

LIFT4LIFE

EMPOWER PROJECT



IMPACT REPORT
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

The Lift4Life Empower Project was a six week online course that utilised strength training as a vehicle through which to achieve personal and interpersonal skill development for girls aged 12-18 in Canada.

The initiative was made possible thanks to a 2020 WISE Fund Grant from Canadian Women & Sport, and ran from November 12th to December 17th, 2020 with seven registered participants. This report aims to provide background to why the course was held, it's theoretical underpinnings, the appropriateness of strength training to achieve the course objectives, and results and learnings from the course itself.



LIFT & UPLIFT



ADDRESSING THE NEED

The need for The Empower Project was originally highlighted by Lift4Life Executive Director Nicola Paviglianti after running "Girl Power" a pilot project providing free strength training to local female youth.

"There is a notable sport gender gap for youth in my community of Quinte West, Ontario. Informal conversations and observations in my community have indicated there are many barriers to physical activity participation for residents for a multitude of reasons including, health inequities, poverty, homelessness, and low socio-income status. This is supported by local research and needs assessments. According to the Hasting & Prince Edward Counties Situational Assessment on Healthy Eating and Active Living (2014) conducted in my community, engaging youth in sports and recreation planning was seen as a priority and there was need to improve accessibility for participation. In the assessment, my home town of Trenton (where the proposed initiative is to take place) was highlighted as an area of need for affordable recreation programming. Furthermore, indicating the need for this project, it was found that local females aged 12+ are less active than males, and over 40% of residents in this category did not meet Canada's Food Guide recommendations for vegetables and fruit (Hastings Prince Edward Public Health 2017 Population Health Assessment).

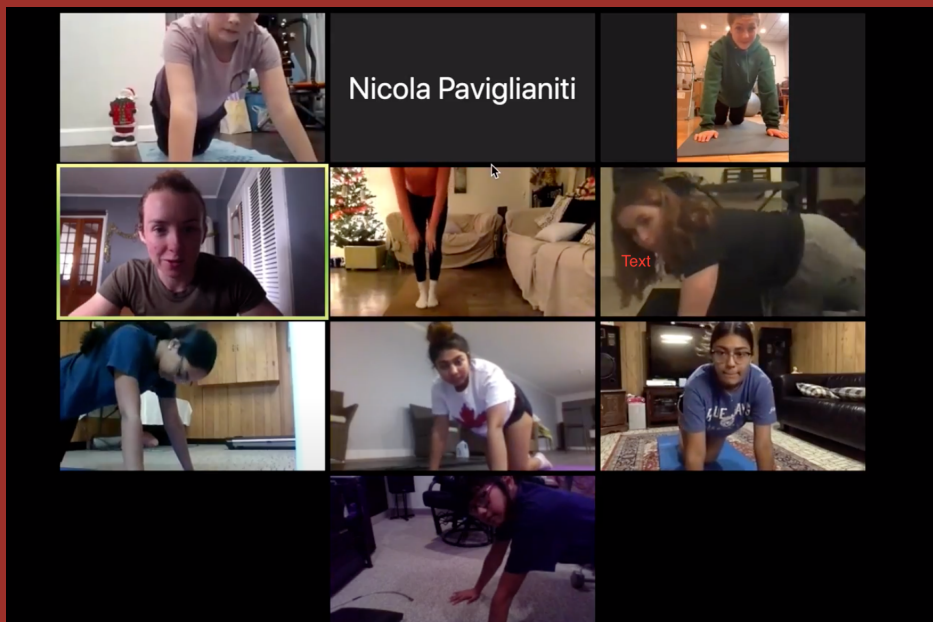
Research shows that girls need extra support to engage with sport, and maintain sport and physical activity as part of their daily lives (Rist, 2019). This is not because they are inherently less enthusiastic or interested, but because sport culture does not support their specific needs in school sport, in after school or weekend sports activities, in the media, or in mainstream sports events.

Gyms provide opportunities for physical activity participation and for health-enhancing behaviors. But at the same time, they too often reinforce gender differences and disparities. The actual design and equipment of gyms is an additional barrier, and components are often gendered including the weight room "dominated by big sweaty men, while females are near the cardio machines or stretching" as numerous studies outline (Coen et al. 2017). This is evident in my community where I am often the only female at the gym lifting weights, I encounter stereotypes every day, and there are no specific female programs introducing them to strength training and its benefits."

ADDRESSING THE NEED

In 2020, Lift4Life was successfully granted project funds under Canadian Women & Sport's WISE Fund Grant to further develop the vision. The Empower Project was proposed, and further developed to introduce girls between the ages of 12-18 in Canada to strength sports offering a new avenue for exercise and challenging the gender norms associated with training for strength.

The program was originally designed to be delivered in person; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was pivoted to be administered online. Lift4Life Practicum student Evie Corrigan from Massey University in New Zealand took the project on within her Post-graduate Diploma in International Development and took the lead to develop the program and spearhead its implementation.



LITERATURE REVIEW

As the name suggests, the developed course draws from empowerment literature specifically the conceptualisation of power by Naila Kabeer. Kabeer (2010) envisages power positively in three ways: firstly the cognitive power within, transforming one's sense of themselves. Secondly, the behavioural power to, the ability to make choices and exercise influence. Thirdly, the relational power with, the process of allying with men and women to question systems and bring about change.

Using this conceptualisation, Lift4Life Practicum Student Evie began to make connections with other theories and approaches. In the field there has been much interest in using sport to bring about positive changes for young people that it has been termed "Positive Youth Development" (PYD). The intended outcomes of programmes include skill development, promotion of healthy lifestyles, gender equality, social inclusion, disaster-relief, and empowerment (Seal, 2020). However, Seal (2020) notes that despite an increased interest in female sports empowerment programmes many fall short of being truly transformative. While sports have been shown to have many positive outcomes they can also promote racism, nationalism, discrimination, corruption, drug abuse, and violence (Hancock, Lyras, & Ha, 2013). In regards to girls empowerment programmes, many place too much focus on the individual and fail to consider the context, as well as the broader structures and inequalities that impact girl's lives (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). Programmes without critical awareness of how systems of inequality intersect place girls as both their own problem and solution which reinforces a neoliberal ideology of individual-level empowerment and personal responsibility (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016).

A transformative approach imbues girls with a critical awareness of the systems that surround them and how to work collectively for change (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). Seal (2020) outlines some recommendations for designing sports for female empowerment programmes including considering the context - specifically women's role, status and the issues they face, participation in planning, partnerships with local organizations to ensure ongoing development, use of non-traditional sport to contest gender norms, and consideration of the role of men and boys. Through these recommendations it is possible to see the connection to Kabeer's power within, power to, and power with.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to using an empowerment framework, inspiration was also drawn from research conducted among female youth refugees by Farello, Blom, Mulvihill, and Erickson (2019). Farello et al (2019) use self-determination theory (SDT) to explore the young women's experiences with sport. They reiterate that sport must be explicitly programmed to bring about positive development as it can otherwise risk causing negative experiences such as stress and social exclusion. SDT, while a theory focused on achieving psychological well-being, resilience and belonging, can also be seen to share practical threads with Kabeer's empowerment framework. Achieving competence has similarities with the conscientization of power within, that is expanding one's own knowledge and capabilities. Autonomy is an agency to act, similar to power to. Relatedness refers to creating positive relationships similar to power with, while lacking the call to action. SDT adds another conceptual layer to how Sport for Development should be conducted and to what ends.

As has already briefly been touched on, PYD is an asset building approach that looks to promote positive relationships, acquisition of new life skills and use of these skills within the community. One of the critiques is that it focuses too heavily on individual responsibility and ignores structures of inequality. However, there are still useful components in the PYD model, particularly the 5 C's presented by Lerner. The 5 C's are confidence, competence, positive connections, character, and caring (Holt, Deal, Pankow, Pynn, & Jorgensen, 2019). A 6th C is suggested, contributions, once adolescents are able to exhibit the other five (Holt et al., 2019). It is hypothesized that the greater the prevalence of the 5 C's the greater the positive outcomes and decreased likelihood of risky behaviour (Holt et al. 2019). Again it is possible to conceptualise the 5 C's as related to an empowerment framework. Considering confidence and character building as related to power within, competence as either power within or power to, and positive connections and caring as power with.

Finally The Empower Project drew heavily from Strong Girls, a Swedish program that promotes well-being and empowerment through sport for adolescent girls. The ten objectives of this course are designed to be delivered over 30 lessons across the school year. These objectives were also cross-referenced to examine their connections with the other theoretical threads. Evie then worked to align them with the major themes she felt strength training offered which formed the basis of the six sessions of the Empower project. For example, challenging gender norms was identified as an advantage of strength training, this aligned with Strong Girls Objective 3: Formulate and express your own ideas, opinions, and values, as well as Objective 9: Reflect on society's ideals, norms, and values and your own agency in society (Rist, n.d.). The content for this session included discussing perceptions of women in strength training, gender norms and male dominated spaces, drawbacks of social media, personal agency and activism, how to communicate assertively, and power poses.

WHY POWERLIFTING?

Powerlifting is a strength sport that consists of the three barbell lifts of the squat, bench press, and deadlift and may be seen as a unique avenue to address the needs of young women in the local community. It is a sport that is increasing in popularity across the globe and is inclusive to all ages, genders, body weights, and abilities.

While training together and supporting one another often fosters a team attitude, powerlifting is an individual sport and therefore one does not have to feel responsible for letting down the team, or not being good enough. Put another way, success and achievement is the product of the individuals hard work and commitment. Powerlifting as an individual sport may also be seen as advantageous in that it may be easier to fit individual training into a busy schedule without having to find a time that suits every team member. However, most powerlifters coordinate training times to train with their friends as community is an integral part of the sport and arguably all sports.

Strength sports and the sport of powerlifting may be seen as a useful tool to help young women come to terms with fears about being judged for their bodies because it explicitly focuses on the body's ability to perform heavy lifts in conjunction with adopting a healthy lifestyle and diet that enables our bodies to perform well. In many cases, bodies will grow as they acquire muscle mass, challenging the societal messages that females should be trying to be smaller and lose weight. Focussing on what our bodies can do when they are looked after (rather than what they look like) is integral to helping young women realize that their inherent self-worth is not attached to their appearance. Strength sports are historically male dominated and associated with male characteristics, with physical strength being one of them. Participating in this sport as a female allows women to redefine what strength means and looks like and to claim space in an area that was once only for men.

Finally, powerlifting is an amateur sport, and it exists almost entirely at the community level, reliant on the work of volunteers. As a result, a part of the culture of powerlifting goes beyond just training and competing to further include "giving back" and contributing through volunteering to ensure the continuation of the sport. There are many roles through which to give back, and many "climb the ranks" by starting with relatively easy one off jobs and then with greater experience moving into leadership and organizational roles.

The Lift4Life Empower Project course had originally intended to utilize powerlifting and the powerlifts (squat, bench and deadlift), but due to gym closures and lockdowns in Canada a much broader approach to strength training was adopted to enable virtual delivery for the course. An online course allowed the attendees to participate at home and from various communities across Canada. Despite not being able to facilitate in-gym training with barbells, Lift4Life provided exercise bands to each participant and is confident the messages and benefits of strength training were still strongly carried over.



COURSE OBJECTIVES

Combining past research in conjunction with Lift4Life's own ethos using strength training, the project was designed to empower young girls to make informed choices about their health and wellbeing, to enhance their self-confidence, efficacy and esteem, to create positive relationships and foster community focused attitudes, and to challenge societal norms and pressures. Of course it also had the goal to encourage physical activity and introduce girls to new movements and sports.

Four project purposes were devised:

- Participants experience personal development in the form of increased confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.
- Participants learn new skills, physically, personally and interpersonally such as communication skills, and emotional tools.
- Participants experience improved relationships with family and peers.
- Participants feel better equipped to make informed choices and tackle societal pressure.

READY TO
GET
STRONG?



6 Weeks of Classes
ZOOM | 5pm
Registration FREE



THE LIFT4LIFE
EMPOWER PROJECT



COURSE STRUCTURE

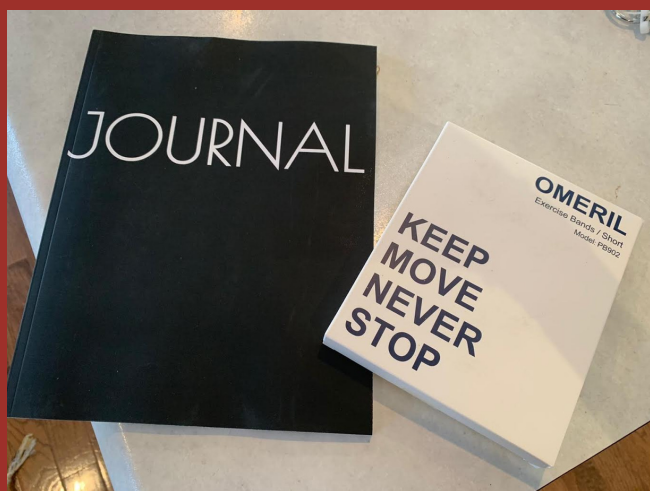
The free online course was offered to girls in Canada and took place on Thursday evenings at 5pm EST. Registration was required in advance and included an intake form to gain parental consent, emergency contacts, past history, and a background on each participant.

Prior to the course beginning, each registrant was mailed a set of 6 resistance bands as well as a journal. The resistance bands were for use within session workouts and for the girls to keep to continue physical activity and exercises after the program. A journal was included for use during activities, and to encourage reflection, as well as documentation. Items were delivered by Amazon Prime to ensure reliable and fast shipping.

The Empower Project took place over a 6-week commitment through Zoom video conferencing, with each session lasting 1 hour in length. Each session incorporated an interactive powerpoint presentation with content relating to that week's theme. The educational presentation included a variety of reflective questions and activities in relation to the topic, and participants were encouraged to share and use their journal. Each week, a female role model from the community was invited to share their story and have a conversation with the participants.

Physical activity and movement were incorporated into each week. To measure improvements, each week included the testing of three baseline movements (wall sit, plank, push ups) in a similar structure. Each week also included a 20 minute workout that introduced the girls to a number of new exercises and movements they could do at home.

The final session featured a recap of the course content, a celebration of achievements including a certificate, and a participant-led workout.



COURSE OBJECTIVES

Session one: Welcome and goal-setting

This presentation introduced the three leaders for the course: Nicola, Shannon and Evie, and an introduction to Lift4Life's work. It introduced strength training in general and powerlifting in particular, and why they were recognized as a medium for delivering this course. The participants were then encouraged to consider their own reasons for doing sport and for joining the course. This discussion segued into goal-setting: the kinds of goals to aim for, how to achieve goals, and how to manage not reaching expectations and still recognize inherent self-worth.

Session two: Positive self-talk and fostering inclusivity

This presentation asked participants to recognize and lean into the fear and self-doubt associated with trying something new, e.g. a new sport. The group worked on recognizing negative self-talk and flipping it to positive self-talk. Positive affirmations were also introduced as a tool to use in times of fear. For example, each participant was asked to note in their journal three things they did well during the session. Session two wrapped up by considering the importance of making spaces inclusive, using powerlifting as an example and then devising our own "virtual gym rules" to set the stage for expected behaviour in future sessions.

Session three: Challenging gender norms

This presentation exposed participants to some of the outdated beliefs held about what women should and shouldn't do. Discussions included social media as a tool that can be used to reinforce gender norms or to challenge them. Some powerful female role models such as Malala Yousafzai were used as examples of what can be achieved when personal agency is used to fight for our values. The participants were then introduced to assertive communication and power poses to use as tools to help them stand up to discrimination.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Session four: Community

In this presentation, the importance of inclusive spaces was reiterated and discussions were held on what it feels like to be bullied or excluded. The concept of compassion- what it looks like and how compassion can be used to support each other- and tools for resolving conflict were also explained in this session. The session wrapped up by considering what can be achieved as a community together and the importance of giving back to communities that have supported us.

Session five: Physical health and performance

This presentation covered ways in which progress and performance can be supported. It was reiterated how progress can be made and how it can be measured. It went on to then examine nutrition, sleep, and stress as three factors that play an important role in the ability to recover from the physical work done during sports, providing useful tips to optimise these things to better support health, well-being and progress.

Session six: Final week celebration

In this final week, learnings were recapped from the previous five weeks and asked the participants to contribute what they remembered or found most useful from those sessions. Evaluation questions were incorporated to prompt discussion about what they enjoyed most, what they would change, or what they found difficult. Each participant was asked to lead an exercise of their choice during the group workout. At the end of the session each girl was celebrated individually with their peers for their achievements during the course.



**HOW CAN WE
SUPPORT AND
COACH EACH OTHER?**

**FOCUS ON
THE PERSON**

**LISTEN TO
THEM**

BE HONEST



RESULTS

Attendance

The first session had full attendance, but over the course of the six weeks attendance waned with only two participants attending the final session. In some cases this was due to illness or family commitments, for one participant it was believed to be due to the course being unsuitable for her as she was considerably older than the target audience. The time of year may also have been a factor, with the final session being very close to Christmas. The holiday period is a time of year many people are winding down for a break, and this may have coincided with reduced motivation due to how high stress the COVID-19 pandemic was for many. Overall attendance was 71% with most participants attending four of the six sessions.

Survey data

Pre and post surveys were conducted to evaluate certain attitudes and self-perceptions that were part of the objectives of the course. The pre survey had full participation. It uncovered that all of the participants said they enjoyed sport and physical activity but only 57% said they felt welcome. 71% felt confident trying new things but only one person responded that they were confident to challenge themselves in front of others. The majority did not express that they felt confident in their bodies and their abilities however most did feel good about themselves overall. The majority were unsure about their ability to set and achieve goals but all indicated an awareness of their own thoughts and feelings. Only one person said they felt somewhat confident expressing their opinions and ideas. Most felt they understood how norms affected girls and women but were less confident in influencing societal change. The majority of girls were active less than one hour per week - a concerning number reflecting many of the challenges of COVID-19.

The post survey received 3 responses, again this was likely due to the time of year and that feedback was requested around Christmas time. However, all those that responded expressed that The Empower Project had changed their view of sport, they felt stronger after the project, had learned new physical skills, and felt more confident in their body and it's abilities. All respondents indicated that they felt they had a clearer understanding of how to reach their goals, had new tools to manage their thoughts and feelings, better understood how their thoughts and feelings influenced their behaviour, had become better at setting boundaries, and had become better at helping and supporting friends and teammates.

Participants felt that giving back to their communities and showing compassion and kindness had become more important to them. Respondents felt more confident to influence society, and believed more strongly that sport is important for girls and important for them. There were mixed responses regarding if they were more likely to try new sports in the future. 66% felt more confident to challenge themselves in front of others and to say what they think and felt they knew more about how norms in society affect girls and women. This indicates some potential avenues for future investigation.

RESULTS

Baseline measures

As a final quantitative measure three baseline movements were chosen that would be completed and recorded each week to measure physical progress across the course. These exercises were the wall sit, plank, and pushups. Due to recording challenges the first week's measures were unable to be collected. Other limitations included difficulties in correcting form over video call, frozen screens or lags, inconsistent attendance, and wrongly angled cameras that made it difficult or impossible to see the movement being done and collect a measure.

Despite challenges, all participants exhibited some progress from start to finish, albeit not always linearly. One participant who attended every session managed to achieve a full 2 min wall sit and 2 min plank (the maximum time) with correct form, and progressed to being able to do 3 push ups on her toes and a further 13 on her knees. Movement variations were introduced to allow participants to choose their difficulty, most began by doing pushups on their knees or with the knees fully tucked under in a table top position and then progressed to trying push ups on their toes. The same is true for the plank position. While length of holds and repetitions increased over the weeks form also improved greatly, participants were witnessed correcting their wall sits to be in a parallel position, and keeping their bodies rigid and flat in plank and push ups without hips sagging. It would be even greater to see the progress made in person with multiple sessions a week.



QUOTES

When asked about progress towards the goals they set at the start of the course the girls said:

"The Empower Project and these sessions get me in the mood to be more productive and make healthier choices."

"I am limiting my snacking now, and eating more fruits and vegetables"

"I've been more confident"

"One of my strengths from this course now is restraining myself from bad habits. I used to watch lots of TikToks, now I do my homework instead"

When asked what they enjoyed about the course the girls said:

"I enjoyed learning new exercises. Specifically the strong woman."

"It was my first time trying yoga, and it was more tiring than I thought it would be, but I enjoyed it."

"I enjoyed the course being online, so I could join"

When asked what things they had learnt from the course the girls said:

"After I learned the wonder woman pose and other power poses, I now use them. I recognize the power they have in stressful times. I also use breathing techniques."

"I am now aware girls can be strong, because during this course I saw girls lift cars and tires. It made me aware it was possible"

When asked what was difficult about the course one girl said:

"Both plank and wall sits were the most challenging, but as the weeks went on I adapted. I began to enjoy it"

When asked if they would recommend the Empower Project to friend they said:

"This course has helped me in so many ways. I would definitely recommend it to a friend. It was really fun!"

"I would tell my friends they should try it because it helps you be more confident in yourself"

A sister of one the participants said:

"I know it impacted my sister a lot"



LEARNINGS

The Empower Project is believed to be successful as it had a good combination of beneficial elements and clearly held value to many of those attending. The following section highlights learnings and provides recommendations for future initiatives of this nature.

Structure of Sessions

A challenge included consistent structure and timing throughout each session, as some parts of the session took longer than expected. Sessions regularly ran over time, and it is suggested in the future to dedicate closer to 1.5 hours to adequately complete the baseline exercises, powerpoint presentation, guest speakers, and workout. Providing speakers with a set time slot would allow it to remain concise and prevent the girls from losing interest. Sticking to a consistent format would allow participants to anticipate where the session is going and would likely be more time efficient.

Promoting Discussion

The girls were at times reluctant to speak over the Zoom call and thus the discussions were often quite leader-dominated. To promote discussions in the future, it is recommended to encourage the girls to come more prepared to calls, for example with questions to ask our speakers. Other options include smaller groups and breakout rooms in Zoom, so that the girls feel less intimidated about speaking in front of a lot of people. Perhaps with more time getting to know each other and more sessions the girls may feel more comfortable participating.

Journal Use

Despite being quiet when it came to speaking, it was found that the girls were very active in using their journals during the sessions. The journals were seen as a very strong and utilized aspect of the course. In the future, it is encouraged to utilize the journals further and provide more opportunities for them to share what they have been writing in their journals to promote discussion while also providing their own account of the learnings from the course.

LEARNINGS

Improve Access

The timing took place at 5pm EST (Toronto time) and was found not suitable for all participants. As mentioned the time of year may also have contributed to falling attendance. During the school term, perhaps later in the evening to prevent interference with school hours across multiple time zones in Canada, or even on a weekend may make it more accessible. A strength of the course was that it was free, and that being online meant transportation was never an issue. In theory, if the timing permitted we could host international sessions across a wide range of time zones. In this cohort all the participants were based in Canada, but we had guest speakers and a leader join from overseas (Zimbabwe and New Zealand).

Improved Physical Activity Section

The physical activity portion and workouts were at the end of sessions, however, due to running over time the workouts were often the shortest part of the session and at times felt rushed. There were definite limitations with space and equipment, however, the girls seemed to enjoy sessions that had more creative workouts and introduced new sports or movements. The bands enabled exposure to a variety of strength exercises.

Extend Length of Course and Sessions

Extending the length of the course and providing sessions more than once a week would allow for more in-depth learning, better physical progress, greater retention of material, and more opportunities for the girls to model their new skills. This presents its own challenges of being a greater time commitment for both leaders and participants however the positive reception of the course ensures confidence in an expanded offering in the future.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & CONTRIBUTORS

Lift4Life would like to extend a big thank you to all the young girls who participated in the initiative, guest speakers who shared their stories and talents, Lift4life's Practicum Student Evie Corrigan for program development and facilitation, as well as Nicola Paviglianiti and Shannon Fernandes for their expertise and facilitation. Of course The Empower Project wouldn't have been possible without generous funding from Canadian Women & Sport. In the midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we were able to provide strength to young adolescent girls in Canada. We are excited to witness the continuing legacy of this project and build upon successes and learnings. #LiftAndUplift

A special thanks Canadian Women & Sport for their funding to make this project possible, as well as the following individuals for making The Empower Project a huge success:

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Evie Corrigan, Post-Graduate Diploma in International Development, Massey University, New Zealand.

Empower Project Facilitators:

Evie Corrigan, Nicola Paviglianiti (Lift4life Executive Director), and Shannon Fernandes (Lift4Life Canada Director).

Guest Speakers -

Professional Strong Woman: Bailey Deschene

Zimbabwe Programming Coordinator & Powerlifter: Audrey Svongwa

Team Canada Masters Powerlifter: Linda Rousseau

Yoga Instructor: Miranda Branyiczky



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