The impact of the F4P phenomenon has been felt in many parts of the world. Jane Shurrush, Manager of the British Council Israel’s regional office in Nazareth, commented on F4P’s work in bringing Jewish and Arab Israeli children together and training Israeli and Jordanian coaches alongside each other: “The research on F4P has shown that an approach that is developed alongside professionals in the field, accompanied by research that informs changes in project activity can have positive results that are not found in projects that simply bring people together without an informed approach. This methodology is now being implemented and expanded into other areas of sport.”

Michael Boyd, the Director of Football Development at the Irish Football Association (IFA) described his experience of F4P as “eye-opening” in promoting inclusion. The IFA has based its grassroots programmes on F4P, promoting the values in coaching to thousands of children in Northern Ireland and collaborating with partners north and south of the border. Sport contributes to personal development and positive community relations but, too often, the integration of women and girls is overlooked.

New research at the University of Brighton is helping to address this oversight by investigating the ways in which netball can help girls’ development through sport.

Football is a universal language, part of today’s culture on every continent and in every section of society. Since 2001, academics from the University of Brighton have been working with sports and voluntary organisations around the world to help heal fractured societies and promote a fairer world. Football4Peace (F4P) emerged from a partnership between researchers at the University of Brighton and the World Sports Peace Project in Israel. Today, in many different countries, it has touched the lives of 8,000 children, nearly 600 coaches and some of the sports’ leading institutions, from England’s Football Association to the Korean Sharing Movement and the University of Johannesburg in South Africa.

Early research identified the primary challenges in developing and implementing F4P’s distinctive model of values-based coaching which is rooted in core values of neutrality, equity and inclusion, respect, trust, and responsibility. As the project grew, it confirmed that sport-based interventions can challenge prejudices in tangible and sustainable ways, relating to foster intercultural understanding and build stronger communities while at the same time embedding good practice for coaches, teachers and community leaders.

Divided societies across the world have been brought together by the positive impact of sport, thanks to social intervention carried out by researchers at the University of Brighton through the Football4Peace initiative. Related innovative research is now creating opportunities for adolescent girls to grow into new empowering roles in their societies, all part of the potential change that sport can bring to the world.
An equally important element to this programme is the way that the community sport coaches (CSCs) not only teach netball skills, but also become tangible role models for the girls. Through interactions with the CSCs, girls were subtly encouraged to reconsider previously accepted limitations that they had placed on themselves.

Research has shown how sport for women in countries of the Global South brings a wide range of benefits including learning about one’s physical capabilities and opening doors to social interactions in a way that few other activities can. Female coaches act as important role models, allowing young women to work alongside women who have received specialist training and who act as mentors.

Research on the potential of girls’ empowerment through sport is currently underway with The Goal-Delhi programme, led by Dr Megan Chawansky, from the University of Brighton and Dr Payoshni Mitra, an independent researcher based in Kolkata. Their research explores changes in Goal participants after completing the 10-month programme, which combines netball training with life skills modules on health and hygiene, communication skills, and financial literacy. This kind of programming gives them legitimate, safe and supervised access to a sport that otherwise might well be missing from their lives.

"Research tells us that adolescent girls can reap the benefits of sport participation. The girls we interviewed told us that they felt healthier and stronger from their participation,” said Dr Chawansky.

The research on F4P has shown that an approach that is developed alongside professionals in the field, accompanied by research that informs changes in project activity can have positive results that are not found in projects that simply bring people together without an informed approach.

Jane Shurrush, Manager of the British Council Israel’s regional office in Nazareth

From the Football4Peace programme, building a new sense of shared humanity, to adolescent girls in India taking a more equal role in their families, the University of Brighton’s practical support and research on sport for development and peace (SDP) is helping to create stronger, fairer and more cohesive societies around the world.