



Former Arsenal football player Johana Djourou, who runs Mondialiti, coaches young girls and boys during a friendly match in Les Charmilles, Switzerland. [Betty Njeru, Standard]



Teenage girls, who form part of Lignon FC, during a school match in Vernier, Switzerland. [Betty Njeru, Standard]

A game for all: Inside Switzerland push for gender parity in football

► Johan Djourou's "Mondialito" football project unites boys and girls to foster inclusivity in sports.

► While girls' football teams were once rare, efforts to increase participation are gaining ground.

BETTY NJERU, GENEVA

It's a sunny Wednesday afternoon in June, and a group of about 20 girls and boys, aged between 8 and 15, gather for a friendly football match in Les Charmilles, a quiet town tucked away from the busy streets of Geneva.

Spirits are high, sun's shining, and their brightly colored red and yellow jerseys immediately catch the eye.

Standing nearby, with arms akimbo and voice booming in a way only Arsène Wenger or Mikel Arteta could muster, is their coach, Johan Djourou. His sharp eyes dart from player to player, ready to engage, though a smile tugs at his lips, betraying his stern demeanor. With a sharp blow of the whistle, he signals the start of the game.

The former Switzerland and Arsenal football player runs a community project known as 'Mondialito,' loosely translating to "the meeting of two ambitions."

"Mondialito came to life because when I was younger, I always played in the streets with my friends. We didn't care that we came from different backgrounds or cultures. We would play football or basketball for hours. But now, that culture is missing because children are distracted by so many things. They stay indoors more

than they play outside," Djourou explains.

Mondialito is a neighborhood football project where girls and boys up to the age of 16 are trained.

"We have both girls and boys. Sometimes the girls come to play alone. We don't care about gender; I just want them to feel included," he adds.

A changing landscape

It wasn't always like this. Football teams for women were virtually nonexistent in Switzerland, and girls didn't start playing the world's most-loved game until recently.

A study published in the University of Bern journal in 2023 found that, to date, many male-dominated sports still see lower participation rates among girls and women.

Sandy Maendly, a former international football player, knows this struggle all too well. Though she hung up her boots two years ago, she remains one of the most celebrated women in the sport, with 89 cups to her name.

Now the Sports Director at Servette Football Club in Geneva, Maendly reflects on her path.

"When I was younger, there were no women's teams, so I was thrilled when, seven years ago, I saw that clubs were creating women's sections. It was always my dream to play in a women's-only club. The switch from player to director came so easily and quickly when I retired in 2022," she says.

Despite efforts by the Federal Government and Swiss sporting associations to increase participation among girls and young women, significant barriers remain.

A 2018 study identified structural constraints such as limited family time, physical health issues, finances, and gender stereotypes as key reasons why many women shy away from sports.

"Menstruation, for example, was always a taboo—not only in football but in all sports," Maendly notes.

Joëlle Schwarz, who co-heads the Health and Gender Unit at Unisanté, a Centre for Public Health and General Medicine in Lausanne, echoes these sentiments. Years of research in her field have demonstrated disparities in men's and women's access to healthcare.

"Sexual and reproductive health was not discussed in traditional family settings. All the reproductive responsibility falls on women. In Switzerland, it's considered a girl's problem, discussed only with girls," she explains.

Physician Boris Gojanovič, who specialises in sports medicine, points out that a lack of information and awareness can hinder girls' and women's involvement in sports.

"When young girls go through menstruation, they may notice a drop in energy, leading to a feeling of fragility. They often visit gynecologists who don't understand these low energy levels, which can be overwhelming. What we need are real specialists," he says.

On a mid-sized football field just outside the city, in Vernier, a group of young girls is preparing for evening practice.

One after the other, they run onto the pitch, a pristine green canvas marked by the precise lines. They start with a warm-up under the watchful eyes of their coaches.

Lea Nipote, 16, Maxine Gremion, 12, and Lya Moreno, 12, have been playing school football at Lignon FC for as long as they can remember. They don't see much difference between boys' and girls' football.

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More clubs are now accommodating pregnant players. Previously, women had to choose between a career and motherhood.”

Sandy Maendly, Sports Director at Servette Football Club

"There's not much difference when we're playing, maybe just in intensity, but physically, it's the same," says Lya.

Despite societal discrimination, Lea remains undeterred. "Sometimes we hear comments like 'girls shouldn't play football.' It makes us angry, but we keep going," she says.

A 2018 study revealed that 41 per cent of Swiss women reduced their participation in sports due to family pressure and pregnancy, while 30 per cent had witnessed sexist comments, and 26 per cent had experienced sexist acts.

Geneva's Minister for Sports and former mayor, Marie Barbey-Chappuis acknowledges that discrimination against women in sports persists in public spaces.

"When exercising or jogging in the streets, Swiss women often feel unsafe due to harassment. These systemic issues stem from a time when women's sports weren't taken seriously. They were overshadowed by men," she says.

But six years on, Dr Gojanovič and Maendly see signs of improvement.

"Previously, women had to choose between a career and motherhood. But now, many clubs are open to the idea that players can be pregnant and still pursue their careers. It's a positive change," Maendly observes.

As Switzerland sets sights for the Women's Euro in July 2025, the government is under pressure to improve conditions for women's sports.

Calls for increased investment in women's sports continue to grow, urging the Swiss government to ensure permanent benefits for female players, similar to their male counterparts. Only 4 million Swiss francs was set aside for next year's Euro, which experts aver is not enough.

Meanwhile, Geneva Canton Member of Parliament Laurence Fehlmann Rielle is leading a campaign to highlight women's health at the Federal Council. She notes that women don't receive the same treatment as men when presenting their health issues to doctors, which could alter the course of their lives.

"All is not well, but we are on the right path," she says.

This report has been produced as part of the 2024 Swiss journalist exchange programme En Quête d' Ailleurs.

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