

Exploring the barriers and enablers experienced by female off-pitch volunteers within grassroots football: Final Report

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1. Executive summary

This report presents findings from a research project examining the barriers and enablers experienced by female off-pitch volunteers in grassroots football. The research was supported by the football federations of England, Sweden, and Austria. Using a mixed-methods approach the study offers new insight into how gendered inequalities are reproduced within grassroots volunteering structures and identifies actionable strategies to improve the recruitment, retention, and development of female volunteers across European football.

1.1. Academic contribution

This research makes a significant contribution to the sport management and sport sociology literature by advancing understanding of women's experiences in off-pitch grassroots football volunteering. Integrating a multi-level perspective, institutional theory, and self-determination theory, the study sheds light on the mechanisms through which gendered inequalities persist within football and shape female volunteering experiences. Empirically, the study extends existing knowledge by focusing on day-to-day, off-pitch volunteering, an area that has been largely overlooked in favour of event-based or on-pitch roles. The findings demonstrate that women's motivation and sustained engagement are shaped not only by individual values and commitments, but by gendered organisational environments characterised by informal recruitment practices, conditional legitimacy, masculinised cultures, and the normalisation of excessive and invisible labour. Theoretically, the research highlights the limitations of macro-level policy action alone. While federations play a key role in shaping inclusion discourse and strategy, meaningful change depends on alignment across macro

(federation), meso (club), and micro (individual) levels, with particular responsibility located at the club level. In doing so, the report strengthens understanding of how institutional logics and everyday club practices interact with motivation, belonging, and legitimacy to shape women's volunteering experiences.

1.2. Practical impact for European football

Beyond its academic contribution, the research provides clear, evidence-informed implications for European football and directly supports UEFA's strategic objectives relating to diversity, inclusion, and sustainability of the grassroots game. The findings demonstrate that increasing the number of women involved in volunteering is insufficient if organisational cultures, role structures, and recognition practices remain unchanged. As such, the report outlines four interrelated strands of recommendations designed to help federations and grassroots organisations move from surface level to substantive change. These strands are: 1) Move beyond symbolic inclusion; 2) Resist the normalisation of excessive and invisible work; 3) Strengthen supportive peer networks; and 4) Foster intrinsically rewarding volunteering environments. Collectively, these insights provide UEFA and national federations with a robust evidence base to inform policy refinement, volunteer development initiatives, and club-level guidance. The recommendations are offered not as prescriptive solutions, but as principles to support ongoing dialogue, reflection, and collaborative action across European football systems.

2. Introduction

Grassroots football across Europe is heavily reliant on the time and commitment of volunteers, whose contributions underpin the day-to-day functioning and sustainability of the game. While recent years have seen significant growth in female participation on

the pitch, off-pitch voluntary roles within grassroots football remain disproportionately occupied by men. For example, internal data from The Football Association indicates that 86% of off-pitch grassroots football volunteers in England are male. This imbalance highlights a persistent gender gap in the governance, organisation, and administration of grassroots football.

Increasing the number of women involved in off-pitch volunteering roles has the potential to generate wider benefits for the women's and girls' game. Greater female representation in these positions may contribute to more inclusive decision-making, challenge entrenched gender norms, and help foster more positive perceptions of women's involvement in football overall. Research suggests that the presence of positive same-sex role models can play an important role in shaping values, beliefs, and perceptions towards participation in activities such as football (Bevan et al., 2021). As such, enhancing women's visibility and influence in off-pitch roles may support continued growth in female playing participation and broader cultural change within the sport.

Against this backdrop, this research is particularly relevant for UEFA and its member associations. Specifically, the study identifies both perceived and structural barriers and enablers influencing women's engagement in off-pitch grassroots volunteering and provides research-informed recommendations to address these challenges. In doing so, the research not only highlights examples of effective practice, but also identifies areas where further action and improvement are required to advance gender inclusion and support the long-term sustainability of grassroots football across Europe.

3. Research aim and questions

The aim of this research was to explore the barriers and enablers faced by female volunteers in grassroots off-pitch roles. To achieve this aim, two research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) were set:

RQ1. What are the lived experiences of existing female off-pitch grassroots football volunteers? To answer this question, the study sought to:

- Identify the facilitators which help encourage and enable volunteering.
- Identify the barriers which limit volunteering opportunities and motivations.

RQ2. Based on the insight gleaned from answering RQ1, how can football federations improve recruitment, retention, and development of female off-pitch grassroots football volunteers? Including:

- What existing strategies are effective and should continue?
- What needs to stop/change?
- What new research-informed strategies could be deployed?

RQ1 is largely answered through sections 4 and 6 (Literature review and Overview of main research findings), whilst RQ2 is answered through section 8 (Impact of research).

4. Literature review

This literature review is organised into three main sections. The first section pertains to off-pitch grassroots football volunteering, highlighting the importance of volunteering for grassroots football, and then defining what is meant by off-pitch grassroots football volunteering. The second section outlines three theoretical perspectives used to analyse

female volunteering within the off-pitch grassroots football context. These frameworks help explain why women remain underrepresented in off-pitch roles, despite an increase in participation in the women's game. The review concludes by identifying key gaps in knowledge which this study seeks to fill.

4.1. Off-pitch grassroots football volunteering

This section of the literature review highlights the importance of volunteering in grassroots football. After which, a clear demarcation between 'on-pitch' and off-pitch' roles is established. In doing so, an explanation as to what this study understands off-pitch grassroots football volunteering to be is provided.

4.1.1. Importance of volunteering in grassroots football

Volunteering has long been recognised as the foundation of community sport, providing the human and organisational infrastructure that enables participation at the grassroots level (Hoye et al., 2019; Nichols, 2021). In grassroots football, this reliance is particularly pronounced, as unpaid labour sustains the vast majority of activity outside the professional game, spanning coaching, administration, welfare roles, club governance, and wider organisational tasks (Bailey, 2022; Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010). Both international and national governing bodies consistently highlight the importance of grassroots football for talent development, community cohesion, public health, and wider social inclusion (FIFA, 2023a; UEFA, 2025).

Grassroots clubs sustain participation infrastructures and embed football into the everyday lives of local communities (Nowy & Breuer, 2019; Torchia, 2020). A distinctive element of this ecosystem is the sector's reliance on voluntary labour. Unlike professional clubs, grassroots clubs operate almost entirely through unpaid

contributions, covering coaching, administrative work, club governance, safeguarding, and facility maintenance (Hoye et al., 2019; Wicker, 2017). This volunteer workforce is widely recognised as essential to the sustainability of grassroots sport, given the limited financial resources available to clubs, with volunteers often described as the heartbeat of sport organisations (Nichols & Taylor, 2015).

4.1.2. Defining off-pitch volunteering

Volunteering is commonly defined as activity undertaken freely and without significant financial reward. For example, Cnaan et al. (1996, cited in Wicker, 2017, p. 326) define a volunteer as “an individual who works out of free will or relatively uncoerced and receives no remuneration at all or only a relatively small reimbursement or pay”. Building on earlier categorisation efforts, Wicker et al. (2024), identify three broad types of sport volunteering: administrative, sport related, and operational. Administrative roles include governance and management positions such as presidents, treasurers, accountants, auditors, and committee members. Sport related roles involve direct delivery of the game, including coaching, officiating, and refereeing. Operational roles are typically temporary or situational, covering tasks such as medical assistance, event support, facility management, ground keeping, or childcare. Similarly, Ringuet-Riot et al. (2016) identify two main categories of sport volunteers: those involved in governance and administrative roles, and those engaged in operational roles such as coaching, team management, and event support.

For this review, and for the study, volunteering in grassroots football has been aggregated into ‘on-pitch’ roles and ‘off-pitch’ roles, with the focus of the research being related to off-pitch roles. The reason for this language is because these are the terms used by The FA when comparing different types of volunteers. On-pitch roles include

coaching and other positions involving direct engagement with players and responsibility for delivering football activities. These roles are highly visible, routinely celebrated within policy narratives and community recognition schemes, and have been disproportionately examined in research on volunteer motivation, recruitment, and retention (Bouchet & Lehe, 2010; Ronkainen et al., 2022). Off-pitch volunteering, by contrast, encompasses the administrative, governance, and organisational functions that enable clubs and leagues to operate. These off-pitch roles include club secretaries, treasurers, welfare officers, registration leads, committee members, fundraisers, and volunteers responsible for facilities and logistics. Paradoxically, The FA also consider groundspeople to be undertaking an off-pitch role. Off-pitch work tends to be less visible, yet more administratively demanding, with volunteers in these positions often reporting frustrations linked to bureaucracy, workload, compliance requirements, and limited recognition (Wicker et al., 2024). Despite their centrality to grassroots football's sustainability, off-pitch volunteers remain under-researched, especially in relation to female experiences.

Fully defining off-pitch volunteering therefore requires acknowledging both its scope and its significance. It encompasses the governance and administrative work necessary to sustain club operations, ensure compliance with safeguarding and regulatory frameworks, maintain community trust, and connect grassroots practice to wider policy agendas (Bailey, 2022; Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010; Stride et al., 2020). Without this work, grassroots football would not only lack organisational structure but would also fail to deliver safe, sustainable, and inclusive participation opportunities. The importance of off-pitch volunteers is therefore critical not only to the functioning of clubs

but also to UEFA's broader aims around diversity, inclusion, and strengthening female involvement across all areas of the game.

4.2. Theoretical perspectives to explore female volunteering in grassroots football

The literature on sport volunteering draws on a broad range of theoretical frameworks, reflecting the multidimensional nature of volunteer participation (Hoye et al., 2019). Understanding women's involvement in off-pitch volunteering requires attention to both structural and psychological dynamics, particularly how opportunities are created, constrained, and reproduced within clubs and governing structures. Three frameworks are especially relevant for this purpose and guide the analysis that follows: multi-level model of diversity and inclusion, institutional theory, and self-determination theory. These frameworks are outlined below and informed the design of the questionnaire used in this study. No single lens fully captures the complexity of volunteering in sport or the ways in which gendered organisational norms shape women's experiences within football. Thus, each framework offers distinct insights into why people volunteer, how they sustain involvement, and the challenges they encounter.

4.2.1. Multi-level model

Multi-level models of diversity and inclusion conceptualise barriers and enablers across the macro (societal), meso (organisational), and micro (individual) levels (Cunningham, 2023). In the context of this study, international and national federations are conceptualised as operating at the macro level, grassroots clubs at the meso level, and individual volunteers at the micro level. This approach stresses that inequalities do not arise solely from individual motivations, but from the interaction of cultural norms, organisational practices, and wider policy discourses. Applying this model enables a

systematic analysis of the conditions shaping women's participation in football, from the cultural construction of the sport as a male domain (Anderson, 2010; Burton, 2015), through to the allocation of roles within clubs and the individual challenges of balancing volunteering with other responsibilities, such as career and family responsibilities, including childcare which often remains disproportionately the responsibility of mothers (Anstiss, 2021; Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; A. B. Smith et al., 2019). In football specifically, entrenched cultural masculinities intersect with club-level processes, such as word-of-mouth recruitment, reinforcing longstanding structural inequalities in volunteering opportunities (Lusted, 2009). Even as the number of female players continues to grow, the off-pitch workforce remains disproportionately male (Burton, 2015; Stride et al., 2020; Mikkonen, 2023). Figure 1 presents the visual representation of the multi-level model provided by Cunningham (2023). Following this is an exploration of each level within the context of female volunteering within grassroots football.

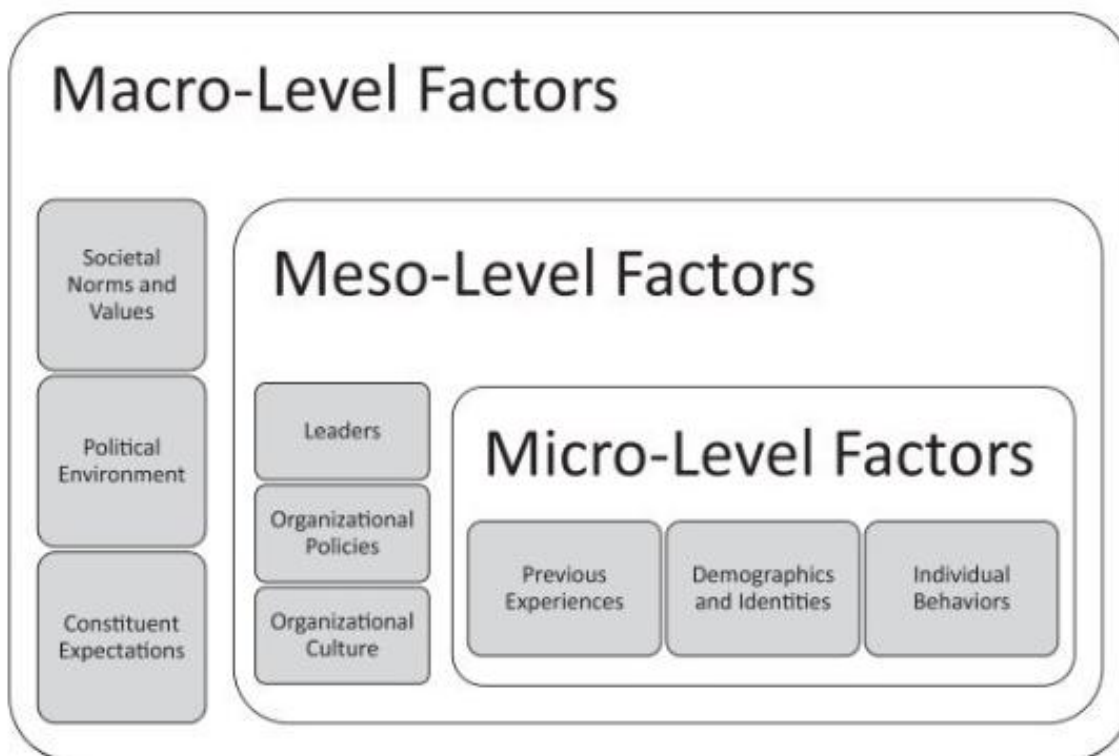


Figure 1- Multilevel Factors Affecting Diversity and Inclusion in Sport Organizations (Cunningham, 2023, p. 17)

At the societal level, sport in general and football in particular have long been constructed as male domains that promote and reproduce dominant notions of masculinity (Anderson, 2010; Burton, 2015). These cultural constructions subtly undermine women’s legitimacy in leadership spaces. There is also evidence that the gender composition of volunteers can directly influence participation rates, particularly among girls and women, with female role models shown to play a key role in encouraging entry into sports traditionally framed as masculine (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2019). Knoppers et al. (2021) show that even when diversity is promoted rhetorically, leaders at national and international levels often use discursive devices such as appeals to meritocracy, neoliberal autonomy, passivity, or silence to resist genuine progress toward gender balanced leadership. Football federations have attempted to disrupt these patterns through equality, diversity, and inclusion strategies such as The FA’s *Inspiring*

Positive Change (The Football Association, 2020) and UEFA's *Time for Action* (UEFA, 2019). Indeed, one strand of FIFA's Women's Football Strategy (FIFA, 2023b), focuses on strengthening governance and increasing female representation in decision-making roles across member associations. While these strategies create symbolic opportunities for women, there is currently limited empirical evaluation of how effectively they have been implemented at grassroots level. However, earlier research suggests that progress toward gender equality in sport organisations has often been uneven and difficult to realise in practice (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Burton, 2015; Hovden, 2010). Structural barriers are therefore embedded both culturally and institutionally, making change difficult to realise on the ground. In sum, we suggest that international and national federations are best placed to positively change the macro-level factors affecting female volunteering within grassroots football. However, we also recognise that this extends beyond footballing bodies and is also dependent on social norms and the political agendas of a society.

Within the context of football, we suggest that the meso-level pertains to grassroots football clubs. Of particular note are the recruitment practices and everyday organisational cultures within clubs. As highlighted by Wicker (2017), entry into sport volunteering is often informal and shaped by relational processes rather than formal recruitment strategies. This is reflected in grassroots football, where existing volunteers frequently draw on personal networks and word-of-mouth to fill roles. Such practices are indicative of processes of homologous reproduction, whereby individuals recruit others who resemble themselves (Handy, 1988; Kanter, 1977). Consequently, these dynamics reinforces the dominance of older male volunteers in committee and administrative positions (Bailey, 2022; Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010). Women are not only less likely to be

approached but are also channelled into gendered positions such as welfare or communications roles, while men retain treasurer, secretary, and chairperson posts (Stride et al., 2020). Nonetheless, meso-level factors can also operate as enablers. Clubs that promote inclusion by actively seeking women for leadership roles, and providing mentoring, training, or role sharing opportunities have greater success in diversifying their volunteer base (Cunningham, 2023). Increasing the diversity of the volunteer base is not only important for ensuring equity of opportunities, but clubs/organisations may also realise wider operational benefits. In her book about female sports coaches, LaVoi (2016) discussed benefits to workplaces such as better decision making through wider perspectives, and less instances of harassment and discrimination. Flexible role design, for example, through job sharing opportunities, can reduce workload and create pathways that better accommodate women who are more likely to be balancing multiple commitments (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011; Stride et al., 2020),

The micro level pertains to the individual. Individual circumstances and perceptions shape both one's willingness to volunteer and ability to sustain involvement. Women often experience time poverty due to disproportionate caring responsibilities, restricting their capacity to take on administrative or governance roles that demand sustained commitment (Burton, 2015). Confidence and perceived competence can also serve as barriers, particularly when roles are framed as requiring technical or financial expertise. Conversely, enablers include prior volunteering experience, access to training and development, visible recognition, and the presence of relatable role models within the club (Hallmann, Ruetz, et al., 2025; Wicker & Frick, 2016). These factors are intersectional: ethnicity, class, age, and disability shape opportunities and constraints, meaning women's experiences cannot be treated as homogeneous (Cunningham, 2023).

This multi-level model highlights that women's participation in grassroots football is shaped by the interaction of societal, organisational, and individual factors, rather than any single level in isolation. This framework therefore provides a foundation for understanding how gendered inequalities are produced and sustained across the system and informs the analysis that follows.

4.2.2. Institutional theory

The multi-level lens approach outlined above can be linked to institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2014). The theory provides a structural lens for understanding why gender inequalities in football volunteering persist, even when reform initiatives are introduced. Football, like many sports, is shaped by entrenched institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) that privilege masculine norms and taken for granted organisational practices, making change difficult to embed at grassroots level (Anderson, 2010; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2008; Hovden, 2010). Furthermore, historical patterns also contribute. It is recognised that local football administration emerged from the amateur-voluntary traditions of the late Victorian era, where governance positions were typically occupied by white, middle-class men (Holt, 2008; Lusted, 2009; McCarthy, 2011).

Recent equality and inclusion strategies from the macro level, such as The FA's *Inspiring Positive Change* (The Football Association, 2020) and UEFA's *Time for Action* (UEFA, 2019), often risk being absorbed symbolically rather than generating substantive transformation at a meso (club) level. From an institutional perspective, enduring change requires institutional work and institutional entrepreneurs capable of mobilising coalitions, challenging dominant logics, and securing support from the wider institutional field (Greenwood et al., 2002; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This situates

women's volunteering within broader power structures that regulate whose contributions are legitimised, valued, or marginalised.

Institutional theory also offers a valuable lens for understanding volunteer experiences of inclusion, an idea grounded in two interrelated dimensions: belongingness and uniqueness. Belongingness refers to the extent to which individuals feel accepted and treated as insiders within a group, while uniqueness captures whether individuals perceive that their distinct perspectives and identities are valued (Jansen et al., 2014; Shore et al., 2011). These concepts align closely with institutional analyses, because experiences of inclusion are shaped by historically embedded norms that determine who 'fits' within particular organisational roles (Mor Barak, 2000; Nishii, 2013).

When clubs operate according to institutionalised expectations that governance, finance, or decision-making roles 'naturally' align with men, women may experience diminished belongingness regardless of their competence or commitment. At the same time, uniqueness is constrained when dominant logics define a narrow template of legitimate leadership - typically assertive, masculine, and individualistic (Kanter, 1977; Thornton et al., 2012). Women who bring collaborative leadership styles, relational approaches to welfare, or alternative communication practices, may find that their contributions are undervalued or viewed as deviations from institutional norms. Through this lens, belongingness and uniqueness are not merely interpersonal experiences, but outcomes of deeper institutional forces that shape legitimacy, voice, and influence within grassroots football.

As a result of the traditional institutional logics of grassroots football, men continue to make up the majority of the off-pitch volunteer workforce. As such, these

multi-level constraints have direct implications for women's motivation, satisfaction, and retention, which can be understood through self-determination theory.

4.2.3. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a psychological lens for understanding motivation and retention in volunteering. SDT emphasises that sustained motivation and wellbeing depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy refers to one's sense of feeling in control, whilst competence refers to feeling effective and capable. Relatedness is the sense of connection to other. In volunteering contexts, research consistently shows that the degree to which these needs are fulfilled predicts engagement, satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions (Haivas et al., 2013; Stukas et al., 2016; Hallmann, Feiler, et al., 2025). SDT suggests that role characteristics that support autonomy and competence, such as task variety, meaningful responsibility, and opportunities for skill development, enhance volunteer fulfilment and performance (Millette & Gagné, 2008). Central to this is the distinction between more internalised and externally driven forms of motivation. Volunteers whose motivation remains externally driven are more vulnerable to disengagement, whereas more internalised motivations are associated with greater satisfaction and persistence (Stukas et al., 2016). In sport contexts, these dynamics are reflected in patterns where individuals often enter volunteering for situational or extrinsic reasons, such as supporting a child's team, but remain involved when participation becomes internalised and connected to identity, community, and belonging (Hayton, 2016; Hoye et al., 2019). SDT therefore helps explain not only why individuals begin volunteering but also why they continue or drop out.

Motivation in volunteering is diverse, multilayered, and dynamic. Clary et al. (1998) and Clary & Snyder (1999) highlighted both altruistic motives, such as the desire to 'give back' and self-oriented motives, including skill development, social networking, or career advancement. Their functional framework outlines values, understanding, enhancement, career, social, and protective motives. SDT offers a deeper explanation for how these motives translate into sustained behaviour by distinguishing between autonomous motivation (intrinsic enjoyment and personally valued goals) and controlled motivation (external pressure or reward) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Evidence shows that volunteers whose basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported are more likely to sustain long term commitment, whereas controlled motivation is associated with lower satisfaction and increased dropout (Haivas et al., 2013; Stukas et al., 2016). Millette & Gagné (2008) further demonstrate that job characteristics, such as task significance, autonomy, and feedback, foster autonomous motivation, which in turn mediates satisfaction, performance, and intention to continue.

In line with other sectors, sport volunteers are motivated by blends of altruistic, relational, and instrumental motives reinforced by strong feelings of community and belonging (Hoye et al., 2019; Wicker, 2017). Hayton (2016) found that student sport volunteers were motivated by both personal development and the relational value of contributing to community outreach. Hallmann, Feiler, et al. (2025) note that sport volunteering introduces distinctive dynamics such as club loyalty, intergenerational participation, and identification with teams or athletes. Football volunteering in particular is often rooted in relational motives, including parents stepping in to support children, and community members contributing to sustain local clubs (Bailey, 2022; Lusted & O'Gorman, 2010). Volunteers are also drawn to opportunities for leadership,

skill development, and employability (Mxekezo-Lallie & Burnett, 2022; Wicker et al., 2024), reinforcing the diversity of motivations within football contexts.

Volunteer motives may shift over time. For some, volunteering begins as a pragmatic response to a request but evolves into a meaningful commitment tied to identity, community, and belonging (Hoye et al., 2019). For others, frustrations with workload, bureaucracy, or limited recognition (Wicker et al., 2024) undermine initial enthusiasm and contribute to dropout. This interplay between motives and constraints underscores that understanding women's participation in football requires attention not only to why they volunteer, but also to the organisational environments that support or hinder sustained involvement. Motives in sport volunteering are therefore best understood as multi layered, blending altruistic, relational, and instrumental drivers.

Gendered patterns further shape how motives are expressed and valued. Earlier work has suggested limited gender difference in motives (Blanchard, 2006), yet later studies reveal more nuanced patterns. Downward et al. (2005) and Hovden (2010) show that men are more likely to occupy visible leadership roles aligned with self-oriented or career related motives, whereas women are often channelled into behind the scenes or 'support group' roles associated with caring responsibilities (Nichols & Shepherd, 2006; Skirstad & Hanstad, 2013). Stride et al. (2020) observe that women in sport volunteering are disproportionately placed in supportive or nurturing positions such as team helpers or welfare officers, reflecting—and reinforcing—beliefs about gendered labour. Mikkonen (2023) adds that women who pursue leadership positions often do so with motives to challenge stereotypes and increase representation yet face organisational cultures that undermine their legitimacy. Thus, while men and women may cite similar motives, the

social and institutional context of football shapes how these motives are enacted and sustained.

Overall, these insights from SDT highlight that understanding women's participation in off-pitch football volunteering requires attention to both their diverse motivations and the organisational conditions that affect whether those motivations can be realised. SDT helps illuminate this dynamic by clarifying how need supportive or need thwarting environments influence satisfaction, commitment, and retention.

4.2.4. Applying the theoretical approaches to this research

The combination of these theoretical perspectives—multi-level model, institutional theory, and SDT—offer complementary insights into the conditions shaping women's participation in off-pitch volunteering within a grassroots football context. Understanding what drives or hinders volunteering thus requires attention to the wider structural and cultural contexts in which volunteering takes place. Functional motives (Clary & Snyder, 1999) help explain why people volunteer, but participation is shaped by organisational capacity, structural inequalities, and socio-political discourses that construct volunteering as both civic duty and cost saving for the state (Hustinx & Meijs, 2011). Persistent gendered divisions in football mean that men continue to dominate governance and decision-making roles, such as chair, secretary, and treasurer positions. Whilst women are more often channelled into welfare or support roles, reinforcing the need for an integrated, multi-level approach to understanding barriers and enablers (Burton, 2015; Mikkonen, 2023; Stride et al., 2020).

The multi-level model maps barriers and enablers across societal, organisational, and individual domains; institutional theory highlights how entrenched logics constrain

change and what is required to overcome them; and SDT explains the psychological mechanisms underpinning motivation, need satisfaction, and persistence. For example, a woman may be highly motivated to support her child's club, yet if institutionalised expectations undermine her legitimacy or narrowly define acceptable leadership behaviours, her participation is unlikely to endure. Conversely, when clubs recognise women's contributions, broaden acceptable leadership styles, and provide pathways into governance, women's motives are more likely to align with meaningful engagement (Hallmann, Feiler, et al., 2025; Stride et al., 2020). This combined analytical framework is essential for the present study. It underscores that efforts to diversify football volunteering cannot simply encourage individuals to step forward; cultural, organisational, and systemic barriers must also be addressed. These frameworks help identify where interventions may be most effective, whether through policy reform, club practices, or individual support; and highlight key evidence gaps, particularly regarding how institutional logics intersect with everyday volunteering experiences in grassroots football.

4.3. Gaps in knowledge

Drawing together the preceding discussion, three gaps are evident. First, much of the sport volunteering literature has focused on event-based contexts, with comparatively less attention paid to sustained, day-to-day grassroots volunteering. Existing research indicates that volunteering experiences vary across contexts, including between ongoing club-based roles and more episodic event settings (Hoye et al., 2019; Nichols, 2021; Wicker, 2017). Second, within grassroots contexts, there is insufficient attention placed on the off-pitch workforce, with much more attention placed on the voluntary coaching on-pitch roles (Burton & LaVoi, 2016; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2016). Third, the

gendered dynamics of off-pitch roles remain poorly theorised and empirically underexplored, especially in relation to how structural, organisational, and individual factors interact to shape women's opportunities and experiences. Although scholarship on women's underrepresentation in sport leadership and governance has expanded (Burton, 2015; Mikkonen, 2023), little research has examined women's day-to-day experiences as off-pitch grassroots football volunteers. While governing bodies at a macro level, such as UEFA and The FA, have introduced inclusion strategies, there is little empirical evidence assessing whether these translate into meaningful change at the meso grassroots club level. Addressing these omissions is vital not only for advancing scholarship, but also for informing policies and practices aimed at building a more inclusive and sustainable football volunteering culture.

These gaps highlight the specific contribution this project seeks to make to the (football) field. By focusing on the lived experiences of female off-pitch volunteers, the study moves beyond generic accounts of sport volunteering to provide football-specific evidence on barriers, enablers, and motivations. In doing so, it connects the everyday realities of grassroots practice with broader institutional initiatives, offering insights that can inform both academic debates and the strategies of football federations.

5. Research design and strategy

This research sought to understand the lived experiences of female off-pitch volunteers operating in grassroots football, recognising that these experiences are shaped by individual contexts and social interactions. Therefore, an interpretivist research philosophy underpinned the study. Interpretivism emphasises the exploration of subjective meanings and the socially constructed nature of reality (Bryman, 2016).

Although this study is underpinned by an interpretivist perspective, quantitative data through an online questionnaire was incorporated in a supportive role to inform the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and photovoice. The quantitative data gathered through the online questionnaire played a supportive role in guiding, rather than determining, the focus of the qualitative interviews and photovoice. The integration of both methodological approaches resulted in a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design. Figure 2 outlines the research approach indicating how the different methods interacted and informed each other along with the literature review. Ethical clearance was provided by the University of the West of Scotland (project number 23539) for all three data collection methods. The subsections which follow detail each data source, providing justification, data collection process, followed by how the data was analysed.

Before detailing the data sources, it is important to highlight the positionality of the research team and consider how this may have influenced the data collection and interpretation of findings (Berger, 2015). The research team consisted of three men and one woman. The lead researcher (male) conducted all the interviews including photovoice interviews, with participants, of whom all but one federation staff participant were female. Efforts were made throughout the research process for the research team to engage reflectively with these dynamics, with particular attention given to centring female volunteer participant voices within the analysis. The lead researcher also occupied an 'historic insider position' (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) within grassroots football, having previously volunteered within the grassroots game and subsequently worked in a paid role supporting volunteers. This prior involvement provided valuable contextual understanding of grassroots structures, cultures, and challenges, which informed the design of the study and interpretation of the findings. However, this familiarity also

necessitated ongoing reflexivity to minimise assumptions, manage potential bias, and avoid normalising practices that participants identified as problematic (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Taken together, these positionalities shaped the research as a co-constructed process, reinforcing the need for transparency, reflexivity, and critical engagement throughout the study.

Research design overview

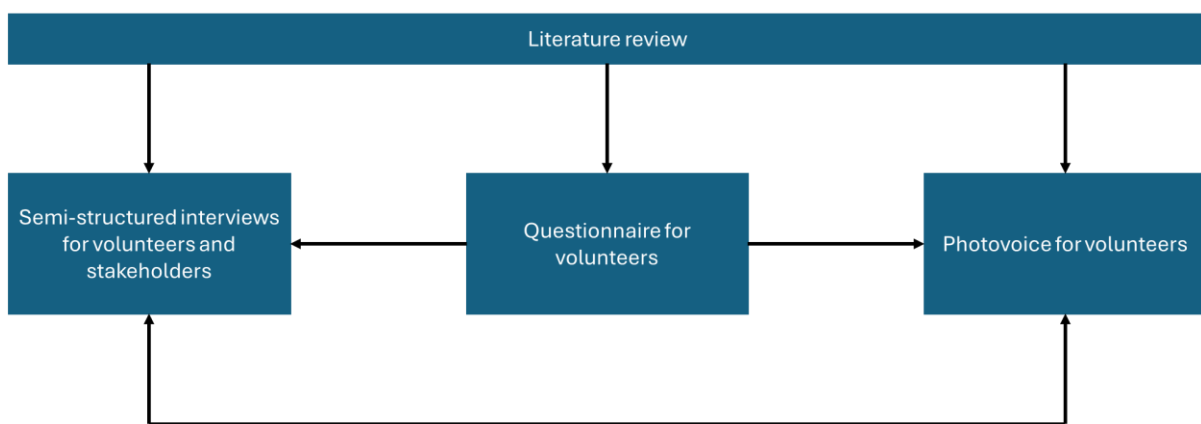


Figure 2- Research design overview

5.1. Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was developed and distributed to female volunteers across England, Sweden, and Austria.

5.1.1. Justification

There were several advantages to using an online questionnaire as the first primary data collection method. These included: accessing a wide range of participants at minimal cost, responses were anonymous promoting participant honesty, and the data was structured allowing for greater scope for comparing data against different groups (Jones, 2022). That said, it was important to be aware of the disadvantages of the questionnaire.

Table 1 outlines some of the disadvantages and how these were mitigated.

Table 1- Risks and mitigations of questionnaire

Disadvantage/risk	How this was mitigated
Complex questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liaison with staff at The FA with questions reworded where improvements were identified. • Questions were then piloted with a small group of participants. • Questionnaire was translated by Swedish and Austria FA into Swedish and German.
No control over who completes questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The eligibility screening questions at the beginning of the questionnaire helped to minimise the risk of ineligible responses.
No opportunity to probe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The findings of the questionnaire helped to identify areas to investigate further as part of the photovoice and semi-structured interviews.
Potentially low response rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Details of the questionnaire were sent to key stakeholders. • For example, the lead researcher emailed every County Football Association in England with details of the questionnaire. • Multiple rounds of distributing the questionnaire were completed.

5.1.2. Process

A questionnaire was designed by the research team in collaboration with The FA. The questionnaire was piloted with a small sample of participants meeting the sample criteria, resulting in minor amendments prior to wider distribution. The final questionnaire (see Appendix 1- Copy of questionnaire was distributed from mid-October 2025 and closed on 19 April 2026. The primary language of the questionnaire was English,

with Swedish and German translations provided by the Swedish FA and the Austrian FA respectively. The questionnaire was administered via Microsoft Forms.

Participants were screened for eligibility and provided informed consent prior to commencing the questionnaire. Based on findings from the literature review, the questionnaire utilised pre-validated measures which included: The Motivation to Volunteer Scale (Grano et al., 2008) which assessed volunteer motivation through self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000); The Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000) modified to fit the volunteer context; Work Group Inclusion (Chung et al., 2020) modified to fit the volunteer context; and intentions to return the following season (cf. Eys et al., 2005). We also included measures of challenges, enablers, and additional motives to the questionnaire pack, all content for these measures are based on expert opinion. All data collected was cross-sectional as it was collected at one time point (October 2025- April 2026).

5.1.3. Data analysis

The quantitative data from pre-validated were analysed using correlational analysis to examine the strength and direction of relationships between key variables. Furthermore, pre-validated measures, and challenges, enablers, and motives were presented visually using bar charts to aid interpretation and comparison across the FAs.

5.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place with female volunteers, and paid federation staff responsible for females/volunteering.

5.2.1. Justification

Semi-structured interviews took place with both female volunteers and paid federation staff with oversight of female volunteers. Semi-structured interviews were well suited to this research because the study sought to gain an in-depth in understanding the experiences of off-pitch female volunteers (Bryman, 2016; Jones, 2022; B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are widely recognised within qualitative sport research as an appropriate approach to explore experience and meaning (Jones, 2022; B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). A semi-structured approach enabled the interviewer (lead researcher) to use the interview schedule as a flexible framework, rather than fixed questions to be asked in a fixed order (Jones, 2022). This allowed the interviewer to adapt questioning, ask unplanned follow-up questions, and explore themes while clarifying responses in real time (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). This balance between structure and flexibility enabled consistency across interviews, whilst still capturing depth and richness in data, while allowing participants to express their views in their own terms (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Furthermore, this approach provided participants with the opportunity to introduce issues that were not anticipated by the research team, enhancing the openness of the interviews (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

5.2.2. Process

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the lead researcher with female volunteers and paid federation staff who hold oversight for female volunteers. Volunteer participants were recruited from individuals who expressed interest in further involvement in the research following completion of the questionnaire, as well as through the lead researcher's professional network. Federation staff were similarly approached through the lead researcher's network. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft

Teams with the audio being recorded for transcription purposes. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with a Participant Information Form. Before each interview commenced, participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions before providing informed consent.

The interview schedule was largely the same for both groups, with some subtle differences in the framing of questions (Appendix 2- Semi-structured interview schedule for volunteers 2 and 3). For example, female volunteers were asked “What motivates you in your volunteering?”, whilst federation staff were asked “In your opinion, what are the main motives for females volunteering in grassroots football?”. Each interview was structured into four main sections. The first section included the warmup question, asking the participant to talk about their involvement in women’s volunteering; this helped to establish rapport and provide contextual background. Section 2 was the bulk of the interview and was split into three subsections- motives, discouragements, and encouragements. Each of these subsections began with a slide prompt being shown containing a selection of factors (see Appendix 4- Prompts for semi-structured interviews. These selections were based on the questionnaire to ground discussions in prior data collection while supporting participant reflection and recall. Participants were asked to select the three which resonated most with them (not necessarily in ranking order). Each one of these was then discussed in greater detail with the interviewer using probes where appropriate. Probes are an important part of semi-structured interviews in order to get as much detail and clarity as possible, enhancing the depth and credibility of data (Cleland et al., 2019; Jones, 2022). Section 3 allowed the researcher to explore any additional topics that had not been covered in Section 2. The final section provided participants with the opportunity to provide further detail on something already

discussed, or anything that they felt was important but had not yet been mentioned, ensuring a participant-led conclusion to the interview (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Shortly after the interview finished, a full verbatim transcript was produced which was then shared with the participant, who had seven days to highlight any errors or misrepresentations, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of data (Birt et al., 2016; Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

5.2.3. Data analysis

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed thematically, following the six-step process (see Figure 3) first outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Thematic analysis process

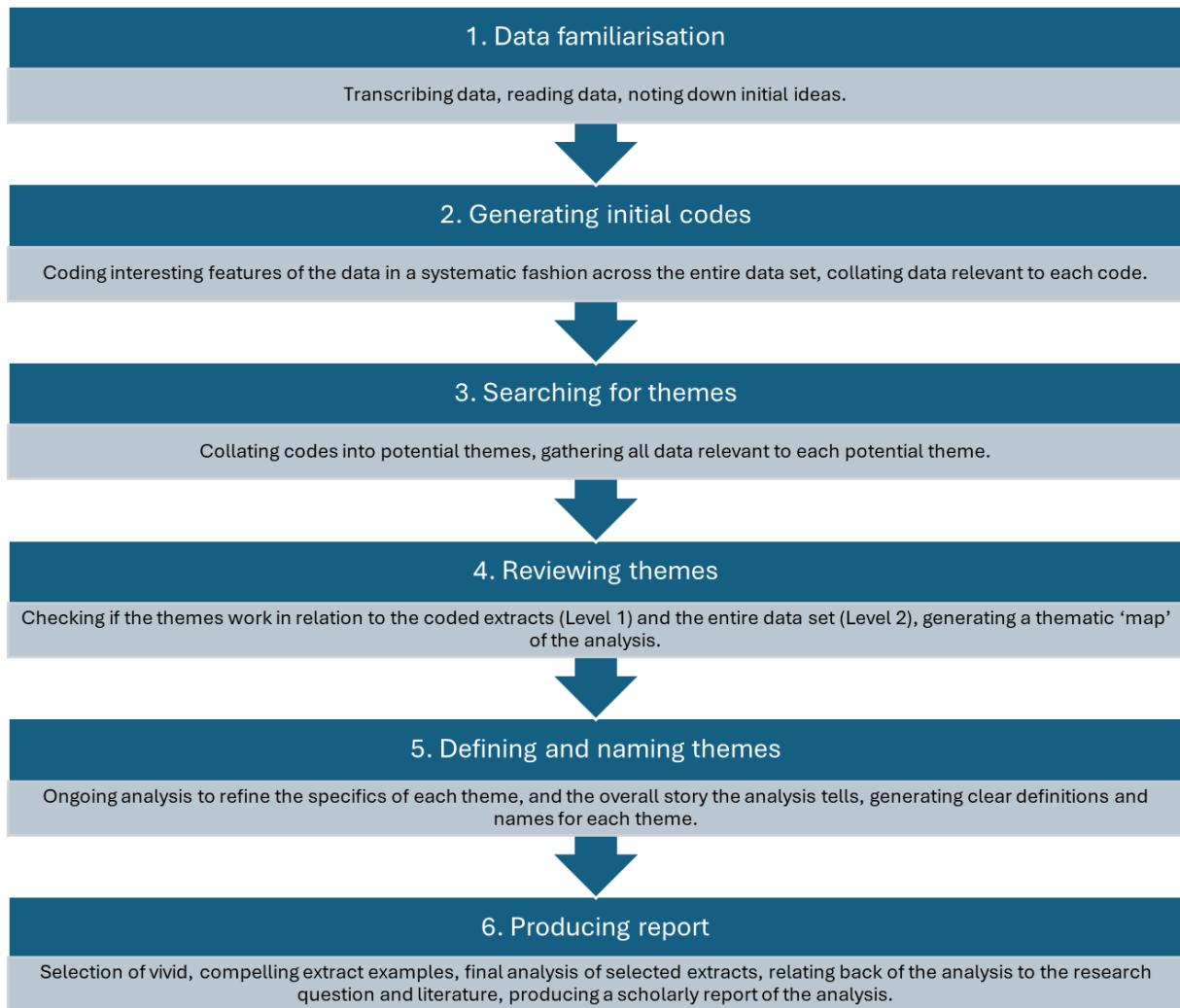


Figure 3-Thematic analysis process (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006)

5.3. Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory method which allows individuals to identify, present and enhance their experiences through the use of photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997).

5.3.1. Justification

There was a strong rationale for incorporating photovoice as part of this study. Firstly, photovoice enabled data triangulation alongside the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, supporting a richer and more nuanced understanding of female volunteers' experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). By integrating visual and verbal data, the method

strengthened the depth and credibility of the research findings. Second, photovoice provided female volunteers with the opportunity to visually represent their lived experiences within grassroots football; allowing participants to communicate meanings, emotions, and contexts that may not be fully articulated through interviews alone (Wang & Burris, 1997). Visual methods are particularly valuable for capturing everyday practices and embodied experiences that can be difficult to express verbally. Thirdly, as a participatory research method, photovoice is especially suited to research involving groups that have historically been marginalised or under-represented, including women within football governance and volunteering structures (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang, 1999). The method aligns with feminist and inclusive research principles by positioning participants as co-creators of knowledge rather than passive subjects. Finally, photovoice enhances methodological inclusivity, enabling participation from individuals who may feel less confident in traditional interview settings or who prefer alternative forms of expression (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

5.3.2. Process

The photovoice component of this study was informed by the literature review and preliminary analysis of the questionnaire data. While the application of photovoice varies across studies, this research adapted the eight-stage approach proposed by Caroline Wang (1999), condensing it into five stages (see Figure 4).

Photovoice process



Figure 4- Photovoice process

Photovoice participants were recruited from individuals who completed the questionnaire and indicated an interest in further participation in the research. Those who expressed interest were invited to attend an information and training session, delivered live via Microsoft Teams, with a recorded version provided for those unable to attend. During this session, the photo-triggers were introduced (see Figure 5). These photo-triggers were developed based on insights from the literature review and initial questionnaire findings. Photovoice participants who provided informed consent were given up to two weeks to complete the photo-mission. Participants used their own smartphones to capture photographs in response to the photo-triggers and submitted these via WhatsApp to the lead researcher's university issued phone number. These photographs were then securely downloaded from WhatsApp Web and stored on the university's OneDrive.

Take photographs...

Of how the environment (physical/social) provides opportunities and/or challenges for you as a female to volunteer in your off-pitch grassroots football role.

Which are reflective of your positive and negative experiences as a female off-pitch grassroots football volunteer.

Reflecting your feelings of belonging/unbelonging when volunteering as a female.

Of what motivates and/or discourages you to volunteer in your off-pitch grassroots football role.

That show how your work as an off-pitch volunteer is recognised/valued or overlooked.

Your sources of learning, development, and support as an off-pitch volunteer.

Figure 5- Photo-triggers

The final stage involved photo-illumination through a semi-structured interview with the lead researcher. These interviews were guided by the SHOWED framework (Wang, 1999) when discussing each photography, which structured the interview schedule while allowing flexibility for follow up questions and probing (see Appendix 5- Photovoice interview schedule including SHOWED for interview schedule which includes the SHOWED framework). Not all elements of the framework were applied rigidly, enabling participants to elaborate on aspects most relevant to their experiences, whilst helping to avoid unnecessary repetition. Following each photovoice interview, a full verbatim transcript was produced and shared with participants, who were given the opportunity to review and amend any inaccuracies or misrepresentations.

5.3.3. Data analysis

The photovoice data was included in the thematic analysis detailed above. Unique to the photovoice data is that data consisted of an interview transcript and photographs. A small selection of photographs are included in the findings section, however the

photographs submitted were largely more appropriate as participatory bridges and prompts for the interviews, rather than to present in the findings. Indeed, this is consistent with previous female sport photovoice studies (see for example Hayhurst et al., 2015), in which after the photographs are discussed in a photo-illumination stage, the photographs are not automatically used (or needed) for the data analysis.

6. Overview of main research findings

This presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Table 2 details the sample characteristics and number of participants for each method. The section begins with the quantitative questionnaire findings, followed by the qualitative findings. The qualitative findings encompass the semi-structured interview and photovoice data and are presented thematically.

Table 2- Data source samples and numbers

Data source	Sample description	n.
Online questionnaire	Female volunteers over the age of 18 operating in off-pitch roles in grassroots football.	Total eligible responses n= 305 Broken down as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • England n= 115 • Sweden n= 123 • Austria n= 67
Semi-structured interviews	Female volunteers over the age of 18 operating in off-pitch roles in grassroots football.	n= 5
	Paid federation staff overseeing female volunteering.	n= 6
Photovoice	Female volunteers over the age of 18 operating in off-pitch roles in grassroots football.	n= 2

6.1. Questionnaire findings

Completions came from England, Sweden, and Austria. The mean age of the sample was 44.70 years (SD = 9.71 years) with an age range of 18-75 years. All data was collected online via Microsoft Forms which included pre-validated measures of motivation, needs satisfaction, likelihood to continue volunteering, motives to volunteer, barriers to volunteers, and enablers. Key results from the questionnaire are detailed below.

6.1.1. Motivation to volunteer

Based on measures of self-determination, Figure 6 indicates that volunteers are motivated for a variety of reasons, however, encouragingly, their intrinsic motivation is high which shows that they are motivated by the inherent enjoyment of volunteering. Likewise, they have low levels of extrinsic motivation and disinterest (labelled amotivation), which further suggests that volunteers are not motivated to participate for rewards and show a high level of interest in their role. Generally, these trends follow across all nations, with Austrian participants demonstrating higher levels of identified and integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Below are short definitions of the types of motivation and how they could be expressed in volunteering:

- **Amotivation** – The person feels no reason to continue volunteering and sees little impact; *e.g., a club administrator completes match paperwork but feels it achieves nothing and considers quitting.*
- **External regulation** – Volunteering is driven by external rewards or pressures; *e.g., someone helps with accounts only because it is required for course credit.*

- **Introjected regulation** – Volunteering is motivated by internal pressure such as guilt or fear of disappointing others; *e.g., a parent continues helping with kit washing because they would feel bad letting the club down.*
- **Identified regulation** – The individual values the importance of the role and its outcomes; *e.g., a volunteer manages registrations because they believe organised administration is essential for children to participate.*
- **Integrated regulation** – The role aligns with the person’s identity and values; *e.g., a long-term club secretary volunteers because supporting grassroots football is part of who they are.*
- **Intrinsic motivation** – Volunteering is done purely for enjoyment and interest; *e.g., a volunteer enjoys running matchday events because they like being involved in the football environment.*

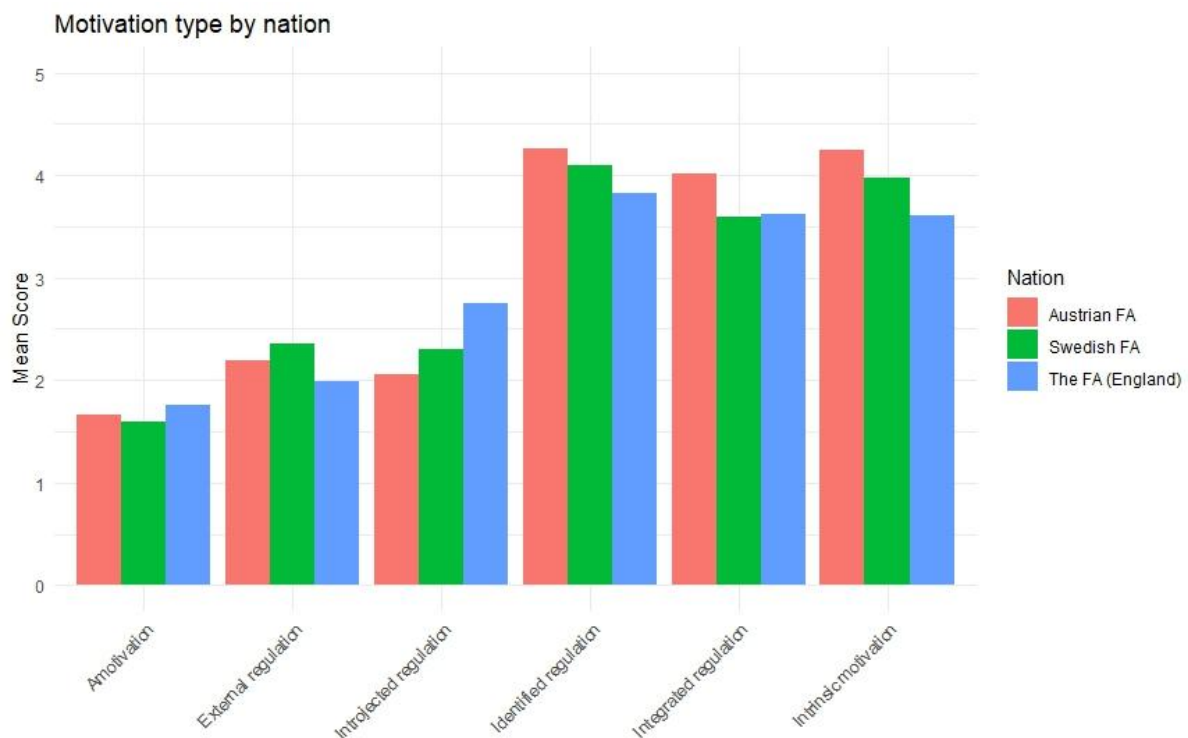


Figure 6- Mean scores of motivations to volunteer

6.1.2. Basic needs satisfaction

In order to be motivated, SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) suggests that three basic needs ought to be satisfied in order to be motivated to achieve goals or participate in a chosen venture. These three needs are: autonomy (i.e., feelings of a sense of choice), competence (i.e., feelings of being effective and capable) and relatedness (i.e., feelings of being valued and connected to others). As can be seen in Figure 7, all three of these basic needs are above average for volunteers which suggests that volunteering satisfies individuals' basic psychological needs which are linked to motivation and wellbeing for all three nations.

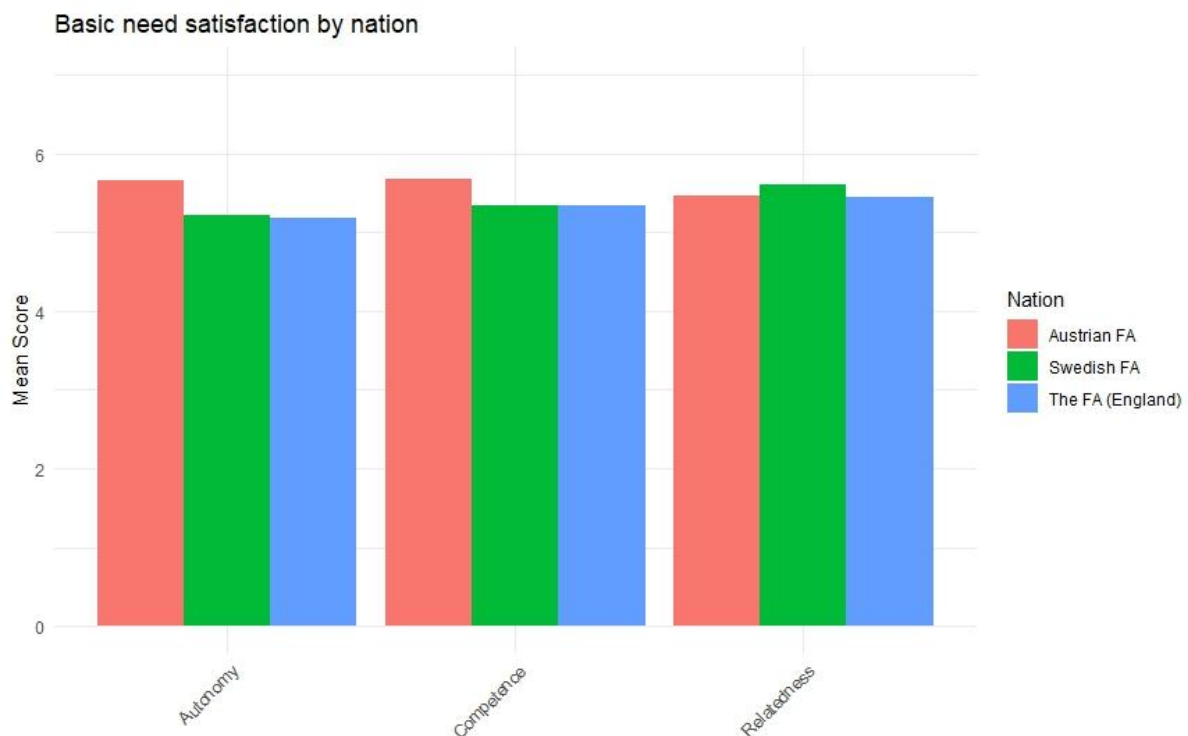


Figure 7- Basic needs satisfaction sub-scales

6.1.3. Group inclusion

We examined perceptions of inclusivity of volunteering environments by assessing uniqueness (the extent to which someone is valued as an individual) and belongingness (the extent to which someone is integrated into a group). Figure 8 suggests that grassroots

football provides an above average level of both components which suggests female volunteers perceive that grassroots clubs provide a sense of belonging but also value the uniqueness they bring to the group which is largely similar across nations.

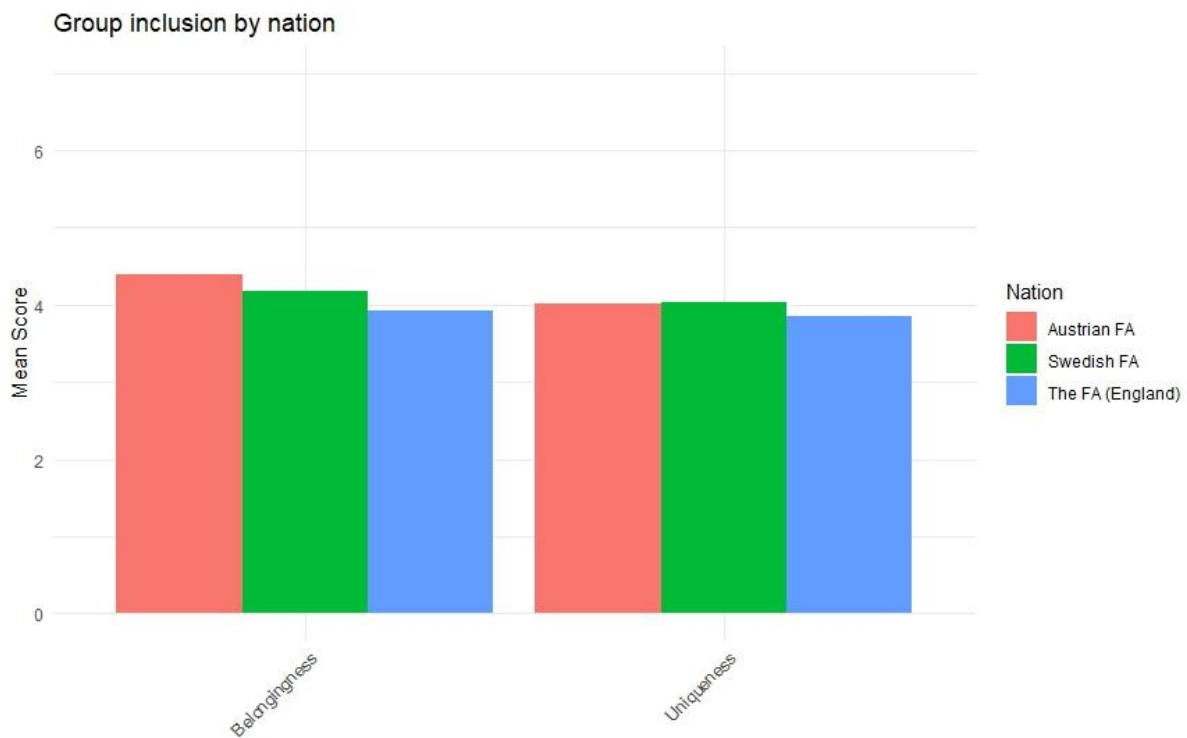


Figure 8- Group inclusion for volunteers

6.1.4. Motives to volunteer

We examined volunteer’s motives for volunteering. We assessed each source of motivation on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Figure 9 shows that some of the highest motives to volunteer are about contributing to community, providing a sense of belonging, enjoyment, and inspiring others. Whilst some of the lowest motivations to volunteer were for career development, employability, and social media influence. Broadly speaking, all nations follow a similar trend with only minor differences noted with higher levels of motivation around social media and to work in football noted in Austria. Taken together these findings suggest female volunteers generally participate for the sense of community and not for career-driven purposes or external validation.

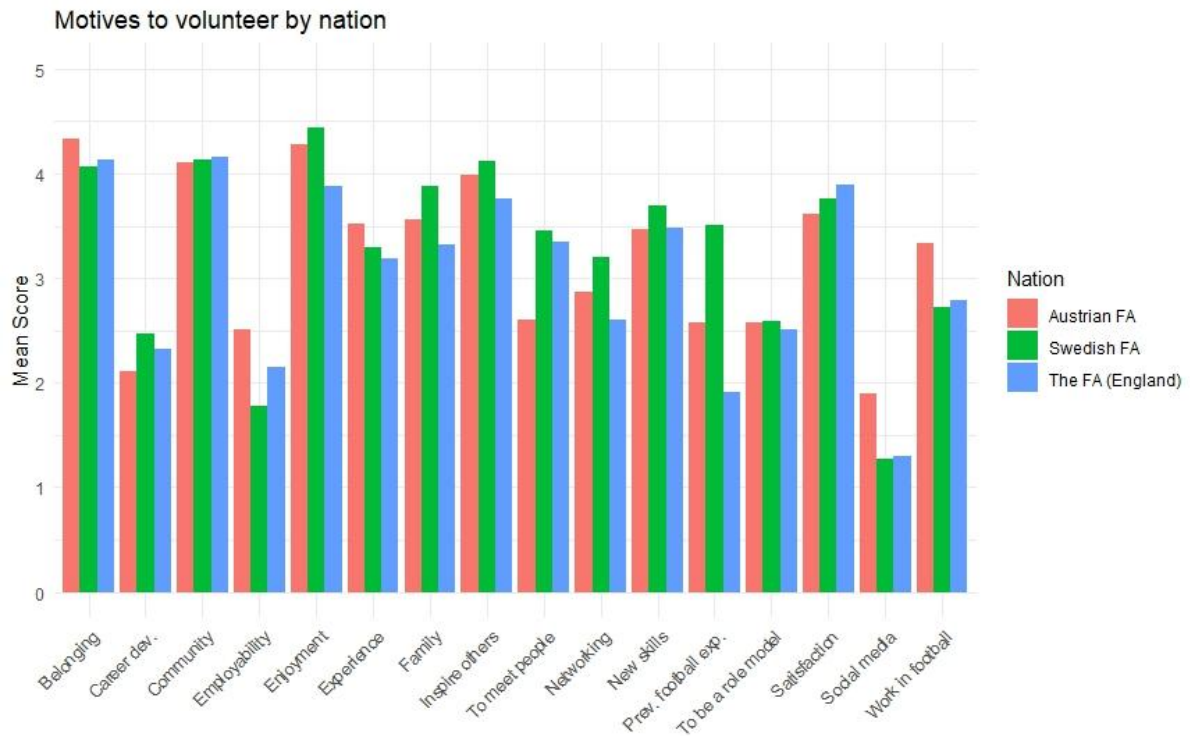


Figure 9- Volunteer motivations to participate in grassroots clubs

6.1.5. Challenges to volunteering

We assessed challenges to volunteer on a Likert scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Figure 10 displays several interesting findings, mainly a lack of time to commit to the role and that workload can often be the biggest challenge in grassroots football. Again, we find these broadly similar across the different nations.

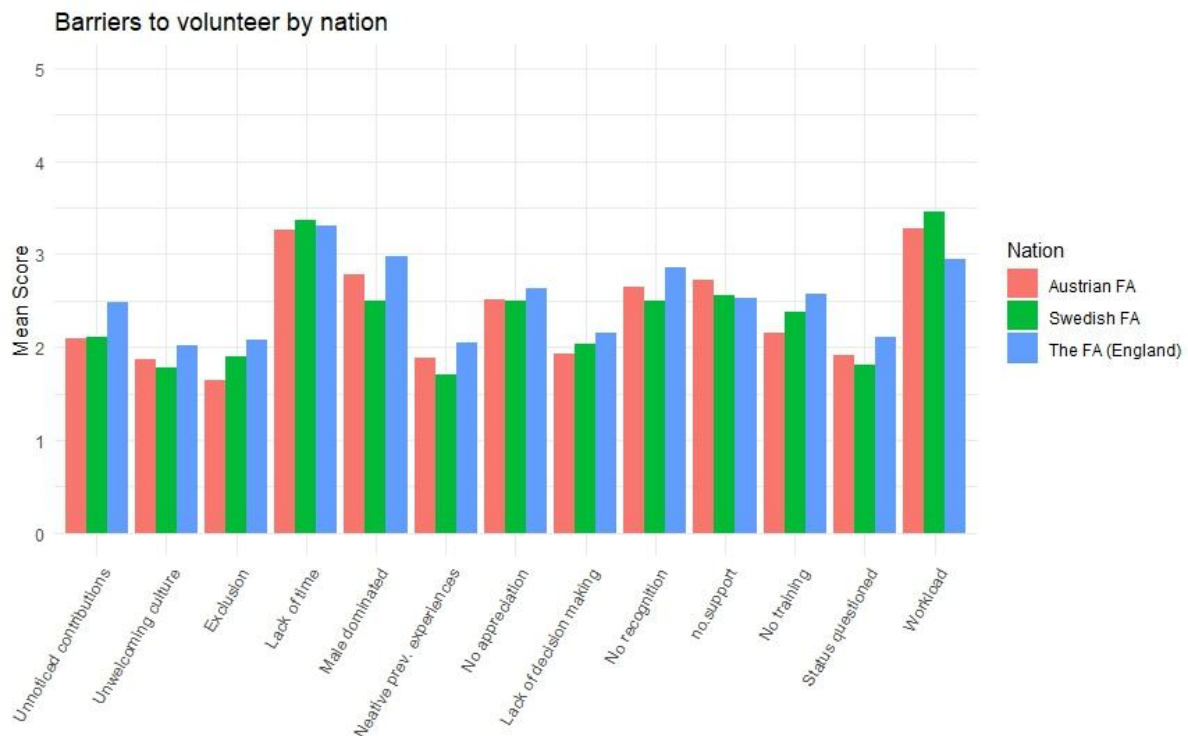


Figure 10- Challenges to volunteering

6.1.6. Enablers to volunteering

We assessed how resources may be used to allow volunteers to continue in their role (1 – no effect to 5 – major effect). Results show (Figure 11) that both support from other volunteers and a positive culture are deemed to have the biggest impact on encouraging those to continue volunteering. The participants from England placed less emphasis on pathways to leadership, role sharing, and support from paid staff compared to Austria and Sweden.

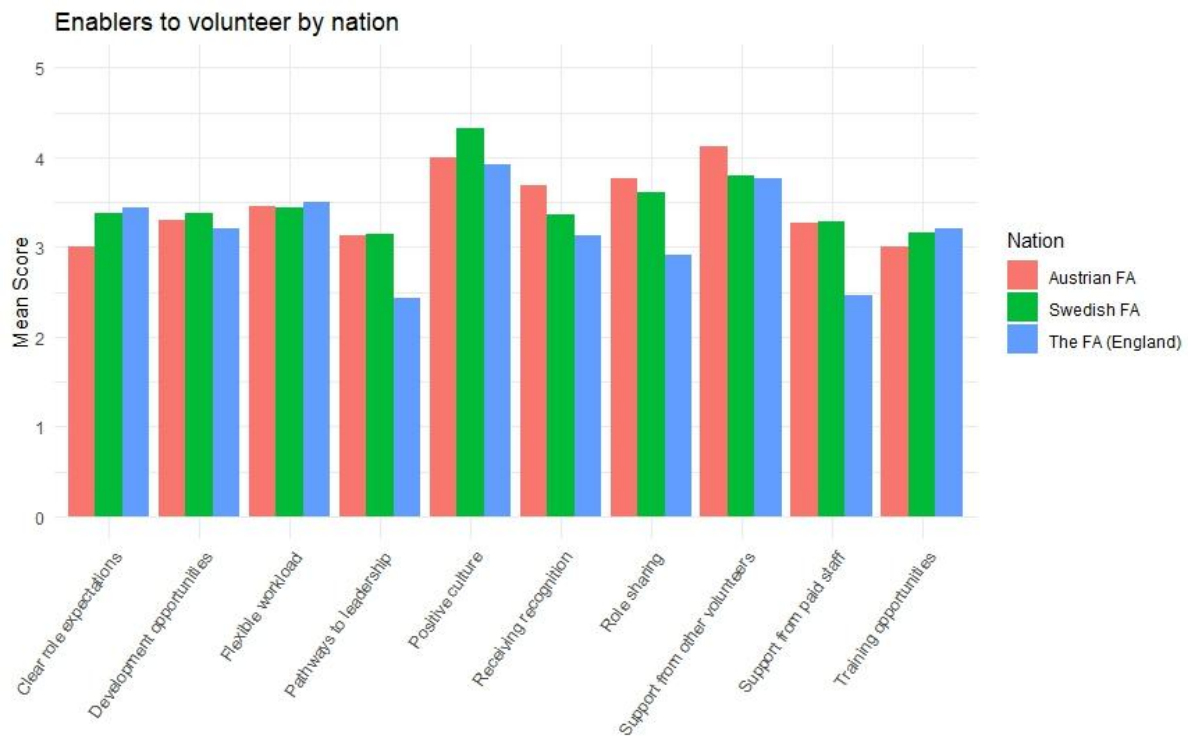


Figure 11- Enablers to volunteering

6.1.7. Likelihood to continue

Figure 12 highlights how likely volunteers are to continue volunteering next season (1 – completely uncertain to 7 – completely certain). The graph shows that female volunteers are highly likely to volunteer next season, and with the same group and in the same role. This shows a high degree of continuity in the volunteering role, with Austrian participants showing slightly elevated levels.

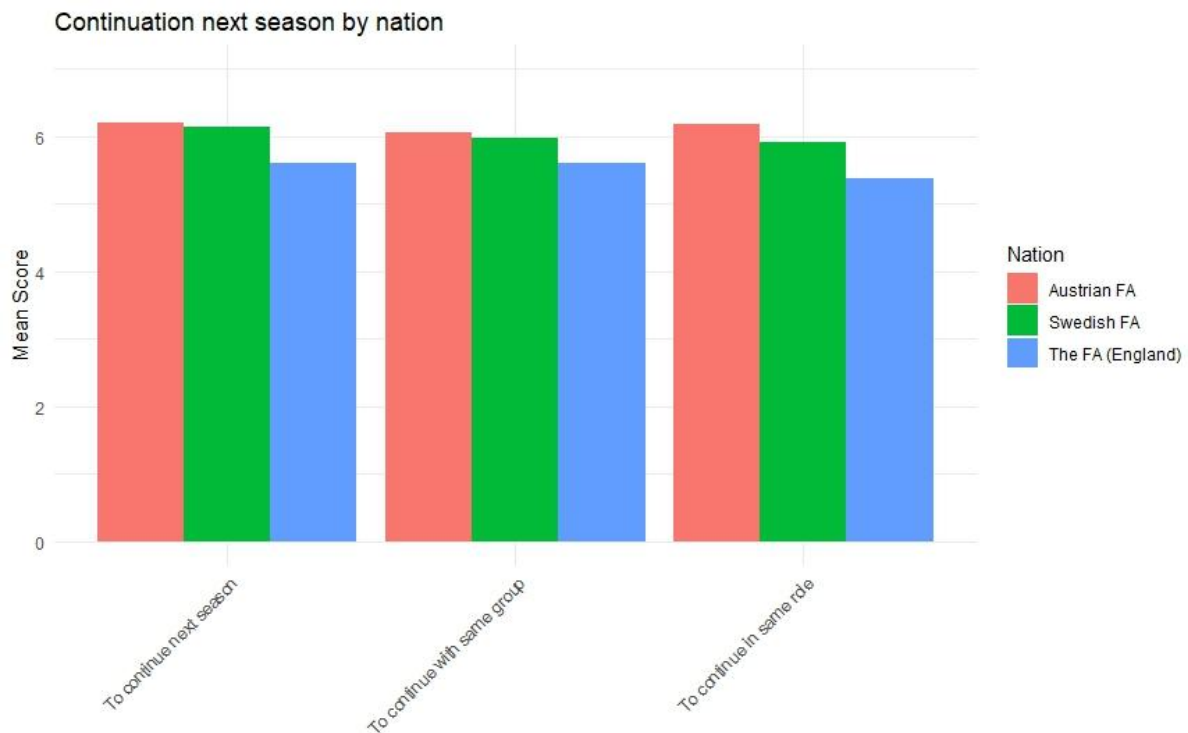


Figure 12- Likeliness to continue volunteering

6.1.8. Inferential statistics

Utilising the 305 responses, Table 3 displays all key variables from the pre-validated questionnaires measuring motivation, needs satisfaction, inclusion, and likeliness to continue. To highlight some key results, intrinsic motivation to volunteer is positively related to intention to continue next season, with the same group, and in the same role ($r = .30-.39$). Similarly, all three basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are positively related to intentions to continue ($r = .22-.37$). Group inclusion (belonging and uniqueness) also demonstrates a positive relationship with intentions to continue next season ($r = .30-.38$). Taken together, these findings suggest that environments that allow volunteers to feel free to make their own choices, feel capable in their role, and feel like a valued member of the team foster stronger intentions to remain. Feeling a sense of belonging to the group, while being valued as an individual, is also critical to sustaining volunteer engagement.

Table 3- Key study variables means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	44.70	9.71											
2. Intrinsic motivation	3.90	0.91	-.02										
3. Identified regulation	4.03	0.79	-.03	.67**									
4. Amotivation	1.67	0.78	-.10	-.25**	-.24**								
5. Autonomy	5.29	0.95	-.01	.35**	.35**	-.43**							
6. Relatedness	5.51	0.93	.00	.38**	.35**	-.38**	.65**						
7. Competence	5.42	0.88	-.01	.40**	.41**	-.39**	.56**	.54**					
8. Belonging	4.13	0.84	.02	.39**	.37**	-.35**	.52**	.57**	.47**				
9. Uniqueness	3.96	0.82	.07	.31**	.32**	-.27**	.46**	.41**	.36**	.73**			
10. Intention – next season	5.95	1.65	.05	.39**	.27**	-.31**	.37**	.31**	.27**	.36**	.33**		
11. Intention – same role	5.77	1.76	.07	.30**	.22**	-.25**	.37**	.30**	.22**	.38**	.30**	.87**	
12. Intention – same group	5.85	1.75	.07	.30**	.26**	-.23**	.36**	.31**	.22**	.38**	.31**	.84**	.86**

Note * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

N = 305

Intention = intention to continue...

6.2. Qualitative findings

The qualitative data derived from the semi-structured interviews and photovoice were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from female volunteers (semi-structured interviews and photovoice) provided insight into lived experiences of the barriers and enablers. Table 4 provides a brief insight into each volunteer participant. Data from federation staff with oversight of female volunteers (semi-structured interviews) offered a complementary perspective of organisational understandings and existing strategies to support female volunteering (federation staff were coded as FS1-FS6). Through this process, four themes were identified, as outlined in Figure 13. During the data collection and analysis, it became evident that several codes and themes are not exclusive to female volunteers but could also apply to male volunteers. However, in line with the research questions of the study, this section focusses specifically on how these themes manifest in relation to female volunteers. Each of these themes is explored in detail in the following subsections.

Table 4- Volunteer participant overview

Volunteer pseudonym	Age	Country	Study contribution	Brief overview of main off-pitch volunteer duties
Alice	30	Sweden	Photovoice and semi-structured interview	Club Chair.
Betty	79	England	Semi-structured interview	League Secretary and Discipline Officer.
Lara	32	England	Semi-structured interview	Club Welfare Officer and Club Secretary.
Louise	51	England	Semi-structured interview	Team Secretary.
Sarah	23	England	Semi-structured interview	Social Media Lead, Club Welfare Officer, and Youth Council.
Willow	20	England	Photovoice	Sponsorship and fundraising; match-day community.

Thematic mapping

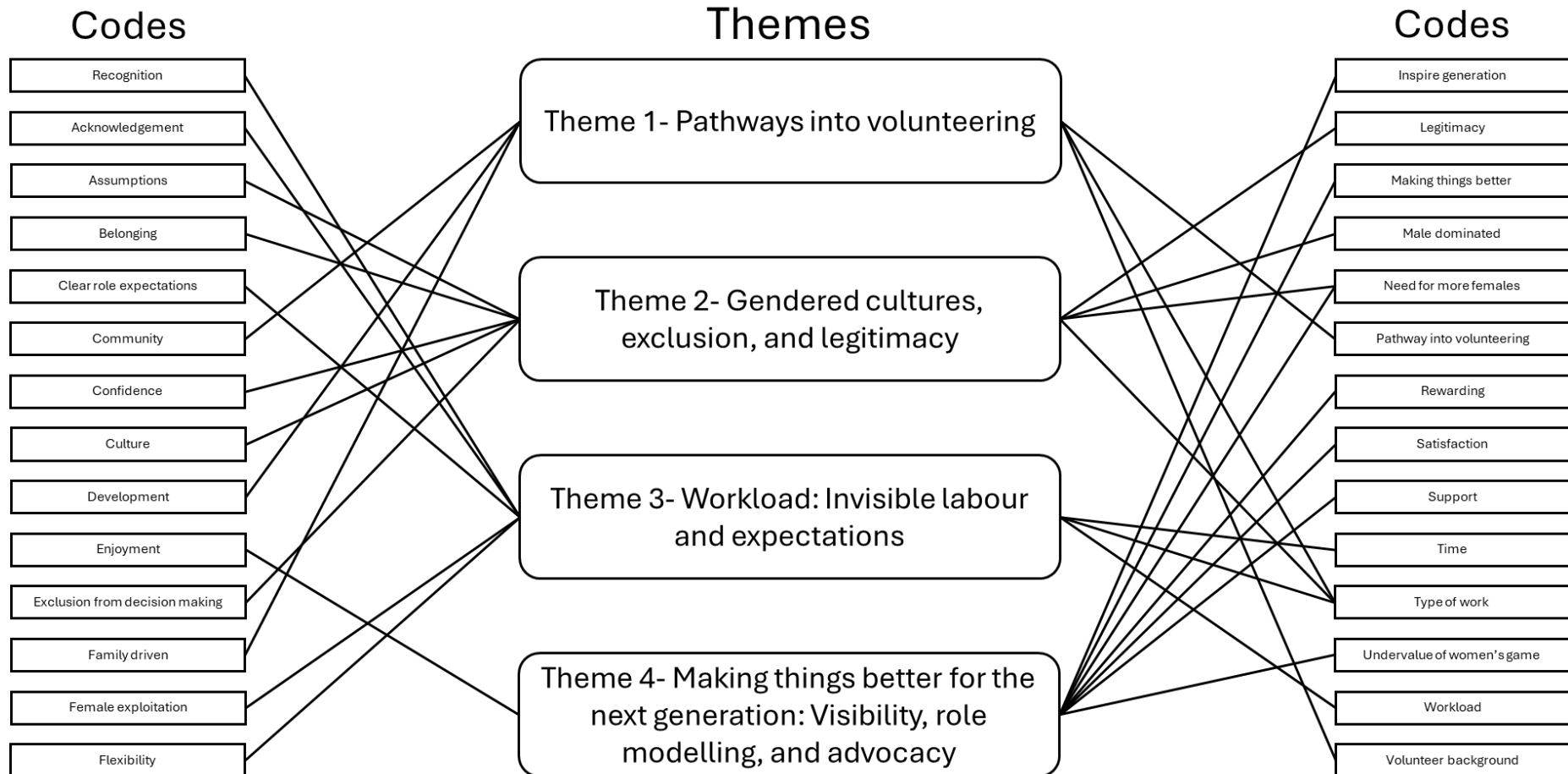


Figure 13- Thematic map

6.2.1. Pathways into volunteering

The findings demonstrate that pathways into off-pitch volunteering in grassroots football are highly patterned and gendered, shaping both initial engagement and the roles women subsequently occupy. Across the volunteer dataset, the most common entry point into volunteering was triggered through family connection rather than a prior intention to volunteer. Both federation staff and volunteers identified family involvement as a dominant pathway into off-pitch roles, particularly for women.

For most volunteers interviewed, grassroots football volunteering began as a pragmatic response to a perceived need within their child's or husband's team. Three of the five volunteer interviewees reported entering volunteering to support the teams their children (Louise; Lara) or husbands (Betty) were involved in, or to help facilitate team formation. Louise described this directly, stating "I did it purely to get my son into a football team", while Lara similarly explained: "The reason that I got involved in this altogether was my daughter was a player in one of the teams in the club". Betty's experience further illustrates the unplanned and reactive nature of this pathway, describing how she stepped in to support her husband's team: "They needed somebody to fill out forms, and I went, 'Oh well, I can do that,' and suddenly I'm still here". This family hook is acknowledged by federation staff: "Family is usually the hook... parents are already there watching, and it becomes 'while you're here, is there something you can help with?'" (FS1). Whilst slightly different, Willow's pathway in remains in the family entry model, being encouraged by her father to volunteer in football.

Initial female voluntary assistance is overwhelming off-pitch in nature, often involving welfare, secretarial, and organisational responsibilities. A key distinction to emerge from the data was the gendered allocation of roles once families became

involved. Both volunteers and federation staff consistently described how fathers were more likely to be encouraged into coaching positions, while mothers were positioned within administrative and care-based roles. FS1 stated that “Traditionally, the dad might coach the team, and the mum thinks, ‘I might as well help out with admin while I’m here.’ That’s generally how it happens”. From a volunteer perspective, Louise articulated this division of labour stating, “I do all the admin... the dads do the coaching”. Lara’s pathway reflects a similar pattern, with her involvement beginning through her daughter’s girls’ team, coached by her husband, before she was asked to take on welfare responsibilities which later expanded into secretarial and treasurer roles. This suggests that family-driven entry points often funnel women into feminised roles that are essential but less visible within club structures.

While family connections functioned as a critical catalyst for entry, participants emphasised that this did not fully explain sustained engagement. Several interviewees described how initial family-driven motivations evolved into more intrinsic forms of commitment over time, particularly as enjoyment and confidence developed. Louise reflected on this shift, noting: “If I didn’t have kids, no, I probably wouldn’t have done it... but now that I’ve done it and how much I’ve enjoyed it, I may still consider doing that in the future”. Similarly, Betty described how what began as helping out gradually became central to her identity, illustrating how family-based entry routes may lead to long-term involvement when intrinsic rewards are present.

However, family-based entry routes are not the only pathways into volunteering. An alternative pathway was identified among younger participants at different life stages. Willow and Alice described entering volunteering as students, motivated primarily by

professional development, skill acquisition, and community connection. Alice highlighted how volunteering offered a meaningful way to build experience and belonging: “The volunteering part has become quite a big part of who I am... it’s an urge to develop and become better”. This pathway contrasts with family-driven entry points, positioning volunteering as a form of personal and professional development rather than a needs-based obligation.

These findings suggest that pathways into grassroots football volunteering are neither neutral nor incidental. Instead, they are shaped by gender, life stage, and social expectation, influencing who volunteers, why they volunteer, and which roles they are most likely to occupy. While family-driven pathways dominate women’s entry into off-pitch roles, the evolution from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation highlights opportunities for improved retention. However, without targeted strategies to broaden entry routes and challenge gendered role allocation, these pathways risk reinforcing existing inequalities within grassroots football structures.

6.2.2. Gendered cultures, exclusion, and legitimacy struggles

The findings demonstrate that grassroots football environments remain structurally male-dominated, although participants acknowledged that gradual progress is being made. Across all volunteers interviewed, football contexts were described as spaces in which masculinity is normalised and reproduced, often positioning women as peripheral or requiring them to continually establish their legitimacy. Louise captured this culture succinctly, describing football as involving “A bit of dick swinging”, reflecting how masculine dominance is both overt and widely accepted. This masculine culture was also highlighted by federation staff. For example, FS4 shared: “Football is still very much seen as a boys’ club — often not consciously, but it’s just overlooked”.

Gendered assumptions are particularly evident within committee and governance spaces. Betty described being automatically positioned in a subordinate role during meetings, with assumptions made about her administrative function despite holding senior responsibility. FS6 described tokenism within committee structures, whereby women are appointed to welfare or female-development roles, a practice which restricts their access to meaningful decision-making authority. Such experiences illustrate how women's authority is frequently questioned or overlooked, even when they occupy formal leadership roles.

For some participants, male dominance manifests in more explicit and hostile ways. Lara recounted experiencing direct verbal abuse while undertaking welfare responsibilities: "He just started verbally abusing me, telling me to go back into the kitchen". Similarly, Alice described exclusionary masculine environments characterised by gendered humour and stereotypes which required her presence in uncomfortable spaces in order to remain included: "I've been in rooms with these older men doing jokes, playing on stereotypes... I feel the need to be there, even though I don't want to, because otherwise I would be excluded". Furthermore, FS2 highlighted how such gendered cultures were normalised at club level, recalling a visit where a sign at the entrance to the clubhouse read: "Man shed, no wives allowed".

Even when sexism is less overt, interviewees described "Boys' club" (Lara) cultures which constrain confidence and participation. Lara went on to explain how masculine norms and humour contribute to feelings of intimidation and self-censorship: "Very boys club... you don't particularly feel like you belong there... it can be quite an intimidating environment... it stops you from speaking up". This description of football

environments foregrounds unbelonging as a central feature of women's experiences within grassroots football. Lara's account highlights how masculinised cultures produce feelings of intimidation and marginality, where women "Don't particularly feel like [they] belong" and consequently refrain from speaking up. Belonging, in this sense, is closely tied to voice and participation, with the absence of belonging directly reinforcing silence and self-censorship. Other volunteers similarly described belonging as conditional rather than assumed. Alice explained the need to remain physically present in uncomfortable settings in order to avoid exclusion, implying that inclusion is contingent upon enduring environments in which women do not feel at ease. As Betty noted, "You can be there, but you're not always included in the same way", capturing a distinction between physical presence and meaningful inclusion. This distinction suggests that occupying space within clubs does not automatically translate into belonging, recognition, or influence.

Several volunteers further emphasised that belonging, where it does emerge, develops slowly over time and is not guaranteed. Betty reflected, "It took a long time before I ever felt comfortable enough to speak up", while Louise similarly noted, "Once you feel a bit more settled and people know you, it's easier—but it doesn't happen straight away". These accounts indicate that belonging must be earned through prolonged presence and relational labour, rather than being embedded within club cultures from the outset. Importantly, Alice's reflections reinforce that even being "In the room" does not ensure inclusion, underscoring a clear separation between attendance and acceptance.

Willow and Sarah talked about receiving kit as being a symbolic marker of inclusion. Indeed, Willow included a photograph of the club kit (see Figure 14) commenting in the interview: “We all wear the same kit... it just makes you feel part of the team”. This is supported by Sarah who said: “I remember waiting so long just to have a bit of kit... I do like having the little t-shirt or the jumper or something, just to show that I am part of this team”. However, Sarah and federation staff commented that usually the kit that women get is often men’s fit and therefore not suitable: “When I finally got the kit, it was a men's XL t shirt”. FS6 recognised: “The kit is for men, and it doesn't fit the women. But nobody thinks, can we order women's fit kit for them to wear?”. Sarah did go on to highlight that progress in this area is being made, potentially due to more female representation on committees:

At the time when I received my T shirt, the club was run by a male. We now have pretty much an all female committee. So looking at those differences there again... we're a female committee. Women have women cut. The men's have male cut.

Thus, whilst kit can act as a symbolic source of belonging, this is not automatic or clear cut. Male-cut kit on female volunteers becomes a daily, bodily reminder that they are ‘added on’ to a male template. This influences comfort, body image, and willingness to be visibly associated with the club. From a federation staff lens, appropriately designed kit is not cosmetic; it is part of creating visible, embodied representation that gives women confidence that they are at the forefront of people’s minds.



Figure 14- Willow_Photo01_“3” (Take photographs reflecting your feelings of belonging/unbelonging when volunteering as a female)

These insights illustrate how women’s sense of belonging within grassroots football is shaped by gendered cultural norms and power relations, rendering belonging fragile, uneven, and continuously negotiated. Rather than functioning as a stable foundation for participation, belonging operates as a conditional outcome of navigating

masculinised environments, with significant implications for women’s confidence, legitimacy, and sustained engagement.

The cultural dynamics often extend into exclusion from decision-making processes. Participants described how legitimacy and influence were not guaranteed by formal roles alone, requiring women to work harder to be heard or remain physically present in male-dominated spaces. Alice reflected on the emotional toll of this exclusion, describing her eventual decision to “Walk away” from a voluntary role, illustrating how persistent exclusion can undermine retention even among highly committed volunteers. Similarly, exclusion from decision-making was associated with frustration and anger, with participants describing how constrained authority undermined their sense of value. Lara articulated this clearly: “Everything that I do needs to go through the two gents that run it... sometimes they don’t see the value in the things I’ve raised”. These dynamics illustrate how women’s legitimacy within grassroots football is conditional rather than assumed. This exclusion also had broader implications for how the women’s game itself was valued. Betty highlighted examples of funding allocated to women’s teams being redirected to men’s teams, while Lara described the frustration of witnessing boys’ teams consistently prioritised over girls’ teams within her club. Such practices reinforced perceptions that women’s football — and by extension, women volunteers — remained less legitimate within grassroots structures. Despite these challenges, participants also identified signs of cultural change. Drawing on over 40 years of experience, Betty reflected on increased openness and partial shifts in attitudes, although gendered power imbalances persisted: “I think it's instead of just being dismissed completely, they are listening, but I still have to shout louder than the blokes”.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate that while progress is occurring, women volunteering off-pitch in grassroots football continue to navigate entrenched male-dominated cultures marked by exclusion, conditional legitimacy, and ongoing struggles for recognition and influence. In addition to recognising these experiences, federation staff noted potential strategies to help address gendered exclusion and legitimacy struggles. Several federation staff emphasised that increasing women's representation within club committees and decision-making roles was critical, particularly in challenging tokenistic practices that confine women to welfare or female-development positions without authority. As FS4 explained, "If you've got one female, they're very easily overpowered. Two — there's safety in numbers". This highlights how numerical representation can shape voice and influence. Staff also stressed that responsibility for cultural change must sit with club leadership. FS4 argued that inclusion would only be sustained if clubs were willing to "Actually back it and put women in those positions", emphasising the need for leadership-led accountability rather than symbolic inclusion. Finally, the development of female-only volunteer networks was identified as a means of countering isolation. FS6 described these spaces as important because "Where you've only got one or two females in a club... coming together in a female-only environment is a safe space", allowing women to share experiences, gain confidence, and realise they are "Not on their own". These federation staff-identified strategies respond directly to the legitimacy challenges and exclusionary cultures described by volunteers.

6.2.3. Workload: Invisible labour and expectations

While off-pitch voluntary work is often invisible regardless of gender, the data suggests that women experience this invisibility in distinctly gendered ways. Across the dataset,

volunteers consistently described extensive administration, organisational, and emotional labour that occurs away from the pitch and largely out of public view. Although this work is essential to the functioning of grassroots football, it was frequently described as underestimated, unrecognised, and taken for granted. Federation staff accounts strongly reinforce this interpretation, explicitly recognising off-pitch roles as invisible within grassroots football structures. FS4 noted that these contributions are often overlooked because they occur away from public, resulting in assumptions that volunteers can continue to take on more responsibilities without recognition or support.

Several participants reflected on the sheer scale of workload. Lara highlighted how the time and effort involved in volunteering is routinely overlooked, particularly when women absorb multiple responsibilities: “People really underestimate the amount of work that needs to go into just volunteering, particularly when you’re the kind of person that has to pick up the slack across all areas”. This underestimation is closely linked to the invisibility of off-pitch work. Betty described how her contributions have historically been marginalised precisely because they do not take place in visible, on-field spaces: “All I did was take on the admin side... and a lot of that is missed because it’s not visible on the field of play”. Conversely, Alice in her photovoice interview discussed a photograph she had taken of a changing room (Alice asked for photograph not be included in the report), explaining: “I cleaned the whole place... and I didn’t tell anyone that I did it”. When asked why she did not tell anyone, she said, “If they know one person does everything, they might not think they need to contribute themselves”. This demonstrates that some forms of labour are intentionally kept invisible, with volunteers absorbing physical and organisational tasks without acknowledgment in order to sustain team functioning and avoid normalising reliance on a single individual.

For female volunteers, this invisibility may lead to feelings of exploitation. Lara explicitly framed her experience in gendered terms, drawing a comparison between how men and women's labour is valued: "I feel like if it was a male person doing that job, it wouldn't be as exploited as much". Rather than being rewarded with recognition or support, competence was frequently met with increased expectation. Federation staff recognised this pattern as a systemic issue within volunteer management practices. FS4 described how capable volunteers often "End up doing six, seven, eight more tasks than what they initially signed up for", suggesting that competence functions as a cue for task accumulation rather than redistribution. Lara captured this dynamic clearly, describing how being perceived as capable has resulted in additional responsibilities being assigned to her, rather than distributed elsewhere: "It's kind of like, 'oh yeah, you're wicked at handling loads of stuff, so yeah, you can just take it on'". This normalisation of exploitation means that women are often taken for granted, with increasing workload becoming an assumed part of their role. For some volunteers, the cumulative impact of these expectations extends beyond volunteering itself, affecting time away from football and wellbeing. Louise reflected on how escalating demands sometimes conflicts with family life: "Sometimes you do think, I haven't got the time for this... I'm not prioritising my own family".

These accounts illustrate how off-pitch volunteering is sustained by extensive invisible labour that is disproportionately shouldered by women. Volunteer workload is experienced not only as time-intensive but also emotionally demanding, with competence leading to further responsibility rather than recognition. Louise detailed: "I'm on about six or seven different WhatsApp groups... you're dealing with messages back and forward all the time... You've had five phone calls and 25 WhatsApp messages,

and you're still trying to sort out the issue". Sarah, who in one of her roles is a Club Welfare Officer highlighted the emotional demands of the role are exacerbated by the demands of life outside of volunteering: "I hit a really rough burnout... from the demands of my volunteering, roles, uni, life, work... There are moments where it's very overwhelming... You're dealing with police, social services... very intense moments that demand a lot of time". This raises important concerns for retention, as excessive and unacknowledged labour risks pushing even committed volunteers towards disengagement. Federation staff echoed these concerns, directly linking excessive workload and lack of appreciation to volunteer withdrawal. As FS4 observed, when individuals feel overused and undervalued in environments where they cannot push back, "What would you do? You'd leave". In addition to outlining these experiences, staff perspectives demonstrate an awareness that excessive and invisible workload is not simply the result of individual over-commitment, but a feature of how grassroots volunteering is structured. FS6 acknowledged that clubs often "Lean very heavily on some of those more engaged volunteers", resulting in responsibility becoming concentrated rather than shared. This tendency is exacerbated by the invisibility of off-pitch labour. Federation staff recognised an expectation that capable volunteers can continually take on more work, especially where work takes place outside public or matchday settings. FS5 further highlighted how unclear role boundaries contribute to escalating workload, describing how volunteers are frequently handed responsibilities with little guidance or limitation. Collectively, these federation staff insights reinforce volunteer accounts by illustrating how organisational practices—such as over-reliance on reliable individuals, informal task allocation, and lack of role clarity—normalise invisible and gendered labour within grassroots football.

For many volunteers, the accumulation of workload is compounded by a lack of recognition for the labour they undertake. Whilst volunteers described how they are not motivated by praise or formal reward, the absence of recognition contributes to feelings of being taken for granted. Lara reflected that women's work was often undervalued in comparison to men's, noting, "Sometimes they can take you for granted a little bit". Other volunteers echoed this sentiment, highlighting that off-pitch work is often invisible and therefore not acknowledged, despite being essential to the functioning of grassroots football. Volunteers did not frame recognition as needing overt praise, but rather as equitable treatment and respect. For example, Lara described frustration when ideas were filtered through men in leadership roles, stating that "Sometimes they don't see the value in the things I've raised". However, volunteers do also appreciate formal recognition and celebration. For example, Willow included a photograph of a Premier League Community Captain award (see Figure 15), describing it as a "Way of saying thank you" and recognition. The pendant acts as a daily reminder for Willow:

So it's in my room, and I see it. It's in my bedroom, and I see it every single day, and it's like a reminder of like you actually are recognised for what, what you've been doing, what you are doing.

Thus, the award confirms the value of her time and efforts in her volunteering.



Figure 15- Willow_Photo02_“5” (Take photographs that show how your work as an off-pitch volunteer is recognised/valued or overlooked)

Federation staff accounts reinforced volunteer interpretations of recognition as a key factor shaping workload sustainability. Staff did not frame recognition as formal reward, but as everyday appreciation and visibility for work undertaken. FS4 explicitly linked lack of recognition to disengagement, questioning, “If it consistently goes unnoticed and unappreciated, why bother?”. Similarly, FS6 emphasised that recognition

did not need to be symbolic or large-scale, noting that “It’s the simple, thoughtful actions that mean the most”. Staff also acknowledged that recognition was unevenly distributed, with FS4 observing that “Those nurturing and support roles are the ones that go unnoticed, and women are more likely to be in those roles”. These reflections support volunteer accounts by highlighting how lack of recognition operates as a structural condition that allows invisible labour to expand, contributes to women feeling taken for granted, and ultimately shapes whether volunteering feels sustainable over time.

6.2.4. Making things better for the next generation: Visibility, role modelling, and advocacy

The female volunteers interviewed overwhelmingly highlighted motivations centred on improving football environments for women and girls, particularly through removing barriers and creating playing opportunities to prevent the repetition of historic gendered exclusion within grassroots football. Louise explicitly connected her involvement to the desire to avoid repeating exclusionary experiences for young people: “I want it to be better for the kids coming through than what it was before... especially for the girls”. Similarly, Betty reflected on long-term changes she has witnessed, expressing a desire to contribute to continued improvement: “You look back and think, well, they didn’t have what they’ve got now. If we don’t keep pushing it, it’ll slip back again”. Federation staff echoed these views, framing women’s volunteering as a corrective response to historical exclusion. FS4 noted: “A lot of women who may not have had the opportunity to play football in their youth are now seeing daughters wanting to play football, and they’re doing their best to remove those barriers”.

Visibility and representation featured strongly in both volunteer and staff narratives, with women’s presence in clubs described as central to shaping girls’

aspirations and a sense of belonging. Lara described how being involved in off-pitch roles was important not just administratively, but symbolically: “If the girls see women doing these roles, they realise it’s not just men who run everything”. Alice similarly reflected on the importance of presence in these roles stating “Just being there matters. It shows girls this space isn’t just for one type of person”. Federation staff also articulated this with FS3 stating: “It’s about showing young girls that football isn’t something men run and women are now allowed into. Women can be the leaders, the decision-makers”. FS6 supported this view commenting: “You need to see it to be it. If girls don’t see women involved in football—off the pitch as well as on it—they just don’t think it’s for them”. These accounts indicate that women’s off-pitch volunteering carries symbolic and legitimising value, functioning as a visible challenge to masculinised norms. Representation is understood as shaping not only participation, but expectation, reinforcing the idea that women’s roles in football matter beyond their immediate tasks.

Furthermore, several volunteers highlighted the awareness of and the importance of being role models to young girls. As Sarah commented:

My girls were a massive part of that motivation. I wanted to show them that you can be young, you can be a female in a male- dominated space, not be scared, not be frightened, not be told you can’t — because you can.

Alice similarly commented: “It makes me eager to show what I’m made of and to inspire the next generation and open the playing field for them, so it won’t be a thing when they come over and do what I’m doing now”. These examples, illustrate that women’s involvement in off-pitch roles is frequently shaped by an awareness of being visible to others, particularly girls and young women. Rather than merely supporting existing

structures, women's presence was framed as actively challenging assumptions about who belongs in football spaces, positioning volunteering as a means of normalising women's authority and participation for future generations

Protecting and further developing women's provision was also a key contributing factor. Lara described frustration at perceived unequal treatment, but also the sense of responsibility as a female: "If nobody's there pushing for the girls, things just don't get done... the focus always slips back to the boys". Betty echoed this concern stating, "The women's side still has to fight for things the men just get automatically". Federation staff similarly recognised the central role women play in sustaining and advancing the women's game, particularly in challenging the persistent undervaluation of women's and girls' football within grassroots club structures (FS4; FS1). In this way, women's volunteering emerges as a forward-looking practice, rooted in advocacy and responsibility for ensuring more equitable football environments for future generations.

7. Limitations of current study

As with all research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations are grouped around participant characteristics and methodological considerations.

7.1. Participant-related limitations

First, the participant sample comprised women who were already engaged as off-pitch volunteers in grassroots football. Consequently, the perspectives of women who do not volunteer were not captured. While this focus enabled in-depth exploration of lived volunteering experiences, it limits insight into barriers to entry for potential volunteers. Engaging non-volunteers would likely have provided additional perspectives on

exclusion, access, and initial motivations, thereby strengthening understanding of recruitment challenges.

Second, the study did not include male volunteers. This decision was deliberate, as incorporating men's perspectives risked shifting attention away from women's experiences, which have historically been under-represented within football research. However, the absence of male participants limits opportunities for direct comparative gender analysis and restricts insight into how gendered dynamics may be differently experienced or reproduced. Relatedly, although this research foregrounds gender, it was beyond the scope of the study to explore other intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, or social class. The experiences of women from other marginalised groups may therefore not be fully represented, and future research adopting an intersectional approach would be valuable.

The study was also limited to participants affiliated with three football federations. However, a high level of consistency was observed across data from these federations, suggesting convergence in key themes. Relatedly, interview participants were predominantly based in England, with only one participant based in Sweden, limiting the geographical diversity of the qualitative sample.

7.2. Methodological limitations

The questionnaire data were cross-sectional in nature, meaning that causal relationships between motivation, organisational factors, and volunteering experiences cannot be inferred. While the questionnaire provides valuable insight into patterns and associations, longitudinal data would be required to examine changes in motivation, retention, or development over time. In addition, the questionnaire included measures of

enablers and barriers that represented initial instrument development, rather than a fully validated scale. While informed by theory and prior literature, these measures would benefit from further refinement and validation to enhance reliability and comparability.

The photovoice component also contributed to the study's limitations, most notably through lower than expected participant uptake. Given evidence from the wider dataset that volunteers' time is already stretched, the two-week photo-mission commitment followed by an interview may have been ambitious. This highlights a broader tension when employing participatory methods with volunteer populations and suggests that more flexible or embedded participatory approaches may be necessary in future research. Furthermore, only two photographs are presented in the findings, illustrating that the photovoice functioned primarily as a participatory bridge, rather than a standalone dataset.

8. Impact of research

This section focuses on answering Research Question 2- how can football federations improve recruitment, retention, and development of female off-pitch grassroots football volunteers? It begins by considering how the findings extend, challenge, and contribute to existing theory and empirical knowledge discussed in the literature, through the multi-level lens, institutional theory, and self-determination theory. The section then outlines a series of research-informed recommendations, structured around four key strands: 1) Move beyond symbolic inclusion; 2) Resist the normalisation of excessive and invisible work; 3) Strengthen supportive peer networks; and 4) Foster intrinsically rewarding volunteering environments. These recommendations are not intended to represent an exhaustive or prescriptive agenda for change. Nor do they mark the conclusion of

dialogue between the research team and football federations and UEFA. Rather, they are offered as a catalyst for continued reflection, discussion, and collaborative action among stakeholders.

8.1. Contribution to preexisting knowledge

This research addresses the three gaps identified in the literature review, with particular emphasis on the under-theorised gendered dynamics of off-pitch grassroots football volunteering. While previous research has largely focused on event-based volunteering and on-pitch roles, this study provides detailed empirical insight into day-to-day, off-pitch volunteering, specifically through the lived experiences of female volunteers. This strengthens the theorisation of female experiences within grassroots off-pitch volunteer environments, moving beyond descriptive accounts of underrepresentation to explain how these experiences are shaped by interacting structural, organisational, and individual factors. Each of the three theoretical perspectives identified in the literature review are now discussed in relation to the findings of the study.

8.1.1. Multi-level lens

Adopting a multi-level perspective (Cunningham, 2023), this research demonstrates how women's experiences are shaped across macro, meso and micro levels. A key contribution lies in identifying the limits of federation influence at the macro-level. While UEFA and national federations play a central role in shaping policy, strategy and inclusion-related discourse, the findings highlight that their ability to influence club-level (i.e. meso-level) culture and everyday practices is constrained. Many of the gendered dynamics identified in this study, including informal recruitment practices, gendered role allocation, and exclusionary club cultures, are embedded within the meso-level of grassroots clubs which remain resistant to top-down change. This extends existing

literature by demonstrating that macro-level initiatives may be absorbed symbolically rather than operationalised in practice, reinforcing the gap between policy intention and lived experience. As such, the findings highlight the need for federations to consider how policy can be more effectively translated into grassroots contexts, rather than assuming that strategic commitments alone will drive change.

8.1.2. Institutional theory

The findings further contribute to institutional theory by illustrating how gendered institutional logics shape everyday volunteering experiences. Institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012) within sport have been shown to privilege masculine norms and taken-for-granted organisational practices that shape who is seen as legitimate within leadership and governance roles. From an institutional perspective, these patterns are sustained through processes of reproduction and isomorphism, whereby organisations adopt and reinforce established norms over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Within football specifically, these logics are historically embedded and reproduced through longstanding governance structures and cultural practices (Lusted, 2009; Schlesinger & Weigelt-Schlesinger, 2016).

While previous research has identified the persistence of masculine norms within sport (Burton, 2015; Hovden, 2010), this study extends this work by showing how these logics are experienced in practice through:

- **Conditional legitimacy-** where women must continually establish their competence and authority within male-dominated environments. For example, female volunteers described situations where their ideas and decisions required validation from male counterparts, or where they felt the need to remain present

in uncomfortable spaces to avoid exclusion. This reflects a context in which authority is not automatically granted but must be earned and repeatedly reinforced.

- **Gendered role expectations-** with women disproportionately undertaking administrative, welfare, and support roles. For instance, volunteers described how fathers were typically positioned as coaches, while mothers assumed responsibility for administration, welfare, and organisational tasks. These patterns align with existing literature on gendered divisions of labour in sport volunteering (Knoppers et al., 2021; Stride et al., 2020), but are extended here through detailed insight into how these roles are normalised and sustained within grassroots football.
- **Reproduction of existing practices-** whereby informal club structures and everyday routines reinforce male dominance in leadership and decision-making. This is evident in family-driven entry pathways, informal allocation of roles, and reliance on existing networks, which collectively limit women's access to positions of influence. These dynamics reflect the continuation of historically embedded practices within grassroots football structures.

All in all, these findings demonstrate that increasing participation alone does not equate to inclusion. While women are present within clubs, their experiences reveal that belonging, legitimacy, and influence remain uneven and conditional. Inclusion, therefore, is not simply about increasing the number of women involved, but about challenging the underlying institutional norms that determine whose contributions are recognised, valued, and legitimised (Scott, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012).

8.1.3. Self-determination theory

Drawing on Deci and Ryan (2000), the findings provide strong empirical support for self-determination theory (SDT), while extending its application to female off-pitch volunteering. The findings show that volunteers are primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, with high levels of autonomy, competence, and relatedness associated with sustained engagement. The study advances SDT in this context by demonstrating that these psychological needs are not experienced in isolation but are shaped by gendered organisational environments. For female volunteers, autonomy is often constrained by informal expectations and the gradual accumulation of unpaid responsibilities; competency tends to be demonstrated through taking on additional work rather than through formal recognition or progression; and relatedness is frequently experienced as conditional belonging within male-dominated environments. This highlights that motivation is not simply an individual characteristic, rather, is dependent on the extent to which environments are need-supportive. These environments will help to enable volunteers to feel autonomous, competent, and connected, which are critical for sustaining motivation: providing important insight for how federations approach volunteer development and retention.

8.1.4. Theoretical contribution summary

Taken together, this research advances knowledge by offering a mechanism-based understanding of women's experiences in off-pitch grassroots football volunteering, demonstrating how inequalities are reproduced through the interaction of individual motivation (SDT), organisational practices (multi-level dynamics), and institutional logics. In doing so, the study highlights that women's participation is shaped not only by

personal motivations, but by the extent to which organisational environments enable or constrain autonomy, competence, relatedness, and perceptions of legitimacy.

Importantly, while federations play a critical role at the macro level, the findings reinforce that meaningful institutional change requires alignment across levels, with macro-level policy needing to translate into meso-level organisational practice and micro-level experience. This underscores the need to move beyond participation-focused strategies alone and highlights the need to address the structural and cultural conditions through which inclusion is enacted, providing a clear theoretical and empirical foundation for the recommendations that follow.

8.2. Recommendations

The findings of this study underpin a set of research informed recommendations groups into four strands. Acknowledging the diversity of contexts, structures, and resource capacities across football federations, these recommendations are presented as principles of good practice rather than prescriptive instructions. While it is envisaged that federations may aspire to work toward these recommendations (if not already doing so), the study recognises that implementing change within grassroots football systems is complex and often constrained by practical, cultural, and organisational factors. We also recognise that that federations may already be actively deploying strategies from the recommendations. Three out of the four recommendation strands are dependent on clubs at the meso-level. It is important to acknowledge that whilst federations at the macro-level have the opportunity to influence changemakers, they are not the changemakers themselves. Rather the changemakers are those operating within local

grassroots organisations. This is reflected in the key actors identified for each strand of recommendations. Table 5 provides an overview of the recommendations.

Table 5- Overview of recommendations

Strand	Key actors	Recommendations
Move beyond symbolic inclusion	Voluntary football organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move away from tokenism. • Move away from assuming representation equals inclusion.
Resist the normalisation of excessive and invisible workload	Voluntary football organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce clear role descriptions with defined boundaries. • Promote shared responsibility. • Position volunteer wellbeing as a priority.
Strengthen peer networks	Federations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively facilitate peer connection. • Support women-only networks.
Foster intrinsically rewarding volunteering environments	Voluntary football organisations and federations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect volunteer autonomy. • Support competence through development. • Strengthen relatedness and belonging. • Use extrinsic motivations in a supportive, rather than essential manner.

8.2.1. Move beyond symbolic inclusion

This research shows that formal inclusion alone is insufficient to challenge gender inequality in grassroots football. Despite occupying official roles, female off-pitch volunteers often lack influence and legitimacy within decision-making spaces, reinforcing a pattern of symbolic rather than substantive inclusion. Meaningful inclusion requires not just access to roles, but the redistribution of voice, power, and legitimacy within grassroots governance structures.

To address this, voluntary football organisations should move away from practices including:

- **Tokenism**- whereby the appointment of women (however equal the split with men is) is treated as adequate representation.
- **Assuming representation equals inclusion**- particularly when committee membership does not confer meaningful authority or opportunities to shape outcomes.

8.2.2. Resist the normalisation of excessive and invisible workload

A consistent theme from the findings is that excessive workload and lack of time contribute significantly to female volunteer dissatisfaction and burnout. While many female off-pitch volunteers enter roles with high levels of commitment and intrinsic motivation, this often results in escalating responsibilities, blurred role boundaries, and the normalisation of invisible labour. Over time, such practices are likely to undermine volunteer wellbeing and threaten long-term retention.

The findings of this study indicate that these workloads are frequently gendered in nature, encompassing administrative, emotional, and organisational labour that is essential to grassroots football but rarely recognised or redistributed. As a result, competence and availability are rewarded with additional expectations rather than support, creating sustainability risks for both individual retention and organisational functioning. To address this, voluntary football organisations should:

- **Introduce clear role descriptions with defined boundaries**- outlining expected responsibilities, time commitments, and points of review. This may help to

prevent role creep and ensure that volunteering remains manageable and transparent whilst allowing for flexibility and autonomy.

- **Promote shared responsibility-** reducing reliance on a small number of highly committed individuals and lowering the risk of individual burnout. If individual burnout does occur, then there is a range of individuals who can cover responsibilities.
- **Position volunteer wellbeing as a priority-** recognising workload management as integral to volunteer retention, and as part of providing a duty of care to volunteers.

8.2.3. Strengthen supportive peer networks

The findings highlight the crucial role that supportive peer networks play in the retention and wellbeing of female off-pitch grassroots football volunteers. Peer support emerged as a key facilitator of sustained engagement, providing emotional reassurance, practical advice, and a sense of belonging within environments that can otherwise feel isolating or exclusionary. Peer relationships with other females help to mitigate experiences of marginalisation, excessive workload, and lack of recognition. These networks function as safe spaces in which shared challenges can be articulated and normalised. This is particularly significant given that off-pitch governance spaces are often male-dominated, where women may feel undervalued or reluctant to voice concerns.

Beyond their social function, the findings suggest that peer networks also perform an important organisational function, contributing to volunteer retention and capacity building. Such networks help foster social capital, collective identity, and informal learning, all of which are critical to sustaining long-term volunteer engagement. To strengthen the impact of supportive peer networks, federations may wish to:

- **Actively facilitate peer connection-** through structured induction, buddy systems, or informal mentoring arrangements.
- **Support women-only networks-** recognising their role in reducing isolation and enabling shared problem-solving without fear of condemnation or marginalisation.

8.2.4. Foster intrinsically rewarding volunteering environments

The findings of this study demonstrate that female off-pitch volunteers are primarily intrinsically motivated. They volunteer because of enjoyment, family and community connections, and identity, rather than external reward. Whilst younger volunteers may be motivated by career progression opportunities, both the quantitative and qualitative data sets show a strong intrinsic motivation. This aligns strongly with SDT, which posits that sustained motivation is most likely when activities support individuals' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Female volunteers in this study reported the greatest satisfaction where they felt trusted in their roles (autonomy), capable and valued for their skills (competence), and socially connected within their club or community (relatedness). Conversely, experiences that undermined these needs—such as excessive workload, lack of voice, or limited recognition—were associated with frustration and disengagement. Whilst recognising the value of extrinsic incentives, such as training, qualifications, and progression opportunities (particularly for newer or younger volunteers), the findings caution that these alone are unlikely to sustain long-term engagement if intrinsic motivations are eroded. Overall, the study suggests that the sustainability of female off-pitch volunteering depends less on creating new incentives to attract women, and

more on preserving the conditions that make volunteering enjoyable, meaningful, and personally rewarding. To foster intrinsically rewarding volunteering environments, football organisations and federations should seek to:

- **Protect volunteer autonomy-** by allowing flexibility in how roles are enacted and avoiding overly prescriptive or bureaucratic expectations.
- **Support competence through development-** ensuring volunteers feel confident, capable, and valued rather than overwhelmed or underprepared.
- **Strengthen relatedness and belonging-** recognising the importance of social connection, peer support, and community identity to volunteer satisfaction (see Supportive peer networks).
- **Use extrinsic motivations in a supportive, rather than essential manner-** extrinsic motivations should not be seen as a substitute for intrinsic motivation.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the experiences of female off-pitch grassroots football volunteers and to identify how football federations can better support their recruitment, retention, and development. Drawing on mixed-methods data across three European federations, the findings demonstrate that women's volunteering experiences are shaped by complex interactions between individual motivation, organisational practice, and entrenched institutional norms. While female volunteers are highly motivated and emotionally invested in grassroots football—often driven by enjoyment, community commitment, and a desire to improve opportunities for future generations—their engagement is frequently undermined by gendered cultures, conditional legitimacy, excessive and invisible workloads, and limited recognition. These challenges do not

reflect a lack of willingness to volunteer, but rather organisational environments that constrain autonomy, competence, and belonging.

The research contributes both theoretical and practical insight, offering a strong foundation for rethinking how volunteering is organised, valued, and sustained within European football. Crucially, the findings reinforce that responsibility for change cannot rest solely with individual women or with macro-level federation-led policy initiatives. Although UEFA and national federations play a vital role in shaping vision, strategy, and resources, inclusive change must be enacted at the meso-level of grassroots clubs, where everyday practices and cultures are produced and reproduced. Addressing gender inequality in off-pitch volunteering therefore requires coordinated action and alignment across macro, meso, and micro levels. Ultimately, fostering more inclusive, supportive, and intrinsically rewarding off-pitch volunteering environments is essential not only for advancing gender equality, but also for safeguarding the long-term sustainability and social impact of grassroots football across Europe.

The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to support ongoing reflection and dialogue between UEFA, national associations, and grassroots organisations, rather than provide a fixed endpoint for reform. The report will be shared with federation partners in advance of presentation to UEFA, enabling stakeholders to reflect on the findings and provide responses that will further enrich discussion and support collaborative action.

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11. Appendices

11.1. Appendix 1- Copy of questionnaire

Due to formatting issues, Appendix 1 has been shared as a separate file.

11.2. Appendix 2- Semi-structured interview schedule for volunteers

Interview schedule- Exploring the barriers and enablers for female volunteering within grassroots football

Opening remarks

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview as part research funded by the UEFA Research Grant Programme.
- This interview will involve me asking a series of questions, asked to find out about your experiences and opinions.
- The interview should take no longer than one hour. If we are still chatting come the hour mark, I will ask whether you want to carry on, stop and return another time, or stop and not be interviewed again.
- Please feel free to share as much as you can. Some answers you provide may seem obvious to you, or you may feel you have already answered a particular question at an earlier point. However, none of the questions are designed to catch you out. Please feel free to disagree with me at any point.
- What you share with me will remain anonymous through the use of participant IDs and pseudonyms.
- The audio of the interview will be recorded, and at times you may see me making notes. The recording will be used to fully transcribe the interview afterwards. You will be provided with a copy of the transcription to review.
- Do you have any questions?
- Please confirm that you are happy to agree to take part and proceed with the interview?

Warm up

1. Tell me a bit about your football involvement and your off-pitch role?
 - a. How long have you been volunteering for?

Slide show questions

2. What motivates you in your volunteering? (see slide)
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant motive for you?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can it be further strengthened?
3. What discourages you in your volunteering? (see slide)
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant discouragement for you?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can this discouragement be reduced?
4. What encourages you to continue to volunteer?
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant encouragement for you?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can this encouragement be strengthened?

Additional questions

5. What positive experiences do you have as a female volunteer?
6. Do you have any negative experiences?
7. What opportunities or challenges does the social environment that you volunteer in provide?
8. To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging/unbelonging when volunteering as a female in grassroots football?
 - a. What causes your feelings of belonging/unbelonging?
 - b. Can you provide me with some examples?
 - c. Why is feeling a sense of belonging important to you?
9. To what extent do you feel your volunteering is recognised/valued or overlooked?
 - a. How does this make you feel?
 - b. Is it important for your volunteering to be recognised/valued?
 - i. Why/why not?
10. How do you learn and develop as a volunteer?
 - a. Where/who are your sources of support?
 - b. Is learning and development important for you?
 - i. Why/why not?

Closing question

11. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to mention regarding what we have discussed, or anything you think is important that you have not yet shared?

Thank you very much for your time in partaking in this interview.

11.3. Appendix 3- Semi-structured interview schedule for federation staff

Staff interview schedule- Exploring the barriers and enablers for female volunteering within grassroots football

Opening remarks

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview as part research funded by the UEFA Research Grant Programme.
- This interview will involve me asking a series of questions, asked to find out about your experiences and opinions.
- The interview should take no longer than one hour. If we are still chatting come the hour mark, I will ask whether you want to carry on, stop and return another time, or stop and not be interviewed again.
- Please feel free to share as much as you can. Some answers you provide may seem obvious to you, or you may feel you have already answered a particular question at an earlier point. However, none of the questions are designed to catch you out. Please feel free to disagree with me at any point.
- What you share with me will remain anonymous through the use of participant IDs and pseudonyms.
- The audio of the interview will be recorded, and at times you may see me making notes. The recording will be used to fully transcribe the interview afterwards. You will be provided with a copy of the transcription to review.
- Do you have any questions?
- Please confirm that you are happy to agree to take part and proceed with the interview?

Warm up

1. Tell me a bit about your role and how this relates to female volunteers?
 - a. How long have you been in the role for?
2. Why do we want more female off-pitch volunteers?

Slide show questions

3. In your opinion, what are the main motives for females volunteering in grassroots football?
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant motive?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can it be further strengthened?

- iv. What, if anything, is being done to strengthen it?
- 4. In your opinion, what discourages females volunteering in grassroots football?
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant discouragement?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can this discouragement be reduced?
 - iv. What, if anything, is being done to reduce its impact?
- 5. In your opinion, what encourages females to continue to volunteer?
 - a. Select up to three of the notes on the slide.
 - b. For each of the three:
 - i. Why is this a significant encouragement?
 - ii. What impact would there be if this was no longer present?
 - iii. How can this encouragement be strengthened?
 - iv. What, if anything, is being done to strengthen/further develop this?

Additional questions

- 6. What challenges within the social environment are you seeking to address to help encourage more female volunteers and improve the experience of existing female volunteers?
 - a. What opportunities are you providing to help break down these challenges?
- 7. What are some of the positive experiences that female volunteers report?
- 8. What are some of the negative experiences that female volunteers report?
- 9. How do you try to encourage and promote a sense of belonging for female volunteers?
 - a. Can you provide me with some examples?
- 10. Are you aware of any of the key motivations/discouragement for females when volunteering?
 - a. How are you trying to address these?
- 11. How do you seek to recognise female volunteer efforts?
- 12. What learning and development do you provide to female volunteers?

Closing question

- 13. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to mention regarding what we have discussed, or anything you think is important that you have not yet shared?

Thank you very much for your time in partaking in this interview.

11.4. Appendix 4- Prompts for semi-structured interviews

As per interview schedule, prompts slightly reworded when presented to federation staff.

What motivates you in your volunteering?

Family	Community	Enjoyment	New skills	Career development
Sense of belonging	Employability	Personal satisfaction	Gaining experience	Desire to work in football
Previous football involvement	Social media influence	Desire to inspire next generation	Inspiration from role models	Meet new people
		Networking		

What discourages you in your volunteering?

Lack of time	Workload	Lack of recognition	Lack of training	Lack of support
Lack of appreciation	Legitimacy questioned	Exclusion	Exclusion from decision making	Culture unwelcome
	Negative past experiences	Male dominated	Contributions not noticed	

What encourages you to continue volunteering?



11.5. Appendix 5- Photovoice interview schedule including SHOWED

Photovoice interview schedule- Exploring the barriers and enablers for female volunteering within grassroots football

Opening remarks

- Thank you for agreeing to take part in this photovoice interview as part research funded by the UEFA Research Grant Programme.
- This interview will involve sharing and discussing the photographs you took during the photography period.
- In advance of taking photographs and this interview, you received a participant information sheet and a consent form, which you were asked to read, sign, and return to me. Thank you for doing this.
- The interview should take no longer than one hour. If we are still chatting come the hour mark, I will ask whether you want to carry on, stop and return another time, or stop and not be interviewed again.
- Please feel free to share as much as you can. Some answers you provide may seem obvious to you, or you may feel you have already answered a particular question at an earlier point. However, none of the questions are designed to catch you out. Please feel free to disagree with me at any point.
- What you share with me will remain anonymous through the use of participant IDs and pseudonyms.
- The audio of the interview will be recorded, and at times you may see me making notes. The recording will be used to fully transcribe the interview afterwards. You will be provided with a copy of the transcription to review.
- Before I start the interview, do you have any questions?

Photo selection

The researcher with the participant will agree a selection of photographs (up to five) to discuss during this interview.

Questions

Warm up

1. Tell me a bit about your football involvement and your off-pitch role?
 - a. How long have you been volunteering for?

Questions for each photograph **SHOWED** technique (Wang, 1999)

2. What do you **See** here?
3. What is really **Happening** here?
4. How does this relate to **Our (your)** role as a volunteer?
5. **Why** does this problem, concern, or strength exist?
6. How could this image **Educate** others?
7. What can we **Do** about it?

Supplementary questions outside of the **SHOWED** technique

8. How can the situation photographed be improved?
9. Please tell me why you chose to take this photograph?
10. Why did you want to share this photograph?
11. Why is it important for you?
12. How does this photograph make you feel as a grassroots football volunteer?
Anything else you want to mention about this photograph?

Closing questions

13. Are there any photographs that you might have wanted to take but did not? If yes, please can you tell me more about that?
 - a. Go through **SHOWED** framework if able to.
14. Before we finish, is there anything else you would like to mention regarding what we have discussed, or anything you think is important that you have not yet shared?

Thank you very much for your time in partaking in this interview.

Reference

Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health, 8*(2), 185-192.