

Play It Brave: Advancing Girls' Mental and Menstrual Health Through Sport



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Key Words

Mental health, menstrual health, girls' empowerment, safe spaces, boxing, purposeful play, wellbeing

Summary

Play It Brave is a holistic programme by Impact Academy Egypt, supported by Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), that uses sport, particularly boxing and purposeful play, to improve girls' mental, menstrual, and overall wellbeing. The programme creates safe spaces where girls can engage in physical activity while accessing psychosocial support, menstrual health education, and mentorship. Implemented across Cairo, Fayoum, and coastal communities, it addresses stigma, gender inequality, and lack of access to health information. By integrating sport with health awareness, Play It Brave empowers girls to build confidence, resilience, and agency, contributing to improved wellbeing and gender equality.

Problem Statement

In Egypt, adolescent girls and young women face significant challenges related to mental health, menstrual health, and access to safe spaces. Cultural stigma surrounding menstruation often leads to misinformation, shame, and restricted participation in daily activities, including sports. At the same time, mental health remains under-discussed, with limited access to safe, supportive environments where girls can express themselves and seek guidance.

These challenges are more pronounced in underserved communities such as Basatin, Fayoum, and Delta regions, where economic barriers and social norms further restrict girls' mobility and opportunities. Girls often lack access to accurate health information, psychosocial support, and safe recreational spaces. This results in low self-confidence, social isolation, and reduced participation in education and community life.

Additionally, gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment create unsafe environments that discourage girls from engaging in public activities, including sports. Addressing these intersecting issues requires integrated approaches that combine physical activity, health education, and psychosocial support. Within this context, boxing has also traditionally been perceived in Egypt as a male-dominated and aggressive sport, often considered inappropriate or unsafe for girls. Social norms have discouraged participation because of concerns about masculinity, injury and reputational judgement, including perceptions that taking part could make girls less suitable for marriage. Play It Brave responds by creating safe, inclusive environments where girls can improve their mental and physical wellbeing while gaining the knowledge and confidence to navigate these societal challenges. By reframing boxing as a tool for empowerment, discipline and self-expression rather than violence, the programme directly challenges these perceptions.

About the Programme

Play It Brave is a multi-location initiative implemented by Impact Academy Egypt in partnership with Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), designed to improve girls' mental health, menstrual health awareness and overall wellbeing through sport. The programme engages girls aged 14–24 from underserved communities, using boxing and purposeful play as entry points for participation and personal development.

The programme combines structured sport training with interactive workshops on menstrual health, mental wellbeing and personal development. Girls take part in sessions that address menstrual hygiene management, challenge stigma and promote body awareness, while psychosocial support is integrated through guided discussions, mentoring and professionally led wellbeing sessions. Delivery ranges from short intensive camps of three to five days to extended cycles of up to three months, combining training, workshops, mentorship and leadership development. This hybrid format balances immediate engagement with longer-term capacity building.

Implementation is community-based and culturally sensitive, with the programme working closely with local stakeholders and families to build trust and encourage participation. Coaches are trained not only in sport delivery but also in creating inclusive, trauma-informed environments where girls feel safe and supported. Safe, girls-only spaces led by female coaches are central to this approach.

Play It Brave also addresses GBV prevention by equipping girls with knowledge, confidence and peer support networks. Through sport, girls develop resilience, teamwork and leadership skills while gaining tools to advocate for their health and rights. Although boxing is the primary tool, football and team games are also used to strengthen teamwork and communication, alongside workshops and discussions on menstrual health, leadership and safeguarding.

By integrating sport with health education and psychosocial support, the programme challenges harmful norms, increases girls' participation in public spaces and contributes to broader gender equality. Physical training also provides a practical language for difficult conversations: it helps normalise body awareness and address myths about girls' bodies and performance in relation to menstrual health; partner drills, pad work and sparring build trust and cooperation; learning to "stand your ground" physically can translate into greater social confidence and voice; and training under pressure strengthens mental resilience by reflecting real-life challenges. In communities where these topics are often taboo, sport therefore becomes a way to make them more accessible and discussable.

Outcomes

Play It Brave improved participants' mental wellbeing, confidence and knowledge of menstrual health. Girls reported feeling more comfortable discussing menstruation and challenging stigma within their communities, while increased participation in sport contributed to improved physical health and self-esteem. The programme also strengthened awareness of mental health, providing coping strategies and access to supportive networks, and participants demonstrated greater confidence in expressing themselves and engaging in group activities.

The initiative also contributed to shifting community perceptions, with greater acceptance of girls' participation in sport and discussions around women's health. By creating safe, girls-only spaces led by female coaches, Play It Brave has helped normalise girls' participation in combat sports and position girls as athletes, leaders and role models. This reflects wider Impact Academy outcomes in which communities increasingly recognise women as capable athletes and leaders in sport. By combining sport with education and psychosocial support, the programme therefore supports both individual wellbeing and wider social change.

Available data from a recent cycle shows 125+ direct beneficiaries, including 10 young women trained as coaches and leaders, 60 adolescent girls actively participating—including refugee girls from Sudan—five female coaches upskilled, and 40+ community members engaged through events. The programme's influence also extends indirectly to families, local clubs and communities, contributing to longer-term cultural change. Across Impact Academy programmes, including Play It Brave, hundreds of girls have been reached over multiple years through camps, competitions and mentorship initiatives.

Successes & Challenges

A key success of Play It Brave was its ability to create safe spaces where girls could openly discuss mental and menstrual health, topics often considered taboo. Integrating sport with health education proved effective in engaging participants and sustaining their involvement, while the programme's work with families and communities helped build trust and increase acceptance of girls' participation in sport. Girls demonstrated growth in confidence, leadership and peer support.

Challenges included navigating cultural sensitivities around discussing menstruation and mental health, as well as logistical constraints in coordinating multi-location activities. Some activities required adaptation because of local approvals and venue availability. Despite these challenges, the programme remained flexible and responsive, helping to maintain continuity and impact.

The programme's longer-term effect can also be seen in individual leadership journeys. Tia Hamza transitioned from participant to mentor, gained professional exposure through an internship with the Anti-Doping Committee at the African Aquatics Championships, and now supports younger girls. Hannah Saleh Abdel Bari followed a similar path, moving from participant to mentor, completing an internship with Impact Academy and supporting younger girls. Together, these examples illustrate the programme's cycle of leadership and sustainability.

Additional stories across the wider Impact Academy ecosystem include girls who began with no access to sport and went on to become national champions, participants entering STEM education pathways through the SAFE programme, and young women progressing into coaching and community leadership roles. These journeys reinforce the wider purpose of Play It Brave: not only participation in sport, but reclaiming space, reshaping narratives and building a generation of girls who are physically strong, mentally resilient and socially empowered to lead.

Lessons & Recommendations

- Integrating health education with sport increases engagement and impact
- Safe spaces are essential for addressing sensitive topics like menstruation and mental health
- Community engagement is key to overcoming cultural barriers
- Psychosocial support should be embedded in sports programmes
- Holistic approaches lead to stronger, sustainable outcomes

References

- Impact Academy Egypt social media
- CFLI Egypt
- Project documentation

Complementary material:

- https://www.instagram.com/p/DRqkm2gijht/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==
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