

Institution: Brunel University London		
Unit of Assessment: 24 Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism		
Title of case study: Mixed Gender Football Policy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
a) Laura Hills b) Amanda Croston c) Bill Baltzopoulos d) Sara Horne	a) Reader b) Lecturer c) Professor of Biomechanics d) Research Fellow	a) 09/2006-present b) 11/2004-07/2016 c) 09/2011-01-/2016 d) 10/1992-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Aug 2013-Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Hills and colleagues' research on mixed football has led to 5 changes in National policy, increasing the age limit at which boys and girls can play together from Under 11 (U11) to Under 18 (U18). During the research over 200,000 young people either played on or were involved in competitions with mixed teams. Young people benefitted from opportunities for physical and social development, enjoyment, developing and maintaining cross-gender friendships, as well as learning to challenge gender stereotypes and inequalities. The benefits can extend to young people more broadly and in 2019-20, 1,015,800 or 33% of 11–16-year-olds in England participated in football (E3).

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Background:

Until 2011, the English Football Association (EFA) banned girls and boys from playing competitive football on the same team beyond the age of 10. Pressure to review the age limit was initiated through a recommendation from a Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and pressure from local clubs. This included a highly publicised meeting between the Chief Executive of the EFA, the Sports Minister, Tessa Jowell and ten-year-old Minnie Cruttwell who was protesting her removal from her U12 boys' team. EFA consultation activities illustrated there was no available research or consistency in policy that could inform their decision. Subsequently, in 2008, the EFA commissioned Dr Laura Hills and colleagues to evaluate U12-U14 trials of mixed gender football. In 2009, Hills' team established that the trials were a success and recommended an increase of the age limit to U14. Although this policy change was approved at all levels of the EFA, the shareholders resisted with an unanticipated veto. Ultimately, the recommendations of Hills et al. led to raising of the age limit to U13 in 2011, and U14 in 2012.

The research for the FA was underpinned by Hills' research on gender, increasing opportunities for girls and women in sport, and physical education. Her work analyses assumptions made about gender differences in the context of sport, the prevalence of hegemonic interpretations of sporting masculinity, and the potential value of mixed sport environments (Ref 1, Ref 2). Hills and colleagues' (Dr Amanda Croston, Dr Alison Maitland, Ms Sara Horne) research with the FA is unique in establishing a rationale for policy change in mixed football (Ref 3).

Research projects funded by the EFA

The research for this project was conducted in seven funded projects (total of GBP198,000) from 2008 to 2019, which led to a series of changes in the EFA's policy on U12 to U18 mixed football.

Impact case study (REF3)

The initial two projects in 2008 and 2009 (Ref 4) employed qualitative methods to investigate pilots of mixed football from U12 to U14. Five teams were used as case studies involving in-depth interviews with 37 stakeholders (players, coaches, parents, and officials), focus groups with male players, and survey data from 59 stakeholders. This research found that girls benefitted from opportunities for skill development, challenge, and enjoyment. Both boys and girls were shown to benefit socially from the friendships they developed and gained respect for each other as teammates.

Subsequently, the research expanded to include annual risk assessments of mixed football involving mixed teams and control groups as well as interview data (at U14, U15, U16 and U18), which led to further policy changes (Ref 5) and subsequent reports that corroborated the findings (Ref 6). This involved cross-disciplinary research with two colleagues from Biomechanics with expertise in performance analysis and injury in sport (Professor Bill Baltzopoulos and Ms Sara Horne). This research has contributed to policy change through an interdisciplinary analysis of the value, risks, and challenges associated with mixed football. The Brunel reports have shown that girls are not at increased risk of injury when playing on mixed teams and they have the necessary skills and technical knowledge. Theoretically, these changes were linked to challenging gender inequalities by shifting understandings of the capabilities of girls and relationships between boys and girls. Hills and colleagues were commissioned by the EFA to conduct research on a pilot of adult mixed recreational football and futsal and to advise on the potential for policy change at this level (Ref 7). This research was interrupted by the cessation of football because of the pandemic and further work has been agreed for 'post-COVID' (E1).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Academic Papers

- Ref 1** Hills, L. (2007). Friendship, physicality, and physical education: An exploration of the social and embodied dynamics of girls' physical education experiences. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12(3), 317-336. doi:[10.1080/13573320701464275](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320701464275)
- Ref 2** Hills, L., & Croston, A. (2011). 'It should be better all together': exploring strategies for 'undoing' gender in coeducational physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*. doi:[10.1080/13573322.2011.553215](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.553215)
- Ref 3** Hills, L., Horne, S., and Croston, A. (2020) 'It's not like she's from another planet'. Shifting gender, changing policy. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. doi:[10.1177/1012690220934753](https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690220934753)

Confidential Reports

- Ref 4** Hills, L., Croston, A., & Maitland, A. (2009) Phase 2: Mixed gender football trials (U12-U14). Report to the Football Association – confidential
- Ref 5** Hills, L., Horne, S., & Baltzopoulos, B. (2015). Injury Risk in Mixed Gender Football U15 and U16. Executive Summary of the Report to the Football Association – confidential
- Ref 6** Hills, L., Horne, S., & Baltzopoulos, V. (2017). Mixed Gender Injury Risk Assessment U18. Executive Summary of the Report to the Football Association – confidential
- Ref 7** Hills, L., Horne, S., Baltzopoulos, B., & Crawley, N. (2018). Injury Risk in Adult Mixed Futsal and Football. Report to the Football Association – embargoed but the executive summary is available.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

During the research, 3,359 girls played in boys' leagues and 32 boys played in girls' leagues. A conservative estimate of 33,590 young people played on a mixed team and over 200,000 young people either played on or were involved in competitions with mixed teams (Ref 4 – Ref 6).

England – Policy change in Mixed Gender Football

The English FA responded to Hills and colleagues' research by increasing the age limit year on year – to under 13 in 2011, then 14 in 2012, 15 in 2013, 16 in 2014, and finally 18 in 2015. The change in 2015 means that the English FA abolished the age limit, allowing boys and girls to play together in youth football. The policy is progressive and unique, in that it allows girls to play in boys' leagues and boys to play in girls' leagues. The current policy states: 'A child in the age ranges Under 7 to Under 18 inclusive may play in a match involving boys and girls.' (E4)

The National Women's Football Development Manager acknowledged the impact of Hills' research: "The project has had a massive effect on the way our sport is played in this country. It wasn't that long ago that girls could not play with boys over the age of 11, and now we are seeing girls have a choice to play up to 18. This has helped players develop in both our grassroots and talent programmes, way beyond our expectations." (E1)

The success of the policy change was demonstrated by SB Frankfort U12 Girls Football, which was undefeated in both their league, Devon Junior and Mini League, and the Argus Cup, having competed against boys' only teams all season. (E5)

Impact on the Women's game

The impact of Dr Hills' research has been significant and contributed to the growth of women's football in England, the success of the National team, the development of individual players throughout the country, and increasing positive respect and support for women footballers. In her book *Playing with the Boys* which focuses on the challenges of trying to be allowed to play on boys' football teams, Niamh McKevitt, the first ever girl in England to play mixed football through to under 16, acknowledged the contribution of Hills' research in "promoting mixed football and allowing me to play." (E6 p7) Describing her experience of participating in Hills' research, she said that, "It was so good to meet someone in a position of authority who was entirely positive about mixed football. I felt that I was finally able to get my views across and that Dr Hills was genuinely interested in what I had to say." (E6 p204) UEFA player of the year in 2019 and FIFA player of the year in 2020, England footballer Lucy Bronze related the importance of mixed football in her development as a footballer, as well as its contribution to establishing friendships between boys and girls, an important finding of Hills' research. She stated that she was devastated when she was banned from playing with boys at the age of 12. "It wasn't about being told I had to play down in Blyth, Newcastle or Sunderland, which is about an hour away from Alnwick, it was the fact my mum had to take me away from my friends. That killed me at the time. I'd spent my childhood playing football with my friends." (E7)

Informing the international game

In 2017, UEFA requested a summary of Hills' findings on mixed football that could be distributed to member countries. The review (E2) was completed with the National Women's Football Development Manager for the English FA and submitted to UEFA.

Change in adult mixed football

Hills and colleagues were asked to observe the 2019 Soccer Aid match as part of their research into adult mixed football. The adult mixed game was given a boost by the match, as women were included in the well-publicized charity event for the first time. The match had a national reach, being broadcast live on ITV to a peak television audience of 5,700,000 viewers (E8) and a stadium crowd of 40,000. 4

English and Brazilian veteran women players were among the football legends and celebrities participating in a game that raised over GBP6,700,000 on the night for UNICEF's *Defending Play campaign*.

Social Change

In addition to the policy change, the research is associated with broader social changes in attitudes towards girls and sport, equitable practices, and relationships between boys and girls. For example, one father of a female player stated, "Playing on a girls' team would involve 'dropping standards'...it would also mean that that she leaves behind her peer group, her own friendship group, which is critical to her developing as a person." The latter is unique in sport nationally and internationally. The change in policy has resulted in an increased acceptance of mixed football for young people. One U18 coach involved in the research stated, "I'm tending to see now that every local junior football team has girls in mixed teams, I think it's becoming more popular so it's just another player now." In addition, it has influenced the FA's transgender policy, as young people no longer need to identify their gender to play football. (E9)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

All sources have been provided in PDF except E9 which is a book.

E1 Letter from the National Women's Football Development Manager, English FA.

E2 Review of the risk assessment to participants playing mixed football in England for the Union of European Football Associations (EUFA) which is the governing body of European football and the umbrella organisation for 55 National Football Associations. (June 2017)

E3 Data from Sport England (2021) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic year 2019/20. [Active Lives | Sport England](#)

E4 FA Handbook/Rules of the Football Association. [accessed at [The FA Handbook 2020-21](#)]

E5 BBC News- Plymouth girls' football team completes unbeaten season (12 May 2019) www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-48243487

E6 Niamh McKeivitt *Playing with the Boys* (Vision Sport Publishing, Kingston Upon Thames, 2015) ISBN-10: 1909534382

E7 The Telegraph, England women's Lucy Bronze goes from making boys cry to World Cup glory (30 June 2015): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/england/11709420/England-womens-Lucy-Bronze-goes-from-making-boys-cry-to-World-Cup-glory.html>

E8 Tellymix viewing figures (June 16 2019) <https://tellymix.co.uk/tv/363819-ratings-poldark-love-island-soccer-aid-and-more-viewing-figures.html>

E9 The Football Association, Policy on Trans People in Football (2014)