



# Levelling the Field II

LEARNING BRIEF  
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**Sports can engage hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, including drop-out learners, unemployed youth and adolescent boys and girls.”**

**– Amref Health Africa Malawi**

# About Levelling the Field II

Levelling the Field II was a £2.4 million programme which ran from 2021-2024 in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia. It was funded by Comic Relief and the Scottish Government.

The programme supported ten funded partners across the three countries to harness the power of sport to tackle social problems faced by the most marginalised women and girls.

Investments powered locally owned and run projects helping women and girls to develop life skills, build confidence, boost self-esteem and access their rights through sport. Each project supported them to make positive decisions about their lives and challenge inequality where they found it.

## The partners and projects we funded:

### Malawi

- Amref Health Africa Malawi – Dance 4 Change
- Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) with Centre for Youth Development and Transformation – Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity through Sports
- Link Education Malawi with United Purpose – Reaching Our Goals

### Rwanda

- Chance for Childhood with Empowering Children with Disabilities (EmCD) and MindLeaps – Natwe Turashoboye: Protection, Participation, Inclusion & Empowerment for Girls
- Shooting Touch with Paper Crown Rwanda (PCR) – Changing the Narrative: Sport for Gender Equity

### Zambia

- Circus Zambia – Nyamukhani na Kazi! Rise up Girls
- Grassroot Soccer Zambia (GRSZ) with Muchinga Corridors of Environmental Management & Health Care (MC) and Adolescent Reproductive Health Advocates (ARHA) – Equality for Adolescent Girls and Young Women through Sport
- MSI Zambia with Tackle – Football and Future Planning
- National Organisation for Women in Sports, Physical Activity and Recreation (NOWSPAR) with Women Win and Response Network (RN) – Ready to Earn
- The School Club Zambia (SCZ) with Play it Forward (PIF) – ‘Own your destiny’ Girls Football League of Sinazongwe

## The programme had two overarching aims:

### 1 Ensuring women and girls are safe, equal and respected

By promoting positive gender roles, building understanding of healthy relationships, challenging harmful stereotypes and amplifying women and girl-led advocacy.

### 2 Promoting women’s and girls’ decision-making power and inclusion

Through information, knowledge and access to services that help them make informed decisions about their future on everything from education to sexual and reproductive rights.

## About Sport for Change

Sport for Change is about much more than the physical benefits of being active. This approach intentionally harnesses the power of sport to tackle social problems and inspire change.

Traditional support services can struggle to engage certain groups based on gender, ethnicity or age. Sport for Change addresses this by bringing together people of different cultures, genders, languages and social classes.

The projects funded by Levelling the Field II used sport’s popularity to intentionally create inclusive, safe spaces for people to build friendships and connections, engage in important conversations and access specialist support designed to meet their needs. It’s about using sport to build awareness, knowledge and solidarity through learning.

# What challenges do women and girls face in Malawi, Rwanda and Zambia?



## According to our funded partners, these are some of the main challenges women and girls in the communities Levelling the Field II supported face:

**Lack of access to education.** Girls often don't get to start school, or are forced to drop out, because of poverty, early pregnancy, marriage or child labour. In many places parents prioritise funding their sons' education while daughters have to stay home and help run the household.

**Gender-based violence and exploitation.** Women and girls can face violence and exploitation from men in their homes and communities. Patriarchal values mean this is often tolerated and upheld by the community. As a result, survivors don't know where to turn and can't always rely on the authorities to support or protect them.

**Poverty.** Women and girls are less able to make choices about their lives if they don't have their own money or decision making power. Being tied to traditional domestic tasks at a young age can stop them from going to school and training for work. Poverty can also force women into situations where they're vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence.

**Lack of political representation.** Women are sometimes stopped from participating in the political system. This means they can't vote for change and don't always have politicians who'll fight for their rights.

**The role of traditional values.** Many funded partners shared how traditional patriarchal attitudes to women were a barrier to change. Some reported a backlash from men and boys to the work they were trying to do. These attitudes were part of the reason women and girls couldn't access contraception, often married young and were prevented from playing sport.

**“Family planning is still a taboo subject in the villages and those that use the services are sometimes accused of being prostitutes or of being promiscuous.”**

**– The School Club Zambia (SCZ)**

**Lack of understanding about their rights.** Women and girls are sometimes unaware of their rights to work, education and decision-making about how, when and if they have sex or children. In many places men make those decisions for them.

**“I've understood that we should not allow people to make final decisions about our lives. My wish is that this training could reach other girls.”**

**– Shooting Touch**

# Levelling the Field II's impact

The programme helped support communities to address some of the challenges faced by women and girls. Through the dedicated Sport for Change approach women and girls were better able to negotiate safe relationships, make decisions, challenge stereotypes and stand up for their rights.

Meanwhile, working directly with schools, families and community leaders helped challenge and change negative attitudes towards women and girls. This included intentionally working with men and boys. In fact, men and boys often became powerful allies by sharing what they'd learned about gender with others in the community and standing up for women's and girls' rights.

## Levelling the Field II directly benefited

# 44,304 people

### including:

- **19,271** girls and young women
- **1,815** boys and young men
- **8,760** parents and guardians
- **1,259** health workers, coaches and staff
- **13,199** community members

## The programme led to\*:

- **1,499** young people getting vocational training and/or life skills training, and/or returning to school
- **5,526** young people accessing sexual and reproductive health services
- **7,303** young people demonstrating increased knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and/or girls' rights
- **6,988** young people reporting increased confidence/resilience
- **10,098** community members demonstrating positive changes in attitudes around girls' rights

\*Not all funded partners worked towards the same issue areas. Even if they did, these numbers may be incomplete, because a funded partner might have worked towards a goal but decided not to measure it.



The School Club Zambia (SCZ), Sinazongwe, Zambia, September 2023 by Loliwe Phiri



## **The School Club Zambia (SCZ) with Play it Forward (PIF) – ‘Own your destiny’ Girls Football League of Sinazongwe**

### **Project aim:**

Providing teenage girls who've dropped out of education in rural Zambia with the skills, financial resources and confidence to return to school and make informed life choices through a football-based curriculum.

### **Project impact:**

- 445 girls returned to school: a critical step in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting gender equality in local education
- 32% increase in literacy rates and 36% increase in numeracy rates among girls taking part
- 725 girls have more understanding of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly around HIV and AIDS

“Football has allowed us to transcend gender barriers in the home, school and workplace which are deep-rooted in the patriarchal society of the villages.” – Project staff

## **Chance for Childhood with Empowering Children with Disabilities (EmCD) and MindLeaps – Natwe Turashoboye: Protection, Participation, Inclusion & Empowerment for Girls (Rwanda)**

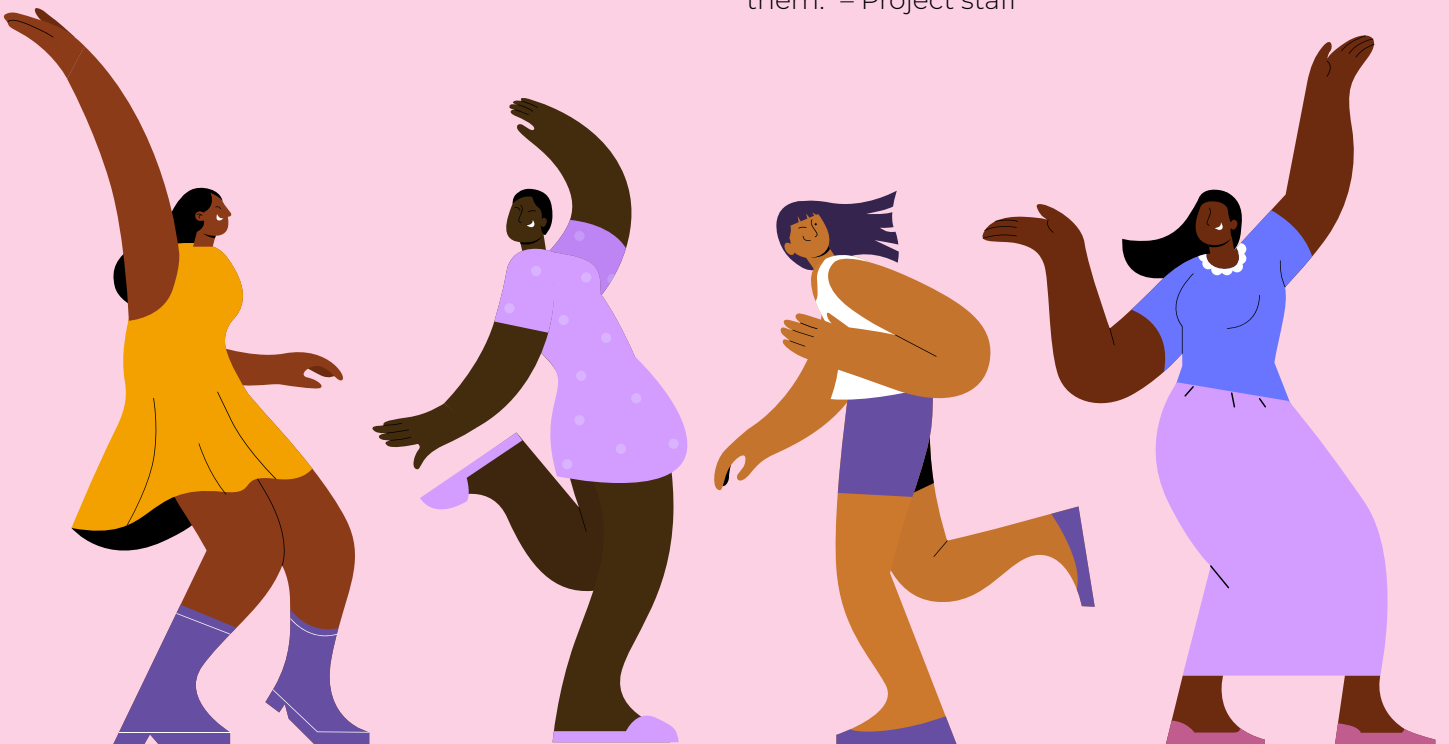
### **Project aim:**

Changing D/deaf\* girls' lives by boosting their confidence through dance, while increasing access to support using sign language training. The project also aimed to reduce stigma towards D/deaf children in the community and create an environment more supportive to their rights.

### **Project impact:**

- D/deaf girls felt empowered to nominate themselves for committees at village, sector and district level. Over ten nominees were involved in elections and six were voted in at different levels
- 3,100 people joined community events and learned about the rights of people with disabilities
- 1,851 dance sessions run aimed at boosting D/deaf girls' confidence and fighting stereotypes in their communities

“Children have been able to showcase their talents and capabilities, challenging misconceptions and demonstrating that disability does not define them.” – Project staff



\*The term 'D/deaf' refers both to the medical condition of hearing loss and the way that many people in the deaf community prefer to self-identify.





The School Club Zambia (SCZ), Sinazongwe, Zambia, September 2023 by Loliwe Phiri

## Amref Health Africa Malawi – Dance 4 Change

### Project aim:

Educating young people about their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the services available to them, through dance and movement.

### Project impact:

- 2,411 young people became 'Agents4Life', ready to support their peers in making informed and healthy decisions
- 61 Youth Friendly Health Service providers were trained to give high-quality sexual and reproductive health and rights services to young people
- 40 child marriages were ended in the local area

"The impact made in preventing child marriages and the recognition received through media coverage are important achievements for our organisation." – Project staff

## The benefits of Sport for Change

Funded partners shared how sport is a powerful tool for social change that can achieve results where other approaches can't.

Sport can help create a safe and inclusive space where teamwork brings people together to share their feelings, build friendships, ask questions and get support. People can also find out about health services, gender-based information and their rights alongside the activity.

Sports like football and netball are popular – which encourages people to take part. Many sports are often accessible, even in rural areas, since communities may already have facilities available. Also, encouraging women and girls to participate in sports like football, cycling and basketball, which are often male-dominated, helps fight stereotypes. This can boost their confidence to take their rightful place in the community.

# What we've learned

## 1 Good coaches and role models matter

Funded partners shared that the skills and talents of those working on the projects, such as coaches, were vital for success. A key skill was managing to include everyone in activities, no matter what their ability or background.

Coaches being open to learning was also important. This is especially the case when experiencing what might be new ideas around gender or safeguarding. Also, coaches learning from challenges, and adapting the curriculum to tackle them, made projects more effective.

Recruiting workers – including coaches and peer educators – from the communities they served was also important. One funded partner described peer educators as “anchors” for their programme. Seeing a peer in a position of leadership made women and girls more likely to take part and learn, building their confidence. Once trained, peer educators could train others, creating lasting change.

For example, Grassroot Soccer Zambia trained young women as ‘SKILLZ coaches’ who educated and empowered peers on gender and rights. This helped establish a long-term network of gender advocates to support positive behaviour.

Coaches, especially female coaches, also had the power to become role models – showing how women and girls could stand up for their rights and fight stereotypes. This was especially valuable in extremely rural areas, where living without media or the internet meant people didn't see female role models on screen.

**“The vulnerable girls and young women looked up to the peer educators as role models.”**

**– Levelling the Field II Learning Coordinator**



Circus Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia, September 2023 by Loliwe Phiri

## 2 Engage men and boys on women's and girls' rights

Funded partners shared how men have a lot of influence over women's and girls' lives – affecting everything from their access to education to exercising their rights. Sometimes men used this power to prevent women and girls from taking part in project activities.

Funded partners talked about how challenging these men on their attitudes could be a long and difficult process, but was essential for changing mindsets.

As one funded partner put it: “Boys are also agents of change for challenging the narrative.” Women-only spaces were a key part of many projects. But funded partners also saw the value of actively engaging men and boys in activities. These ranged from hosting workshops on gender with men and boys in attendance to recruiting boys as mentors and champions for girls' rights.

Men could then influence other men by sharing the lessons they'd learned. Some said that including men and boys made projects “acceptable” to local communities. Funded partners also spoke about how influencing boys' attitudes could help nurture a future generation of men who would fight for women's rights.

**“Today I learned that a husband who violates his wife is not a real man. Here in the village, we don't have opportunities to hear messages like this.”**

**– Shooting Touch with Paper Crown Rwanda (PCR) – Changing the Narrative: Sport for Gender Equity workshop attendee**

### 3 Facilitators need support

When doing work of this kind, project staff, volunteers and coaches could be hearing about, and even experiencing, traumatic situations involving violence and injustice. In response, one funded partner spoke about how “carers need care too.” Not taking care of frontline workers could lead to burnout, wellbeing problems and/or high turnover.

Providing this care could be achieved by offering training, counselling, supervision or safe spaces where they can process and share their experiences.

Another funded partner spoke about “focus[ing] on the coaches and what they need” so that they’re able to do their jobs properly and be effective community leaders. One partner launched a coaching clinic every three months, which helped coaches develop skills around topics like gender-based violence, which empowered them.

Funded partners also looked out for new opportunities for project staff and volunteers when programmes finished. This helped them progress in their work – as well as share expertise and learning with others.

**“The project had a team of committed and motivated staff who remained dedicated to the implementation of the project. Despite the challenges, they demonstrated resilience and adaptability.”**

**– Amref Health Africa Malawi**

### 4 When and where activities happen is important

Funded partners shared that when and where activities happen can be more important than what the activity is. So while the choice of sport mattered, ensuring women and girls could take part safely often mattered more.

This meant understanding what challenges women and girls face in their everyday lives. For example, the venue needs to be somewhere safe that they can easily get to on their own.

Timings must also work around women’s and girls’ education, jobs, childcare or family commitments. This means consulting with people early and often about these basics is essential for successful projects.

NOWSPAR spoke about how their sessions around gender were greatly appreciated by communities in remote rural locations – especially since communities in these locations weren’t hearing these messages anywhere else.

Mobile facilities can be a solution if available. MSI Zambia and Tackle used a mobile caravan to take services and information about sexual and reproductive rights directly to women and girls. Running sessions from community-level healthcare facilities can also help women and girls access health services more easily.





**Due to limited options and spaces for women to gather and share ideas in Rwanda, the women mentioned that Shooting Touch is one of the safe spaces that helps them to not only get out of their homes, but also to enjoy their rights, talk about the issues they face in life and learn about solutions.”**

**– Shooting Touch**

## 5 Make the venue a safe space for everyone

Research shows that safe spaces are right at the heart of Sport for Change.

A safe space goes beyond ensuring people's physical safety. It's a place where everyone feels free to share their views and experiences, have important conversations and feel connected, away from discrimination or judgement. For projects focusing on women's and girls' rights, it may mean finding somewhere safe away from men and boys to talk freely about subjects that might be considered taboo in communities.

This approach can be role-modelled by the people running the project. Funded partners spoke about how the values of non-judgement, empathy, trust and humility are critical for making this work.

Sport can provide a positive context to help this happen. Elements like teamwork, trust and enjoyment can help people feel safe and secure together.

## 6 Focus on inclusion from the start

Funded partners agreed it's important to offer inclusive and accessible programmes to engage all women and girls. This could include older women, pregnant girls and women, mothers, and girls and women with disabilities. Projects need to budget adequately for meaningful inclusion from the start.

Funded partners spoke powerfully about how physical activity gives women and girls the opportunity to express themselves and challenge negative attitudes. For example, dance performances by D/deaf girls helped demonstrate how disability doesn't define them and showed others what they can achieve. Performances also challenged harmful words used to describe D/deaf people like "ikiragi" (deaf-mutes) or "ibigoryi" (idiots).

Making this happen meant ensuring project workers communicated in ways that worked for women with disabilities. For example, using sign language materials for D/deaf girls helped them better understand messages about gender-based violence and sexual health.

Offering other activities alongside sport helped boost inclusion. For example, Link Education Malawi offered opportunities for participants to play board games, alongside organising netball sessions.

In some cases, pregnant and lactating girls were also encouraged to take part, by the projects providing childcare or spaces in venues where babies could safely settle. However, many funded partners spoke about how budget constraints limited what they could achieve around inclusion.

Recording information about the people who took part was vital. By learning about different needs, funded partners could make careful adaptations to their approaches so everyone felt included.

**“[As a result of the programme] D/deaf girls felt empowered to nominate themselves for committees at village, sector and district level.”**

**– Chance for Childhood**

## 7 Working in partnership is essential

Funded partners didn't always have the depth of skills and knowledge they needed to run programmes most effectively. So they used partnerships to gain expertise around key project elements like gender or Sport for Change.

These could be partnerships with local elders, schools, health centres, sports bodies, organisations focused on gender issues, government and more. This didn't just help share knowledge – it boosted community buy-in and increased trust.

For example, some funded partners worked with local health centres to develop resources focused on women's and girls' needs. They also partnered with people who could provide training and advice about work and starting a business to help women and girls earn their own money. The programmes helped highlight the need for services specifically aimed at young people, not just adults.

This wasn't always a simple process. One funded partner mentioned “inevitable teething problems” when starting to work together as different organisations got to know each other's ways of working. These could be made worse by problems with internet connections if people were working far apart.

Team-building exercises helped overcome these problems, making it easier to solve issues together.

**“Partnerships fostered a sense of ownership and collaboration, leading to necessary support and resources being provided to ensure the project's success.”**

**– Amref Health Africa Malawi**

## 8 Community ownership counts

If local communities felt they 'owned' a project it was more likely to succeed.

Funded partners achieved this by involving the communities in both planning and running projects. Because they felt ownership, community members were more likely to volunteer in projects and offer spaces for the activities to take place. Intentionally including men and boys right from the start was crucial to changing their minds about gender – and ensuring girls could be part of projects.

Community ownership also helped make the projects more sustainable. For example, by hiring coaches from the community, funded partners could keep skills in the local area beyond the funding period. Meanwhile, involving village elders and school leaders in the hiring process gave credibility. Funded partners also recognised that including community leaders is key to getting parents and caregivers involved.

**“Their [community leaders] buy-in was crucial for changing attitudes and behaviours towards girls' rights and empowerment.”**

**– Chance for Childhood**

## 9 Organisations must be ready to respond to external factors – and funders need to be flexible

During Levelling the Field II, funded partners faced serious external problems far out of their control.

These included the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic plus outbreaks of other serious diseases like anthrax and cholera. Zambia also suffered the country's worst drought in 100 years.

These were compounded by infrastructure challenges like power cuts halting sports sessions and schools closing. Meanwhile, project costs rose as inflation pushed prices up.

Circus Zambia spoke about how “fluctuations in the economy led to inflation, resulting in increased costs of goods and services, impacting project expenses and budget planning.”

Funded partners shared how these problems didn't just disrupt projects – they made women's and girls' lives much harder. That's because women were often running households and trying to make do with less.

Responding to these challenges took resilience. But Comic Relief supported funded partners by being flexible on reporting deadlines, activity adaptations, workplans, targets – and allowing for budget reallocations.

This flexibility was appreciated by the partners as it enabled them to adjust to changing situations. Also, Comic Relief provided extra funding which came at the right time and helped them continue their work.

**“The worst drought in 100 years (according to national archives) has pushed already extremely food insecure families into a more perilous situation.”**

**– The School Club Zambia (SCZ)**

## 10 Strong safeguarding is vital

Every funded partner spoke about how safeguarding was essential.

Raising women's and girls' awareness of sexual and reproductive rights and gender-based violence wasn't enough on its own. Each partner had to also offer safe and effective ways for them to access support and services to make sure their risk from harm was alleviated.

Women and girls are often vulnerable to a wide range of injustices and rights violations: from child-marriage to exploitation and gender-based violence. So safeguarding them both inside and outside activities was essential.

Safeguarding practice should include strong policies, processes, partnerships with other organisations and referral pathways to effectively protect vulnerable people.

This started with specialist training on safeguarding for project staff and volunteers – often through other partners. It also included training teachers and sports bodies on establishing or tightening their safeguarding procedures.

Educating the wider community was also important – so they could support and advise each other on where and how to get help.

Link Education Malawi shared how learning through netball curriculum sessions meant “learners [were] more knowledgeable about their rights, responsibility and safeguarding because of [the] topics covered.”

Despite their best efforts to address safeguarding risks, funded partners were keenly aware of the gaps in the wider system, such as the lack of a safe house where children could stay and get help after experiencing abuse.

**“We feel much more confident in safeguarding. We’ve learnt how to deal with very complex cases quickly and that there is a big difference with how cases are handled in town compared to the rural areas that needs to be carefully considered.”**

**- The School Club Zambia (SCZ)**



# Stories of change from Levelling the Field II

## “My life has really changed.”

“I am the only girl in a family of five. My mother always asks me to look after my brothers whenever she’s travelling. I end up missing classes. I thought this is how it is supposed to be because I am the only girl in the house.

Through the project training I have realised this is a violation of my right to education. Fortunately, my brother is also participating in the clubs. So, one day I went home and in front of my mother I asked my brother what they’re learning at Girls Empowerment Network Malawi.

My brother explained how they’re challenging stereotypes that limit girls. So I asked him why he is not practicing that at home. It was a really good day! My mother then said everyone, even the boys, must take care of themselves, and I should not miss school because I’m taking care of them. My life has really changed since then. I’m happier and have time to play with friends and come to the clubs.”

**Girls Empowerment Network (GENET) with Centre for Youth Development and Transformation – Enabling Girls to Advance Gender Equity through Sports (Malawi)**

## “I developed my self-confidence from dance training.”

Beatrice\* is a 16-year-old girl born D/deaf in the Nyabihu District of Northwest Rwanda.

Because her family and community couldn’t use sign language, she often felt isolated. This affected her confidence and self-esteem.

Her life began to change when she joined a local project dedicated to the participation, inclusion and empowerment of girls just like her. This included getting involved in dance training sessions including both D/deaf and hearing participants. Her family also had sign language lessons.

At first she was self-conscious, worried that the fact she couldn’t hear the music would set her apart. But the trainers used visual clues, vibrations and sign language so everyone could fully take part. Her mother learned sign language, helping Beatrice feel her love and commitment.

“I developed my self-confidence from dance training which allowed me to interact with both hearing and D/deaf peers,” she says.

“I am happy that my mother attended sign language training – when I am in [the] holidays I teach her more. We can now have a long conversation. My dream is to own a restaurant because food is something needed all the time.”

**Chance for Childhood with Empowering Children with Disabilities (EmCD) and MindLeaps – Natwe Turashoboye: Protection, Participation, Inclusion & Empowerment for Girls (Rwanda)**



\* All names have been changed for anonymity





The School Club Zambia (SCZ), Sinazongwe, Zambia September 2023 by Loliwe Phiri

## “I’m so happy to be back in school playing football with my friends.”

At 13, Christine\* was forced to drop out of school when her parents couldn’t afford to pay her fees.

"I want to be educated and be able to read and write," she says.

"Dropping out of school made me sad and I feel left out when I see my friends still learning."

One of Christine’s old teachers encouraged her to join the ‘Own your destiny’ scheme. The programme used football to teach women and girls about sexual and reproductive health and rights while reintroducing them to school.

Christine had seen other girls from her village return to school. Her teacher believed she could too.

### **Starting a business and returning to school**

Christine really enjoyed learning about entrepreneurship as part of the project.

“I started my business after I had some entrepreneurship training and was given startup capital,” she says.

“I wanted to do a unique business and be able to raise money for me to go back to school. With the help of my parents, I started selling plastic plates, cups and lunch boxes.

“I’m happy my business is doing well and no one else is selling the same product as me. I want to use my savings to buy goats and increase my plate business so that I never have to worry about school fees again."

Christine has since gone back to school and is now in grade eight.

"I am so happy to be back in school and playing football with my friends," she says.

“My dream is to become a successful entrepreneur which I feel like I have started to become already!"

### **The School Club Zambia (SCZ) with Play it Forward (PIF) – ‘Own your destiny’ Girls Football League of Sinazongwe**

\* All names have been changed for anonymity



To find out more about our work  
please visit [www.comicrelief.com](http://www.comicrelief.com)



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