

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Scoring Second Chances: Addressing Women's Unique Challenges and Opportunities in a Football-Based Prison Programme

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## ABSTRACT

Sport-based prison interventions may particularly benefit women, a vulnerable population within the penal system. However, evidence of their impact is mainly based on men's experiences. This study qualitatively examines the experiences of 11 women enrolled on the Twinning Project, a football-based prison programme designed to reduce recidivism and enhance employability. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed positive outcomes for participants, such as improved self-perceptions and intentions to help others. However, the prospective long-term impact of vocational qualifications was less evident. Barriers to engagement were identified in parts of the programme's structure and delivery, women's health issues, and participants' perceived lack of control over post-release outcomes. Enablers included support from peers and staff, the appeal of football itself, and the absence of criminal identities. The findings highlight the Twinning Project's potential to benefit women prisoners and underscore the need for sports programs to accommodate gender-specific experiences in prison.

## 1 | Introduction

Women are an often-overlooked population within the criminal justice system. Yet, due to the prevalence of primary caregivers within this population, there is a high downstream social cost of their incarceration (Murray and Farrington 2008). Women in prison frequently have histories of trauma, including physical and sexual abuse (DeHart et al. 2014), which contribute to their high rates of mental health issues (Kennedy, Mennicke, and Paul 2021). The conditions in prisons, typically designed for men, exacerbate these issues by neglecting women's specific needs (Carlen and Worrall 2004). This intersection of gender, trauma, and systemic neglect necessitates interventions

tailored to incarcerated women's specific needs. Sport-based programmes have shown promise in addressing these needs by strengthening psychological resilience and wellbeing (De Marco and Meek 2022; Meek 2018; Meek and Lewis 2014).

Here, we share an analysis of interviews with women who completed the Twinning Project, a football-based programme designed to reduce recidivism by providing sport-based vocational qualifications and bonding to the "football family". While there is initial evidence of immediate benefits for men (Newson et al. 2023, 2024; Peitz and Newson 2024), it remains unclear to what extent women experience similar benefits or what unique barriers to engagement they may face.

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## 1.1 | Women in Prisons

In England and Wales, where the Twinning Project was first rolled out, imprisoned women are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression compared to men (O'Moore and Peden 2018) and 11 times more likely to self-harm (MoJ 2023a). Accordingly, improvements to women's safety and wellbeing were declared priorities in the UK's strategy for women in prison (MoJ 2023b).

The need for improvements is stark: women are punished in facilities and regimes designed for men, who are more likely to be imprisoned for longer terms and violent crimes (MoJ 2023b). Strict security protocols for violent offenders, including strip searches and mechanical restraints, are often disproportionate for the average woman in prison (Wright et al. 2012) and, together with a lack of same-sex staff (Bartlett and Hollins 2018), can undermine women's trust in the institution. People in prison with histories of abuse are also at risk of maladjustment and more likely to engage in punishable misconduct, perpetuating the cycle of inadequate criminal justice (Houser, Belenko, and Brennan 2012). This increased vulnerability of women in prison and lack of tailored criminal justice institutions highlight the importance of evaluating programmes through the lens of gendered experiences.

## 1.2 | Sport in Criminal Justice

The growing popularity of sports-based interventions in criminal justice settings is nested within a larger, global initiative to use sports for development in contexts including healthcare, education, inequality, social justice, and peacebuilding (Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe 2016). In criminal justice, sports programmes are considered beneficial for three main reasons: (1) They provide safe and accessible alternative activities for at-risk individuals (Hartmann and Depro 2006); (2) They can enhance physical and mental health (Meek and Lewis 2014) and; (3) They can help people (re-)connect and engage with communities beyond established social circles (Best, Musgrove, and Hall 2018).

Social identity perspectives suggest that sports in prison can facilitate valuable social connections, bolster confidence, support job or educational pursuits, and provide access to community resources (Abrams and Christian 2007; Meek 2013). A recent meta-analysis found that sport-based programmes have moderate effects on crime-related outcomes (such as reoffence rates and crime-related attitudes) and large effects on psychological outcomes (such as self-esteem, stress-related burdens, and depressive symptoms) (Jugl, Bender, and Lösel 2023). Although gender was not a significant factor in the effectiveness of sport-based programmes, the analysis did not include women-specific interventions.

A systematic review of sport-based interventions (Woods et al. 2017) highlighted a significant gender imbalance within the literature, reflecting prison demographics, which may be further skewed due to fewer women participating in sports and physical activity programmes (Meek and Lewis 2014). This imbalance is also relevant for the Twinning Project; the project leverages the appeal and popularity of football, often underestimated among women (Pope 2016), to motivate participants and ensure sustainable engagement. Football clubs, known for their community integration and symbolic value, can uniquely aid reintegration efforts

(Breitbarth and Harris 2008; Whitehouse and Fitzgerald 2020). Football coaches delivering these charitable programmes are respected community figures, serving as positive role models (Potrac, Nelson, and O'Gorman 2016), and football's symbolic uniform may reinforce values conducive to desistance (Wilde 2004).

The Twinning Project, designed for both men and women, reflects the growing prominence of women's football, both as a spectator sport and recreational activity (Veevers 2024; Women's Sport Trust 2024). However, women continue to face unique barriers to engagement at many levels of the sport, as active participants and as spectators (Culvin 2023; Drury et al. 2022; Forbes, Edwards, and Fleming 2015; Lewis, Roberts, and Andrews 2018; Williams, Pope, and Cleland 2023), and it is unclear whether such gender discrepancies extend to participation in football programmes within the criminal justice system.

## 1.3 | The Present Research

The Twinning Project is a football-based prison intervention operating in five countries and four continents at the time of writing. This research focuses on the UK, where, since 2018, 70 major football clubs have been twinned with 60 local prison or probation services to deliver coaching, stewarding, or refereeing programmes in both the men's and women's estates (Newson and Whitehouse 2020). Participation is self-selective, with applications jointly assessed by prison officers and the club delivering the programme. The selection criteria prioritise participants with less than 24 months left to serve and possessing implicit minimum levels of literacy and fitness. Participants who committed sexual offences are not admitted to the programme. Cohorts typically have 10–16 participants, with programmes lasting 5–12 weeks, containing both theoretical and practical sessions. The programme content is identical for men and women, though coaches tailor each programme to meet their participants' unique needs.

This study aimed to explore women's experiences of the Twinning Project and address the following research questions:

1. How do women describe the impact the Twinning Project has had on them?
2. What factors act as barriers to and enablers of engagement?

## 2 | Method

### 2.1 | Design

This exploratory, phenomenological study focused on women's experiences with the Twinning Project. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically.

### 2.2 | Data Collection

In Spring 2023, three researchers visited two prisons to interview women who had completed the Twinning Project. The researchers were all women with academic backgrounds in anthropology or psychology. Interviews were conducted in private

offices or classrooms, recorded on handheld devices, and lasted between 9 and 28 min ( $M=18$ ). Questions focussed on women's backgrounds (age, life before prison), experience with the Twinning Project, and reproductive health.

## 2.3 | Participants

Eleven women (aged 21–52) with various ethnic backgrounds who had previously completed the Twinning Project agreed to participate in interviews. For more information on the broader demographics of women participating in the Twinning Project, see the Supporting Information. Names of participants and staff have been changed to protect anonymity. References to identifiable elements of the prison were removed.

## 2.4 | Analytic Procedure

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following an adapted version of the procedure outlined by Nowell et al. (2017) and facilitated by NVivo software (v.12/v14).

The first step was data familiarisation. Two researchers reviewed the entire dataset and noted initial thoughts. They then provided two coders with a list of broad areas of interest for coding.

Second, initial codes were generated. Coders systematically reviewed each transcript, identifying important sections and labelling them according to relevant themes or issues. The codes were distinct, ensuring clarity and avoiding redundancy. Coders paid equal attention to each transcript, coding data extracts on multiple relevant topics as necessary. Memos were recorded to capture emerging topics and insights. Following coding, the team reviewed and discussed the results, finalising a comprehensive list of relevant codes.

Third, themes were identified by sorting and collating coded data extracts into themes, understood as “significant concepts that link substantial portions of the data together” (Nowell

et al. 2017, 8), and into related subthemes. Rationales for decisions were documented.

Fourth, themes were reviewed to ensure they formed coherent patterns. Themes were refined, organised logically, and reduced to a manageable set that effectively summarised the data.

Subsequently, themes and subthemes were named and defined, clearly describing their scope and content (Table 1). Finally, findings were contextualised within the literature, and practical implications were considered.

## 3 | Results

### 3.1 | (1) How Do Women Describe the Impact the Twinning Project Has Had on Them?

Women discussed their intentions to connect with and help others rather than describing immediate behavioural changes (Theme 1.1). Furthermore, participants mentioned improvements in self-perception, specifically confidence and wellbeing in the prison environment (Theme 1.2). The third theme concerned the anticipation of the programme's long-term impact, which revealed different mindsets among participants, between those interested in using their new skills further and those who focussed on other vocational qualifications and skills more relevant to their employment history (Theme 1.3).

#### 3.1.1 | Theme 1.1: Helping and Connecting With Others

Participants' accounts did not feature references to stark behavioural changes. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the Twinning Project's criteria for recruiting participants based on “good” behaviour. Reinforcing this, one participant, Amira, revealed that the appeal of the programme and its recruitment process had a significant impact on her behaviour before she was even selected for the course.

**Amira:** I had been asking to get put on that course for time, but they was like, being in jail, you have people that

**TABLE 1** | Overview of themes and subthemes of the research questions.

Research question	1. How do women describe the impact the Twinning Project has had on them?	2. What Factors Represent Barriers to (2.1) and Enablers (2.2) of Engagement?	
Themes	1.1 Helping and connecting with others	2.1.1 Programme characteristics	2.2.1 Social connections
Subthemes		<i>Programme structure</i> <i>Programme delivery</i>	
	1.2 Building Self-confidence and wellbeing	2.1.2 Women's Health Issues	2.2.2 The draw of football
		<i>Reproductive health</i> <i>Weight issues</i>	
	1.3 Long-term relevance of programme skills	2.1.3 Lack of control over destiny	2.2.3 Absence of criminal identity

can't do certain things. I couldn't do certain things, just because I was a bit naughty at first, but I knuckled down and allowed to do it because I kept my head down.

Participants did, however, talk about their intentions to help other people—specifically, women and children—using skills they had developed on the programme. For example, Lea described how a coach helped her manage her anger and taught her the skills required for coaching children.

**Lea:** The Twinning Project's been a good project. People are nice. I remember I was angry one time, and they just told me, "It's not worth it, let it go," and I didn't want to let it go, and they were like "It's not worth it", and they'll talk you down. They were good people. I mean, they taught us about coaching little kids. They played football with us, the coaches. I enjoyed tackling some of them

Lea then stated her intention to coach in the future because of her experience with the programme.

**Interviewer:** I'm just curious, do you think you're going to work with people in football?

**Lea:** Yeah, because before I came in, I even had my piece when I was younger. I wanted to do coaching. So, I wanted to do coaching, but I wasn't really feeling it, and now I do. They've given us emails to actually contact and that.

Other participants wanted to use the football skills and knowledge they had developed to reconnect with their children after reuniting.

**Shelly:** I've got two young boys, so I took them to football. And they're so excited now because I can go out and play football with them, never done that.

Emily talked about the potential to employ broader skills acquired through the programme to help vulnerable children.

**Emily:** I like the coaching bit. It's very interesting because you don't actually think there's a lot of time and effort going into coaching. You just being put a few cones down. Tell the kids what to do. Done, dusted. Do you know what I mean? But there's a lot of stuff that goes into coaching, and that shocked me, do you know what I mean? So, it was interesting to see, like, what they actually do. [...] And like these days, out there, it's a scary world and there's these gangs and this and that. So then when you have something like this out there for them, then do you know what I mean? So, when I knew, when I found out it was coaching, and I thought maybe I could change that kid's life and get them off the streets and make... do you know what I mean?

When Emily described her background, her desire to help vulnerable children could have been a desire to help people like herself when she was younger.

**Emily:** Well, I used to go [to school] now and then. And then, half the time I used to skive. Because my childhood weren't the best, with abuse and stuff. So (...) it was one of them. Sometimes I'd go to class, sometimes, sometimes I'd just disappear.

### 3.1.2 | Theme 1.2: Building Self-Confidence and Wellbeing

A common theme in reflections about the programme's impact was the perceived change in participants' feelings about themselves. Emily described a boost to her confidence and wellbeing, and Sophia reported observing this change in her cohort.

**Emily:** It was good. Yeah, cause you feel good about yourself then because it builds your confidence.

**Sophia:** I liked the drills. So, part of the training project, it's effectively teaching women confidence and skills to teach younger people football. And so seeing women around the prison, you get to know sort of personalities and just watch, and you can see women who are quite shy and timid inside the prison, generally flourish when they're given a bit of responsibility or maybe a skill, you know, that they organise and you can see them come out themselves, which is really good, actually.

Others, like Ella, talked explicitly about mental health, and both she and Nicky pointed to the value of the Twinning Project as a challenging and enjoyable activity that draws attention away from everyday prison life and encourages optimism.

**Ella:** I found it good for like, mental health really, more than anything. I come in, taking part, new challenges every week. But with the same group of people and I found it something to look forward to every week.

**Nicky:** Knowing every Thursday we were going to be doing football was something to look forward to. [...] But for some people, that's living here for—they get a bit "Oh I don't want to do that", so you have to be like "Come on, girls! It's fun", not just it's like sports.

### 3.1.3 | Theme 1.3: Long-Term Relevance of Programme Skills

When participants talk about their long-term plans to use skills learned in prison, the Twinning Project seemed to be less salient for some women's plans compared to other vocational qualifications, which were more directly tied to employment opportunities (as for Ella) or fit better with past employment histories (as described by Shelly).

**Ella:** I did the six months bike shop course. Because then, when I go home, I'll have a job. [...] The bike shop is already aware of everything because like, I'm currently employed by them at the academy.

**Shelly:** Yeah. So, I can't wait to get out and come home. I've just done like level 2 and 3 hairdressing and barbering. [...] And "TAKWA" assessors' qualification as well. To add to my business when I go back. [...] And I'll be set up when I go home.

Nicky also stated that she was completing a hairdressing course to get a job upon release. However, when asked about any recommendations to improve the Twinning Project, she hinted at her interest in using the skills she had gained from it, but relevant information on how to do so was not provided.

**Nicky:** Um, maybe [the Twinning Project] should give advice on what you could do when we go home with it. Because with prison, when you go home, obviously, it changes all job opportunities. So, I don't know where to even start really, to go and say "Oh, I've been in prison", because (...) there's some crimes, you obviously can't work with kids.

Similarly, Amy and Holly were genuinely excited about the potential to use their football coaching skills to help at-risk children. Still, they did not formulate any concrete plans to implement this.

**Interviewer:** So, is it something you'd like to carry on when you get out?

**Amy:** I'm thinking about it. [...] But I think there needs to be more stuff like this out there, for kids, and get them off the streets, and start doing it at youth clubs.

**Interviewer:** So, you'd love to coach football?

**Holly:** Yeah, like if you've got roles for something to do with the twinning project, you know what I mean. I think that's something they could look into [...] they were saying that they teach a lot of like the younger kids, like ones who are in like the naughty schools and stuff. Like, they really help them out. So, if they offer roles, that would be really good. Like somewhere to work, even just assist them or something.

### 3.2 | (2.1) What Factors Represent Barriers to engagement?

#### 3.2.1 | Barriers

Women experienced different types of barriers: Some were linked to programme characteristics (Theme 2.1), aspects of the structure and delivery of the course; other barriers reflected health issues (Theme 2.2), including lack of fitness and reproductive health; others reported a perceived lack of control over their destiny (Theme 2.3) and lingering concerns about being able to succeed following incarceration more generally.

#### 3.2.2 | Theme 2.1.1: Programme Characteristics

*Subtheme: Programme structure.* Different structural issues impacted participants' engagement. Almost all interviewees

wanted more extended programmes, and many considered long pauses between sessions to interrupt their learning. This was not just a matter of prolonging a pleasant experience (Theme 1.3); participants described concrete benefits of longer and differently structured programmes, including benefits to learning processes and outcomes.

**Sophia:** I would have a few more weeks to it. Just so you could develop some of the skills and maybe have it all day, not half a day.

**Robyn:** Instead of it being once a week, I think it should be a full-week thing so you can get your head into it

The academic workload of the theoretical sessions is also described by some as "the least favourite bits" and "challenging" by women who describe themselves as "not book-smart". While recruitment considers implicit literacy levels, tasks like free writing in journals can pose challenges to cohorts with weaker educational backgrounds. Some participants describe overcoming such difficulties with the help of the coaches, possibly strengthening rapport with staff and contributing to improved self-perception (Theme 1.2).

Programmes during the winter presented physical barriers due to the cold and wetness of outdoor facilities. Although she was part of a summer cohort, Ella said winter courses should be done indoors. Amira was less lucky, as outdoor sessions had a knock-on effect on her cohort's cohesion.

**Amira:** I enjoyed it. But I feel like I would want to do it again because I didn't get the full experience...I feel like the people that I was on course with, a lot of them didn't show up, because it was winter, and we was doing it outside. It was freezing, so like playing sports in the winter, is not the one. So, some people felt like they were gonna drop off.

**Interviewer:** And why did them not showing up mean that the experience wasn't so good?

**Amira:** Because it's like everybody didn't that like motivation. [...] It affected everyone's mood [...] Everyone was just like, what's the point? [...] I feel like a lot of people got put on it because there wasn't a lot of people that signed up for it because it was winter. So, it was like they didn't want to do it anyway.

*Subtheme: Programme delivery.* Maintaining motivation and engagement is a significant responsibility of those delivering the programme, and breakdowns in interpersonal relationships were barriers in specific cases. Continuing her account of a demotivated winter cohort, Amira described how staffing and course delivery became barriers.

**Amira:** There is this one gym staff. (...) not many people like her. Not a lot of people want to come down. There was a girl who was meant to come down today. And she didn't show up because she thought the gym staff was going to be here.

She didn't come to the football a lot cause that woman was on constantly (...)

**Interviewer:** And was that staff member involved in running the project?

**Amira:** [...] When the people from the twinning project come in, that staff member was always with them. But then on top of that, the people that come in for the Twinning Project, the two people that were coming from the start ended up not coming in anymore. And they changed to some other people because they couldn't be bothered. It was like they quit because they got the same vibe as well. It was mad. It was just a shambles bruv.

In addition to specific interpersonal issues, gender was also salient for some women's experiences of course delivery. For instance, when Lea was asked about specific recommendations to improve the programme experience, she said she wanted more female staff because she was uncomfortable raising issues around reproductive health with male coaches.

**Lea:** I didn't mind the men teaching us and stuff. But [a female coach] was there, and she was the only woman, and there would be two other guys. To have more women there to teach us and what not. I didn't mind the men, but to have more women or if it was two women and one guy and whatnot because we might speak to a woman. It may be something you don't want to tell a man.

Nicky, on the other hand, did not mind having male coaches but expressed this in the context of stereotyped treatment, highlighting that the appropriateness of gendered interactions in prison is context-dependent.

**Interviewer:** And was it alright? Like, you didn't mind [the coaches] being men or?

**Nicky:** No, no, he never was like, "Oh this is a men's sport" or anything. He was more like "Come on girls!"

### 3.2.3 | Theme 2.1.2: Women's Health Issues

*Subtheme: Reproductive health.* Issues related directly to women's health were mentioned as potential barriers. Although participants stressed that their menstrual cycle had not hindered them from completing the Twinning Project, they reported that period pains and bleeding were significant barriers to activities in prison. For example, Sophia described how the risk of "leaking" due to a combination of sportswear and cheap sanitary products would make women hesitant to engage in physical activity. Shelly explained how heavy periods and inadequate painkillers would prevent her from being active and taking part in sports sessions. For Amira, reproductive health was both a physical and mental barrier, partially due to male staffing.

**Amira:** I know how much [my period] stopped me from doing things I want to do. If doing football for the Twinning Project it is going to be a headache because you've got to come back constantly to go toilet. It depends as well, like, have they got the stuff [menstrual health products] in the toilet, like it's embarrassing innit. Like as much as everyone says it's not when you've got a lot of male officers, they make you feel like it's a big taboo to talk about it (...) it's embarrassing.

*Subtheme: Weight issues.* Another health barrier to engagement was a lack of general fitness, which participants explicitly linked to weight gain, for example, getting out of breath/tired quickly. Holly was concerned about weight, as it related to her levels of energy and body image, and both Holly and Lucy attributed weight gain to the prison diet.

**Holly:** But like, being in prison makes you fat. You're tired, do you know what I mean, you don't have any energy. So, when she signed me up, I was like, oh, alright then I'll do it. But I felt like really embarrassed.

**Lucy:** The only reason why physically I can't do it is if I get out of breath is because I'm putting on weight, and that's down to a very unhealthy diet in HMP prisons.

### 3.2.4 | Theme 2.1.3: Lack of Control Over Destiny

Several participants expressed concerns that they lacked control over their future upon release. This was not specifically tied to the Twinning Project but reflected broader concerns about how and whether they would feel enabled to take a positive step following their experiences within the criminal justice system. For Emily, life before prison was "chaotic"; "a vicious cycle" of drugs, homelessness and prostitution in "one evil world out there". She was not sure what would come next for her and was wary of external influences on her destiny:

**Emily:** But I don't know what I want yet. I'd probably do a bit of everything, me. Why not? [...] Yeah, it all depends on how everything is when you get out and its (...) getting back to reality and all the change that's happened everywhere.

Ella turned down earlier release because she was concerned that life outside prison could distract her from completing the qualification she started in prison. She knew that without this employment opportunity, she would have less control over how prospective employers would perceive her.

**Interviewer:** So, you are going to work at a bike shop?

**Ella:** Yeah, yeah, with an employer who already knows about my background because I've been in the programme, rather than going to an interview and thinking, "Oh [...] if they google me," or do I tell them this, or do I tell them that?

Others described imprisonment and the corresponding lack of control over everyday routines as a threat to their ability to

reintegrate. Like Ella, Holly and Shelly were wary of an early release on temporary licence and raised concerns about feeling institutionalised.

**Holly:** Outside is like, oof, yeah, I mean it is weird, like what they call it when you get in, oh when we know when people go to prison for long (...) institutionalised.

**Shelly:** Yeah. I need to get my head straight when I go home, cuz it's like in here, you get in a bubble. It's like, it's so weird, you can't explain it until you live in it. You forget about the outside world and what your life is like.

These persistent backgrounds where the self is decentralised from decision-making, situated within (a) a patriarchal society and (b) the prison environment, may have presented a gendered barrier to change.

### 3.3 | (2.2) What Factors Represent Enablers to Engagement?

#### 3.3.1 | Theme 2.2.1: Social Connections

Participants often mentioned good chemistry in the cohorts when asked what made them enjoy the programme. The great value of social connections was alluded to in *Theme 2.1*, where a lack of cohesion in a cohort undermined a participant's experience. Almost all participants described a positive atmosphere in their cohorts. Robyn explained the capacity of the Twinning Project to facilitate social contact among prisoners who otherwise would not have engaged with one another.

**Robyn:** You wouldn't normally mix certain girls in the jail. But you've been brought together for this Twinning Project, and you just crack on with things and make new friends and I think it's important in this community.

Most participants also praised the coaches for making the Twinning Project accessible, providing a pleasant learning environment, and treating them with respect and care.

**Holly:** [The coaches] just make you feel so comfortable. It's just like, like they've known you for like years.

**Amy:** The people who come and coach us as well, they don't look down on you. So, it's nice, do you know what I mean. They're not here to judge. They don't look at you and think, Oh, you're in prison, you're this. They treat you like you're on the out, like you're (...) everyone's human. And it's nice as well, that they give their time and day to come.

#### 3.3.2 | Theme 2.2.2: The Draw of Football

Football was itself a significant factor in engaging participants. Some women drew motivation from positive football memories to sign up, and those without a football background discovered their appreciation for the sport during the Twinning Project.

**Lea:** I used to play football when I was younger, that was my outlet to take out my anger, if I'm angry or something it will calm me down. And that was the one positive thing in my life growing up is football.

**Shelly:** I just loved playing football because I've never played football, and I went in blind.

Some participants also talked about the availability of a football programme for women's cohorts as a sign of recognition of women's interest in and achievement in the sport. At the same time, Nicky appreciated that coaches did not treat them differently from men.

**Amy:** There's a lot of women that, er, they like the football [...] They always go for the men because they automatically think men. They don't think 'oh women like this'. Do you know what I mean? So, it's nice to get recognised.

**Nicky:** [The coach] was never like, "Oh, this is a men's sport" or anything. He was more like "Come on, girls!"

#### 3.3.3 | Theme 2.2.3 Absence of a Criminal Identity

Participants who reflected on their involvement in the criminal justice system and their future upon release strongly rejected the label "criminal." Nicky differentiated herself from a "typical criminal", based on her index-offence, and implicitly extended the absence of a criminal self-identity to other women incarcerated for similar offences.

**Nicky:** I've been in now a year and seven months—I should go home on the next one. So not long at all. And yeah, I was in a car accident. So that's why I went to prison. I'm not like your average criminal person. Yeah, yeah. Wrong time. Wrong place. [...] Yeah, yeah, it's bad. But there's quite a few girls in here for car accidents.

Shelly also rejected the idea that she was a criminal.

**Shelly:** Erm, I'm in for a car accident. So, I'm in for dangerous driving, speeding, I've got four and a half years. And like, this is the first and last time I'll come to prison because I'm not a criminal and I don't go out and intentionally commit crime.

She followed this up by highlighting her detailed plans for employment upon release, maximising her dissociation from a criminal lifestyle by focusing on law-abiding activities instead.

## 4 | Discussion

Interviews with women in prison revealed enjoyment of the Twinning Project, regardless of prior engagement in football. Results indicated that the programme's impact on women's well-being, social relationships, attitudes, and behaviours is nuanced, relating to broader contextual factors and mitigated by both personal and situational barriers and enablers.

## 4.1 | Impact

Analyses suggested improved confidence and mental health among participants, aligning with literature on the benefits of sport-based programmes for women in prison's wellbeing (De Marco and Meek 2022; Meek and Lewis 2014), and quantitative findings with men who completed the Twinning Project (Newson et al. 2024).

Women particularly focused on helping others, including peers and family, rather than on self-oriented changes. They engaged in informal peer support and showed interest in mentoring roles within similar sports-based schemes, both of which are beneficial for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people (Brown and Ross 2010; Nixon 2019) and reflect outcomes that would be difficult to capture with typical quantitative approaches (e.g., prison behaviour records). Such communal prosocial behaviour is also more associated with women than men (Eagly 2009), which may reflect a gendered response among a population that is typically incarcerated at a greater distance from their families compared to men (Jaffe 2012). These findings also align with our previous work that found consistent examples of altruism among Twinning Project participants serving community sentences, all of whom were men (Newson et al. 2023).

Regarding the programme's long-term impact, participants showed notable differences. Some had already acquired skills and vocational qualifications from other prison programmes, raising questions about whether recruitment should focus on individuals without additional qualifications to ensure that educational and employment opportunities are fully taken advantage of (De Marco and Meek 2022). For those interested in football coaching or mentoring, clear next steps for applying their new skills were not provided. Considering that the UK's top professional football league alone supports around 90,000 full-time equivalent jobs (EPL 2024), there is potential to signpost applicants toward employment opportunities in football-related industries.

Thus, the programme's impacts appeared in the moment rather than longer-term personal development. However, there were also signs that participants were inspired to do things differently moving forward, for example, continue with coaching.

## 4.2 | Barriers

The data also revealed several barriers to women's engagement in the Twinning Project. First, participants reported practical issues with programme delivery and structure, including unpopular outdoor sessions that reduced participation and scheduling that rushed or interrupted the learning flow. Programme providers could address these issues at their discretion, for example, by relocating practical sessions indoors for winter cohorts or providing additional opportunities for processing and applying acquired knowledge.

Other barriers, such as those related to prison health, reflect persistent issues incarcerated people face (Hannan-Jones and Capra 2016). Weight gain is more common among incarcerated women than men (Gebremariam, Nianogo, and Arah 2018), and

in the UK, weight-management programs are often not available (Leech et al. 2024; Meek and Lewis 2014). Previous guidance on standards to improve women's health and wellbeing in UK prisons explicitly highlighted the need for physical activity and weight management (Public Health England 2018). Still, neither is currently addressed (NHS 2023). Our results indicate that concerns over fitness and body image can undermine engagement in programmes that are beneficial to both physical and mental health, reiterating the importance of incarcerated women's physical fitness.

Barriers related to menstrual health were also prominent, consistent with global issues concerning women's sexual and reproductive health in prison (Van den Bergh et al. 2011). Twinning Project participants reported that access to adequate sanitary products and medical supplies hindered their participation in physical activities, emphasising reproductive health as a potential barrier in sport-based programs. While it is essential to avoid reducing women's experiences to their menstrual cycle, acknowledging these intertwined barriers is crucial.

Finally, we identified the perceived lack of control over one's destiny as a potential barrier, which could partially reflect gendered experiences. Some women expressed concerns about becoming institutionalised, an experience that can be exacerbated by caregiver status (Enroos 2011). Other participants considered the risk that re-engaging with harmful elements of their past could undermine their efforts to make positive changes upon release. It has been suggested that women are particularly vulnerable to social risk factors for offending (Davies 2002), and improvements to resettlement services to support women in such situations is one of the key recommendations in the most recent guidance for women's prisons in the UK (NHS 2023).

## 4.3 | Enablers

Women were primarily enabled by the support networks they said they wanted more of, both by peers and staff. Peer support and cohesive cohorts were recognised as motivating factors for participation, underscoring the importance of informal peer support in prison (Nixon 2019). This factor was also noted in interviews with male Twinning Project participants serving community sentences (Newson et al. 2023). Participants credited staff, particularly coaches, as knowledgeable educators who provided a space for sport and associated learning and served as trusted authority figures. A reflective account co-authored by a Twinning Project coach in the women's estate highlights the importance of vulnerability and trust in the interactions between service users and practitioners, acknowledging prisoners' lived experiences (Kay, Mason, and Hartley 2022). Such trauma-informed approaches are increasingly adopted in women's facilities, with training provided for Prison Officers in England and Wales from 2015 (Auty et al. 2023), and have been highlighted as key to developing physical activity strategies that can adequately address the needs of women and girls in the criminal justice system (Meek 2018). Sport may complement the benefits of trauma-informed approaches by reducing coerciveness and increasing normativity, which is crucial for women's rehabilitation (Marcoux Rouleau 2020).

Football itself was identified as an enabler, with some participants recalling positive past football experiences and others describing their first-time engagement with the sport as accessible and enjoyable. This reflects the often-underappreciated popularity of football among women (e.g., Pope 2016) and supports Meek and Lewis's (2014) assertion that offering interesting sports programmes to women is crucial to drive engagement. The Twinning Project's introduction of football programmes into the women's estate aligns with this perspective, as acknowledged by our participants, and should encourage providers of other sports programmes to consider delivering to women.

Asserting an absence of a criminal identity seemed to enhance women's confidence in seizing future opportunities, contrasting other participants' concerns over institutionalisation. The development of distinct non-criminal identities is associated with desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), and prison programmes have been found to support such processes (e.g., Smoyer 2014). Studies of male Twinning Project cohorts indicated that identification with the programme increased over time, correlating with improvements in wellbeing and prison behaviour (Newson et al. 2024; Peitz and Newson 2024). Further research is required to explore how women engaged in sports develop new identities, though our results demonstrate that some participants explicitly distance themselves from criminal identities.

#### 4.4 | Limitations

This research entails several limitations. First, recruitment for the Twinning Project favoured participants close to release and those with higher prison privileges, meaning our results may not be generalisable to the general prison population. The anticipation of returning to loved ones may have led to a focus on positive aspects of the programme. At the same time, the impact on those with lower compliance with prison discipline remains unclear. Second, the limited sample size may have restricted the number of emerging themes. Experiences of social connectedness and physical wellbeing, which correlate with age and ethnicity (Harris, Hek, and Condon 2007), might not have fully captured the needs of less-represented demographics. Third, the study was conducted shortly after COVID-19 ceased to be a national emergency in the UK, which may have biased results. Data were collected in Spring 2023, but some participants completed their programmes in 2022, during delays in returning to normal prison operations due to staffing issues (IMB 2022). This may have led to a bias toward better-staffed facilities, and the pandemic's impact on health and wellbeing could have further influenced participant selection, potentially excluding those most affected by Covid restrictions.

#### 4.5 | Conclusion

Our findings emphasise the importance of evaluating sport-based programmes, such as the Twinning Project, with a specific focus on the unique needs of women. The qualitative insights from this study, including participants' intentions to help others and their desire to reconnect with their children, reveal more profound and nuanced outcomes that are particularly

relevant for women. Moreover, analyses revealed gendered barriers that should be acknowledged in the programme delivery (e.g., accommodating issues related to menstrual health) as well as opportunities to further build on enablers to engagement (e.g., embracing trauma-informed approaches for provider staff) that can be applied to projects beyond the Twinning Project to maximise the benefits of sport-based programmes for women in prison.

#### Ethics Statement

The University of Oxford (SAME\_C1A\_19\_016) granted ethical approval for this project, and all participants provided informed consent.

#### Conflicts of Interest

Linus Peitz is a part-time research consultant for the Twinning Project. The research presented here (incl. data collection & analysis) predates his engagement with the organisation. The remaining authors declare no conflicts of interest.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.