TOGETHER WOMEN RISE
Collective action for global gender equality

Girls Gotta Run: Empowering Girls through Sports and Education

October 2026 Fact Sheet

Girls Gotta Run Foundation (GGRF) helps Ethiopian girls stay in school, build confidence, and strengthen their futures through education and running. Its program creates supportive spaces where girls can learn, develop leadership skills, and reduce their risk of leaving school because of early marriage or financial hardship.

Bethlehem's Story

In Wolaitta Soddo, poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to menstrual supplies can make it difficult for girls to remain in school. At age 16, Bethlehem is succeeding despite these challenges. Before joining GGRF's three-year Athletic Scholar Program in 2024, she was struggling and uncertain about whether she could continue her education.

This year, she ranked first among all Grade 9 students at Abba Pascal Secondary School—an achievement reflecting both her hard work and the support she received.

"The director listened to my story, and I was given dignity," she said. "I was seen. Through the program, I received school fees, a new uniform, sanitary pads, books, and meals. I also joined the girls' running club and life skills training."

These resources gave Bethlehem the freedom to focus on her studies.

"Now, I raise my hand. I lead discussions. I run with pride," she said. Her favorite subjects – Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology – are fueling her dream of becoming a cardiologist.

Bethlehem's success has created a ripple effect far beyond the classroom. Her father, once hesitant about girls' education, is now a vocal advocate. Her mother returned to school herself and proudly celebrates Bethlehem's achievements. And with GGRF covering Bethlehem's education costs, her family can now better support her two younger sisters. Bethlehem is determined to inspire her peers to believe in their own potential.

"I tell other girls: never give up and dream farther than you ever imagined."

Watch a video of Bethlehem sharing her story here.

Understanding the Issue in Context

In rural Ethiopia, girls face significant barriers to completing secondary education due to poverty, restrictive gender norms, and early marriage. Nationally, only 20% of girls complete secondary school, and nearly 40% are married before age 18. The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical turning point, with dropout rates rising sharply during adolescence. Contributing factors include school fees, household responsibilities, food insecurity, and long, unsafe commutes that increase girls' vulnerability to gender-based violence.

> *Marriage before age 18 is internationally recognized as a fundamental violation of human rights.*

According to the UN's Multidimensional Poverty Index, nearly 69% of Ethiopia's population faces serious challenges involving education, health, and living conditions. These challenges often affect girls and women most severely. When girls leave school, they may face earlier pregnancy, lower lifetime earnings, greater health risks, and fewer opportunities to participate in decisions affecting their communities. Over time, these effects can limit opportunities for entire families.

Among the critical issues facing girls in Ethiopia:

- Child marriage and early pregnancy can interrupt a girl's education and affect her health and future economic opportunities. Marriage at a young age may also leave girls isolated and with less influence over decisions affecting their lives.
- Girls may also experience violence or harassment. In rural areas, limited information about legal rights and limited access to medical, legal, and other support services can make it especially difficult to seek help.

Community-Based Solutions in Action

Together Women Rise's $40,000 grant supports GGRF's Athletic Scholarship Program in Bekoji and Wolaita Soddo, Ethiopia. The program helps girls at ages when many are at risk of leaving school. It combines educational assistance, meals, mentoring, life-skills education, and coached running.

Activities continue throughout the year, including during school breaks. The program also offers participating mothers training and opportunities to strengthen their household income and savings.

Over the one-year grant period, 200 girls will receive:

- **Full academic support** – tuition, uniforms, tutoring, and school supplies
- **Weekly life-skills sessions** covering health and well-being, leadership, personal safety, and managing money
- **Daily lunch** to support nutrition and school attendance, including higher-protein options to improve health and athletic performance
- **Health support and hygiene kits** – including urgent medical support
- **Sports kits** – running shoes, apparel, post-practice snacks, etc.
- **Four days per week of structured, coached running practice**
- **Participation in local and regional races**
- **Personal mentoring** – Personal mentoring from female coaches who live in the community. Girls also learn and participate alongside peers, helping them build friendships, confidence, and mutual support.

Over the same period, 126 mothers of these girls will:

- Receive paid work preparing program meals, providing income while strengthening families' connection to the program.
- Participate in vocational skills training, including business development workshops
- Participate in savings and loan cooperatives that promote financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and household stability.

*If **mothers** earn money and save money, their daughters are more likely to stay in school, even once outside support such as the GGRF scholarships end.*

Program managers and coaches select participants based on financial need and the barriers they face in remaining in school. They conduct home visits and interviews and receive referrals from local education and women's affairs offices. GGRF also regularly asks girls, families, schools, and community partners what is working and where improvements are needed.

Impact and Transformation

GGRF was founded in 2006 by Dr. Patricia Ortman after reading about Ethiopian girls training to become professional runners as a means to escape child marriage. What began as a scholarship fund for aspiring athletes has since evolved into a comprehensive program that harnesses the cultural power of running to unlock educational and economic opportunities for girls.

GGRF addresses several reasons girls leave school, including financial hardship, early marriage, and limited support. According to GGRF, **96% of participants complete secondary school, compared with approximately 20% of girls nationally**. In addition, 98% of participants remain unmarried until adulthood. A 2019 doctoral study found that participants also showed greater confidence and leadership at school and in their communities.

Sustainability is embedded in GGRF's model. Staff members live in the communities they serve, and they offer culturally grounded mentorship. GGRF alumni increasingly return to mentor younger scholars, ensuring long-term continuity and inspiration. Mothers of scholars participate in savings and microfinance groups that foster financial resilience, enabling families to continue supporting girls' education beyond the scholarship period. This multigenerational model promotes community ownership and drives lasting change from within.

GGRF tracks both measurable results and participants' experiences. It gathers information from girls, mothers, coaches, staff, schools, and community partners:

- **Attendance** – Coaches and staff keep records of attendance at running practice and life skills sessions.
- **Academic performance** – This includes exam scores, grade transitions, and graduation rates. GGRF partners with local schools, education officers, and community leaders to verify academic outcomes and better understand non-academic challenges affecting girls. This community-informed approach ensures that our monitoring tools remain culturally grounded and responsive.
- **Academic attainment, self-confidence, life skills, and delayed marriage** – Each year, girls complete surveys before and after program activities.

GGRF uses their responses to understand changes in school progress, confidence, life skills, and age at marriage. The results also help staff improve life-skills sessions, identify girls who need additional support, and determine whether tutoring is helping.

GGRF works closely with local organizations and leaders. Its Ethiopian partner, Imagine1Day, manages activities in the participating communities and adapts them based on local feedback. For example, the program developed personal-safety training after mothers expressed concerns about their daughters' safety. GGRF also collaborates with Women and Children Affairs, Education, Youth and Sports offices at the town and zonal levels to identify the most vulnerable girls and households, ensuring resources are targeted where most needed. In the U.S., GGRF partners with organizations like Project Redwood, NYC Marathon, and Project Good for Girls and is cultivating a growing Ethiopian diaspora network.

GGRF was honored as the official charity partner at the Grand African Run. The organization's short film, Bekoji 100, won Best Documentary at the Every Run Film Festival.

DIRECT IMPACT: 326 WOMEN AND GIRLS (200 GIRLS, 126 MOTHERS); INDIRECT IMPACT: 1,800 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Diborah's Story

Diborah joined GGRF at age 12, the youngest of 11 children in a single-parent household. Initially shy and disengaged, she found her voice through the Athletic Scholarship Program. With steady support, she began speaking up in class, mentoring peers, and excelling academically – eventually earning one of the highest scores in her region on Ethiopia's national college entrance exam. Today, Diborah is studying engineering at Addis Ababa University, becoming the first in her family to attend college. Her journey reflects how holistic, community-based support can transform not only individual futures, but entire families and communities.

Mission Alignment

This project recognizes that girls need more than school fees to remain in school and thrive. It brings together education, nutritious meals, health information, running, and mentorship. Local female coaches, participating mothers, and community partners help shape and deliver the program. By supporting both girls and their families throughout the year, GGRF creates an environment where girls can learn, build confidence, and imagine a wider range of possibilities for their futures. This reflects Together Women Rise's commitment to helping women and girls build healthier, more secure lives.

Budget

Item	Description	Cost
Daily Lunch	Daily meals, with enhancements to include higher-protein options to improve health and athletic performance	$12,500
Program Salaries	Salaries for local coaches and program managers	$10,500
Program Expenses	Tuition, uniforms, and school supplies for new and existing scholars	$10,000
Life Skills and Health	Sessions include vocational training and self-defense; hygiene kits and urgent medical support	$4,500
Mother's Group	Vocational training and savings support	$2,500
Total	Total project cost: $115,000. Rise funding: $40,000 (35%)	**$40,000**

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Source Materials

Girls Gotta Run
GirlsGottaRunFoundation
UN Women
Ethiopia Gender Equality
Collecting Cultural Feedback on Ethiopian Views on Girls, Sport, and Voice
2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index
2024 MPI Tables
Unicef Child Marriage