

Girls and Football South Africa: Building Self-Esteem and Empowering Young Women Through Sports

A woman is raped every 17 seconds in South Africa, according to estimates by Interpol, the international police organization. Through her program Girls and Football South Africa (SA), [Jos Dirkx](#) ^[1] believes that teaching girls to have strength over their own bodies will decrease rates of pregnancy and HIV, give them knowledge about prevention and how to get help if they need it, and help them avoid trouble plus give them confidence not to blame themselves if they do become victims of sexual assault.

Stigma and disbelief prevent many of the victims from reporting rapes. [Jos Dirkx](#) ^[1], the founder of Girls and Football South Africa (SA), believes that South African girls will continue to be plagued by sexual assault, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy as long as they lack support, accurate information, and confidence.



“Girls in South Africa are not given the luxury of feeling good about themselves,” Dirkx said. “I want to see these girls have someone tell them every day what they deserve in life, help them develop trust in themselves, and support them to understand that they can become whatever they want.”

Dirkx launched [Girls and Football SA](#) ^[2] in early 2010 to promote football (known as soccer in the United States) for girls and women, organize educational campaigns and workshops, and conduct outreach to the general public about the importance of girls and women in sport. Dirkx wants to change attitudes about girls and women in South Africa by empowering them through sport, providing them with role models, and creating an educational program that deals directly with the challenges that girls face around their health and sexuality.

Girls and Football SA
[2] was a winner of the
3rd HALF and
National Committee
for International
Cooperation and
Sustainable
Development Early
Entry Prize in the
Changing Lives
Through Football ^[3]
competition

Girls and Football SA's goal is for girls not only to play sports, but for girls to become empowered by learning to trust each other and be comfortable with their bodies. Dirkx believes that by building the girls' self-esteem, they will also have a platform to express themselves and learn that they have the right to make choices that are good for themselves.

Girls and women's sports are dramatically underdeveloped in South Africa, with formal programs for girls almost non-existent. Pretoria hosts a high-performance sports center where a select number of young girls receive a high-quality education and intense training in football, but other programs, similar to Girls and Football SA, are rare.

Girls typically have limited free time since they are expected to work in their homes. Many parents struggle with the concept of girls playing sports, misperceiving that sports are dangerous for girls' bodies.

Dirkx, a Dutch citizen, moved to South Africa in February 2010 to pursue a Master's degree in International Relations at Stellenbosch University. As the World Cup in South Africa's approached, Dirkx and her mother began discussing the importance not only the World Cup, but of sports in general.



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Dirkx had played sports her entire life, including football, tennis, swimming, and dance, and knew how transformational sports were for her. “I felt that it was important for South African girls to feel good about themselves through sport, just like I feel when I play sports,” she said.

“We began with a needs assessment of young girls in schools, giving them a chance to express what they wanted. And we found that many young women would come up to us asking when they were going to get the chance to play.”



Kaylin, one of the girls, wrote: "South Africa is a developing country and there are people struggling in rural areas. Football could help, because training can take you away from all the bad things outside."

Rachel, another girl working with Girls and Football SA, said: "There are challenges; there is competition. Every time I watch boys, I think, 'I can do that, I can do that,' you know? But people don't think that, they say girls are different than boys. Obviously they are, but we can do the same thing. We can do what they do."

"We are starting programs in three schools in August and September, and plan to create teams for 15 other schools," Dirkx said. "The Girls Action Foundation, and Sport and Society have been very helpful to support us to design programs to implement in the schools."

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"ETA, South Africa's largest exercise and training academy, is also our partner, and together with the University of Stellenbosch Girls' Football Team we will be conducting workshops catered towards girls' needs and girls' development."

The program includes an hour of drills, time for the girls to play against each other, a place for them to talk, and games and exercises to encourage trust. "This is an approach that is fairly basic for North America, but not common in South Africa," Dirkx said.

"Girls and women work so hard all the time, that giving girls the advantage of being girls and recognizing that it is important to let girls play, is crucial to getting girls to feel good about themselves."

Fran Hilton Smith, the manager of the South African National Women's Football team, adds, "If it hadn't been for football, I don't believe that many of the girls would have achieved the heights that they have achieved. They don't come from wealthy families -- they are from the townships or rural areas and they have no money."



"These girls have nothing. I think that a project like this one, Girls and Football SA, is really, for me, absolutely incredible. Girls and Football SA has already made a massive difference in the lives of young girls in this country."

While still early in its implementation, Girls and Football SA's goal of helping to promote self-esteem and confidence through football is already being realized. Jabulile, one girl who is benefiting from Dirkx's project, said, "Most people say soccer is a sport for men, but we are showing them that we can play the sport, and we can play better than boys."



The biggest challenge Dirkx faces is getting resources for girls' sports. Budgets for male athletes are larger, and female athletes are far less privileged. Women athletes describe their current state as receiving less money and media attention than men.

"Lots of South Africa women believe it is important to get equality for men and women on the field," Dirkx said. "This is challenging because in South Africa, sport is considered a male territory."

"At the end of the day, sport should be accessible for everyone. The girls we work with all say, 'I just want to play, the sooner this takes for girls the better'."

Website: <http://www.girlsandfootballsouthafrica.com/> [4]

Changemakers Taxonomy:

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Source URL: <https://www.changemakers.com/GirlsandFootballSouthAfrica>

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[1] <https://www.changemakers.com/user/111047>

[2] <http://www.changemakers.com/en-us/node/80609>

[3] <http://www.changemakers.com/football>

[4] <http://www.girlsandfootballsouthafrica.com/>

[5] <https://www.changemakers.com/browse/human-rights-peace/abuse-violence>

[6] <https://www.changemakers.com/browse/health-fitness/hiv/aids>

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