills for young people: citing that 94% of women CEOs played sport growing up.[2]

31 Structural inequality between genders remains a constraint; for sport to drive positive change, the systems and governance around it need to change too.

- Good practice: Wahine Toa — a Māori programme for women in coaching and administration within governance structures, with five reports produced to date. Recognised by the New Zealand government and New Zealand Olympic Committee, gifting places for 50 people to attend a week-long programme, with potential to be adapted to other regions through collaboration.

"The system should carry talent forward, rather than waiting for exceptional individuals to carry the system."

[2] EY and espnW, *Where Will You Find Your Next Leader?* (EY, 2016).

Identifying opportunities

32 In societies affected by conflict and exclusion, sport is not a luxury but a tool of inclusion, social cohesion and peace — particularly important for women and girls, who face additional obstacles including lack of access to resources, family/societal pressure, and risk of discrimination, harassment and violence. Sport can help rebuild what conflict damages: trust, a sense of belonging, and social cohesion.

33 The African Union recognises this potential by treating sport as a complementary tool for the inclusion, security and empowerment of women and girls — through safe spaces and more women coaches, and by involving boys and men in shifting the perceptions that shape women's and girls' participation. Programmes should not be copied wholesale but adapted to the context: a design made for a stable urban setting cannot simply be applied to a rural or displaced community; recommendations included integrating sport into education and social policy, investing in local organisations, and building partnerships across government, the private sector and institutions.

- Good practice: A workshop held by Qatar Foundation in Doha led to a proposal from MISAHEL to target selected fragile communities and support women to build safe spaces there, starting small, evaluating impact, and scaling once effectiveness is proven.

34 Women play a foundational role in Caribbean sporting culture. The global challenge is less the lack of conversation on the role women play than a lack of commitment and follow-through.

- Good practice: Guyana has developed a sports academy with formal criteria distinguishing "core" from "non-core" sports — to qualify as a core sport, a sport must include a girls' nursery programme. Core sports receive dedicated budget allocation covering facilities, tournaments, and travel costs, with girls placed at the centre of the sport's development strategy. This was designed to be resilient to political change: a change of government would mean disappointing everyone invested in the policy — making it harder to unwind. Budgetary integration behind such commitments is essential, since government investment aimed at building a movement needs measurable outcomes — a baseline, identified milestones, and continuous assessment — and an open door is not enough on its own; pathways need to exist for women and girls to actually go through it.

35 Participants discussed the need to promote the role of sport in economic development and supporting livelihoods among policymakers to ensure its inclusion among national economic plans, infrastructure investment and more.

- Good practice: When Basketball Africa League started operations, very few countries had basketball facilities. Since then, the league has created 40,000+ jobs, contributed millions in value-add GDP and there are more courts throughout African countries.

Financing

36 Financing was explored further, including the Qatar Fund for Development's (QFFD) role across most of the SDGs, using sport and education as advocacy tools, with a focus on life skills, mental health, education, and economic empowerment, particularly for women.

- Good practice: QFFD runs several programs including Zaatari refugee camp (located in Jordan), alongside programmes in Colombia and Mexico focusing on sport as a tool to promote education, demonstrating the valuable role of sport in humanitarian development and peacebuilding.

37 A persisting financing gap was identified as needing to be bridged, alongside the importance of integrating sport goals with other development goals. Genuine investor appetite for gender equity investment was questioned, along with prospective returns for investors.

38 ESG investment was discussed, along with how branding depends on the kind of investment an organisation is trying to attract.

- Good practice: Work helping the Yunus Centre in Bangladesh move toward greater financial self-sufficiency, on the basis that governments will not always deliver what people want to see, so this responsibility should not rest with government alone.

39 Capital exists across the African continent that could be unlocked; the financial instruments needed to channel investment are often lacking. Building the right instrument or structure allows funding to be tracked both globally and locally — illustrated by the process of investing in and eventually selling a franchise, which opened possibilities, including from external and African investors, that would not previously have seemed possible.

40 Feedback from group discussion covered accountability (need for checks and balances) and the use of intermediary vehicles — such as special purpose vehicles (SPVs) — to channel funding to the grassroots, including common set-up principles, scalability, and the need for a shared culture of good practice. Leveraging social outcomes for private sector investment and sustainable funding solutions are key.

- Good practice: The Yunus Sport Centre introduced the concept of social business as part of procurement and financing modalities for Paris 2024, which extended into Milan-Cortina. This form of impact-led sustainable procurement ensured outcomes that outlive the events.

41 Innovative financing approaches discussed included tapping into diaspora funding and public-private partnerships, alongside balancing philanthropic funding with commercialisation. Funding needs to be long-term, with an emphasis on diversifying investment sources — with an opportunity at the micro-funding level to shift the narrative from giving to investing.

Traditional sport, heritage and identity

42 Participants discussed the World Nomad Games (Kyrgyzstan) as an example of traditional sport showcase, which showcase culture and heritage that is thousands of years old, before the sport constructs of today. Several traditional sports were highlighted including archery, falconry (in Qatar), swimming, fencing, horse riding and more, and participants reflected on how they reinforce tradition, and strong cultural values.

43 New Zealand's haka was highlighted as an example of how tradition was adapted to include women in a traditionally male-dominated sport.

44 Character-building through traditional sport was raised in relation to youth engaging with their history and elders, connecting with their roots, and using sport to showcase identity — with traditional sport seen as a potential anchor for cultural continuity, particularly given the pace of digitalisation. Traditional and non-Western games were discussed in relation to how they differ from formats practised elsewhere, prompting reflection on what needs to be preserved.

45 The value of time in considering heritage was also raised comparing, decades, centuries, and millennia.

46 The role of government and intentional programs to promote uptake of traditional sport in youth was raised, along with establishing clear pathways for economic livelihoods through sport.

Advancing inclusion and accessibility

47 The disability rights movement was described as lagging behind other social movements, with the population affected becoming even more marginalised where disability intersects with gender. A recurring challenge is the charity mindset around disability and inclusion – framing people as giver and receiver, powerful and powerless – which obscures the inherent value of a person with a disability being present at the table.

- Good practice: IPC programme in Malawi. Stigma and discrimination linked to disability, including social misconceptions with curses, kept people in their homes. A systemic response combined three strands: making disability visible through public para-sport viewing parties; using para-sport lessons as an entry point into wider education, training teachers who also became coaches; and creating a pathway through national para-games, with around 100 athletes participating. This drove wider systemic change, including a first national disability act, a requirement for councils to integrate para-sport, the National Paralympic Committee's first official partner, and stronger employment outcomes for people with disabilities.
- Good practice: Trinidad and Tobago. A collaboration between a development bank, the IPC and other partners combined top-down and bottom-up approaches to public policy analysis, identifying reforms and providing government with a roadmap to reduce barriers, alongside technical support brought directly to communities.

48 Sports facilities are also a target for development banks considering infrastructure investment, underlining the need to keep identifying and addressing further barriers.

- Good practice: The State of Qatar has taken an approach of Sports for All; advisory councils were established with members of the community with different forms of disabilities to ensure they were part of the development and creation process during the build out for the FIFA World Cup 2022 Games. The advisory councils continue to meet and discuss sport programming even post the games. Qatar Foundation hosts an Ability Friendly program, which supports children with disabilities by providing dedicated facilities, trained coaches, and fit for purpose sport lessons, so that all kids of all abilities can play safely and with dignity. The Ability Friendly program has trained coaches throughout the country and beyond through its train the trainer program.

49 Not all disability is visible, and around 300 million people around the world live with an intellectual disability. The statistics around the access and health outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities provides a stark reality.

- Good practice: For girls and women with intellectual and developmental disabilities, finding sports role models in mainstream media can be incredibly difficult. Special Olympics creates a highly visible global platform that proves to young girls what is possible. The organization systematically targets gender parity across functions and innovated through a unified program where athletes with intellectual disabilities are paired with those without under the same team.

50 Sport can provide access and opportunity to marginalized and vulnerable populations and can serve as a tool to provide identity and belonging. In countries where street children may not have government-issued IDs, they become excluded for health, education and government services at large, including protection from violence, and sport programming can provide a tool to elevate these children out of poverty.

- Good practice: The Street Child World Cup which takes places alongside major sporting events, has promoted access and government support to children through their participation in sporting games. Their active participation has led to inclusion in government systems for them and their families, providing opportunity and access to economic livelihoods, education, health, and more.

Building a global coalition for action

51 Participants reflected on the power of working across different sectors, and on the real possibility of shifting the wider conversation from giving to investing — noting that this shift will require a strong academic and evidence base. There is an opportunity for this cross-sector community of practice to build a shared evidence base, and to keep learning collectively about what to measure, and why.

52 On building coalition: participants discussed how to use the collective power of those in the room, while leaving space for those who want to be part of change but are not present — citing Togo as an example, where the country's leadership was invited to ask what more could be done. Ways to help included scaling and sharing resources, advocating together, and creating a platform to learn from and replicate success stories from across the sector.

53 On Global South/Global North financing dynamics: most current investment still originates in the Global North. Opportunities raised included the potential of disruptive technology and high mobile phone penetration in Global South nations to enable new models of financial sustainability; the significant, often underexamined, online audiences and monetisation around lesser-known sports; and the potential to activate mature diaspora communities in financing sport differently.

54 Moving the needle requires shifting perceptions from “giving” to sport for development to “investment” in sport for development – a sustained investment in the systems, structures and pathways for women and girls early, before the Olympic Medals are won.

55 Despite significant progress, gains remain fragile and more work is needed — including helping the current generation of young athletes connect with one another globally to build networks for the future.

56 Closing reflections centred on two points: 1. the macro impact of many minor, micro-level actions — individually, and through personal networks, small changes can carry significant cumulative impact over a generational timeframe, and 2. paired with urgency, since much of this work is needed now, even as some of the deeper cultural shifts involved may take a generation, or longer, to fully materialise.

57 Final reflections stressed the importance of committing to a course of action and building a community of practice spanning grassroots and leadership levels, recognising the scale of the challenge is too large for any single actor.

- Good practice: A Qatar Foundation, and Basketball Africa League collaboration, facilitated by Qatar Sports Investment, will see two newly refurbished basketball courts working with local communities in Senegal and Nigeria for 2026, with two more courts opened in 2027 and 2028. It is one of a number of ongoing projects, which can be replicated and scaled.

"It only takes one voice to open the door."

Conclusion

58 In order to advance female empowerment, inclusion and accessibility through sport, in the course of the dialogue, participants recognised and the following as meaningful next steps. The need to:

- embed safe access as a precondition for any sport for development programming, addressing practical safety needs — coaching, transport, lighting, facilities — alongside broader participation goals;
- build deliberate pathways from participation into coaching, officiating, leadership, policymaking and other roles, so that girls entering sport can see a future for themselves in it beyond playing;
- pursue structural and governance reform within sporting institutions themselves, including targets, transparent appointment processes, and accountability mechanisms, rather than relying on visibility or informal change alone;
- ground programme design in local knowledge and local leadership, resisting the transplantation of models across different regions or contexts without adaptation;
- diversify and sustain financing beyond the grant cycle, through blended, catalytic, diaspora and private investment, underpinned by rigorous, comparable evidence linking sport participation to development outcomes;
- adopt a rights-based approach to disability inclusion in sport, moving away from a charity mindset toward recognising the inherent value and agency of people with disabilities;

- recognise and resource the leadership already exercised by women across the Global South, connecting it to institutions, networks and decision-making structures rather than treating empowerment as something introduced from outside;
- continue building a cross-sector, cross-regional community of practice and coalition, given that the scale of the challenge is too large for any single actor, organisation or country to address alone.

59 Participants also valued the dialogue itself as a starting point for continued cooperation, using the occasion to begin building partnerships and to stay in contact beyond the meeting.

"We cannot count on luck to be dominant – we need to create pathways."

Policy actions from Dialogue (recommendations)

60 From the above dialogue the following recommendations were arrived at.

- Develop a global coalition and / or network as a mechanism for sustained dialogue, knowledge exchange, and sharing of best practice.
- Participant and stakeholder wellbeing and safeguarding must be the highest priority in practice not just in principle.
- Source and share good practice in Sport for Development; and its role in achieving broader societal outcomes, grounded in local realities rather than Western/Northern conventions and organisation structures.
- Monitoring and evaluation must be appropriate to the subject matter. Overly burdensome processes and requirements not only weigh heavy on those on the ground but determine the nature of the projects themselves. Funding needs to take this into account sensitively.
- Underpinning adoption and practice of Sports Diplomacy strategy as an enabler for the above. Dedicated strategy facilitates deliberate intentional interventions and support on behalf of relevant stakeholders; and recognises when to support from a distance.

“There is so much opportunity for sport to shape the lives of women and girls now and into the future.”

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