

# Sporting Bonds: Can sporting programmes properly facilitate the meaningful integration of migrant and host communities in Ireland?

## AUTHOR

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## AFFILIATIONS

Sport Against Racism Ireland.

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Funded by the Laidlaw Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme.

## INTRODUCTION

Having spent the last two summers volunteering with the not-for-profit organisation Sport Against Racism Ireland (SARI) at their annual Football for Unity tournament, a four-week football tournament held across Dublin's north-east inner city with the explicit aim of showcasing football as an educational tool which can bring communities together, the Laidlaw programme offered the perfect opportunity to examine the efficacy of the Football for Unity tournament and its integrative power. Setting out to test the oft-quoted narrative that describes sport as an arena of racial and social equality (Green & Hardman, 2000), as well as a positive tool for the integration of migrant communities (European Commission, 2007), I decided to conduct a study aimed at discovering whether or not long-lasting social connections and strong feelings of social inclusion were fostered by non-Irish natives through their participation in the Football for Unity Tournament.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The first stage consisted of a condensed literature review, in which journal articles, academic publications, and various grey matter such as European Commission reports relating to the research topic were examined. Current thought on the definition of 'integration' as opposed to 'assimilation' (Hatzigeorgiadis, et al., 2013), and the impact of competition and motivation on the use of sport as a socially bridging tool (Krouwel, et al., 2006) were identified as most relevant to the research question.

Berry's Model of Integration-Multiculturalism describes the varying strategies used by individuals who are trying to maintain their cultural heritage while simultaneously interacting with the host culture, a process referred to as acculturation (Berry, 2008). This distinction between intra-cultural and inter-cultural integration stood out as key to the study, given the often exclusive focus of policy-makers on inter-cultural integration.

A second element that appeared across studies was the way in which an atmosphere of sporting competition could shape individuals' understanding of sport as a tool of social integration (Muller, et al., 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

This project followed a mixed-methods approach, using both quantitative surveys and semi-structured individual interviews to ensure a rounded interpretation and contextualisation of the data collected (Brannen, 2017). The findings from the literature review were then used to inform the main themes of the questionnaire handed out to those participating in the 2023 Football For Unity (FFU) tournament. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their ethnic background, their experiences of sport in Ireland, the potential of sport to connect migrant and native Irish communities, their level of involvement in SARI programmes, and their experience of the FFU tournament. Survey answers were used to refine the semi-structured interview guide and highlight potential interviewees. This purposive sampling ensured that the interview sample group were all of a migrant background, occupied a variety of roles within the tournament structure, and there was an equal gender balance. Eight interviews with a variety of players, coaches, and volunteers, were conducted pitch side, in public spaces, and in the SARI office. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was done in accordance with Braun and Clarke's method of identifying and analysing patterned meaning within datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes were constructed by the researcher using a coding book and through the identification of common understandings and instances of meaning-making that were shared by individual interviewees.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

Out of a possible 300 respondents, I received 118 survey responses (a 39% response rate). 80 respondents were men and 38 women, representative of a sample size in which there were 16 men's teams and only 5 women's.

24 different countries of origin were represented, with Algeria (11), Somalia (13), and Brazil (10) the largest participating groups of Third-Country Nationals or non-European Union citizens. The largest ethnic group present beside White Irish (43 respondents) was Black African (34 respondents), with non-White Irish respondents making up a majority 62% (n=74) of all survey responses.

52.5% of respondents were participating in the tournament for the first time, while 18.6% had participated in each of the last three years. 45 respondents (38.1%) had participated in two or more SARI programmes.

53% of respondents said they had experienced or witnessed discriminatory incidents while participating in sporting activities in Ireland, with 8.5% placing such incidents at a Football For Unity tournament.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Following the guidance offered by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I analysed the eight interview transcripts with a view for the 'storybook' approach to thematic analysis. This meant locating the data within the social and political contexts from which it emerges from and making active choices as a researcher when constructing themes.

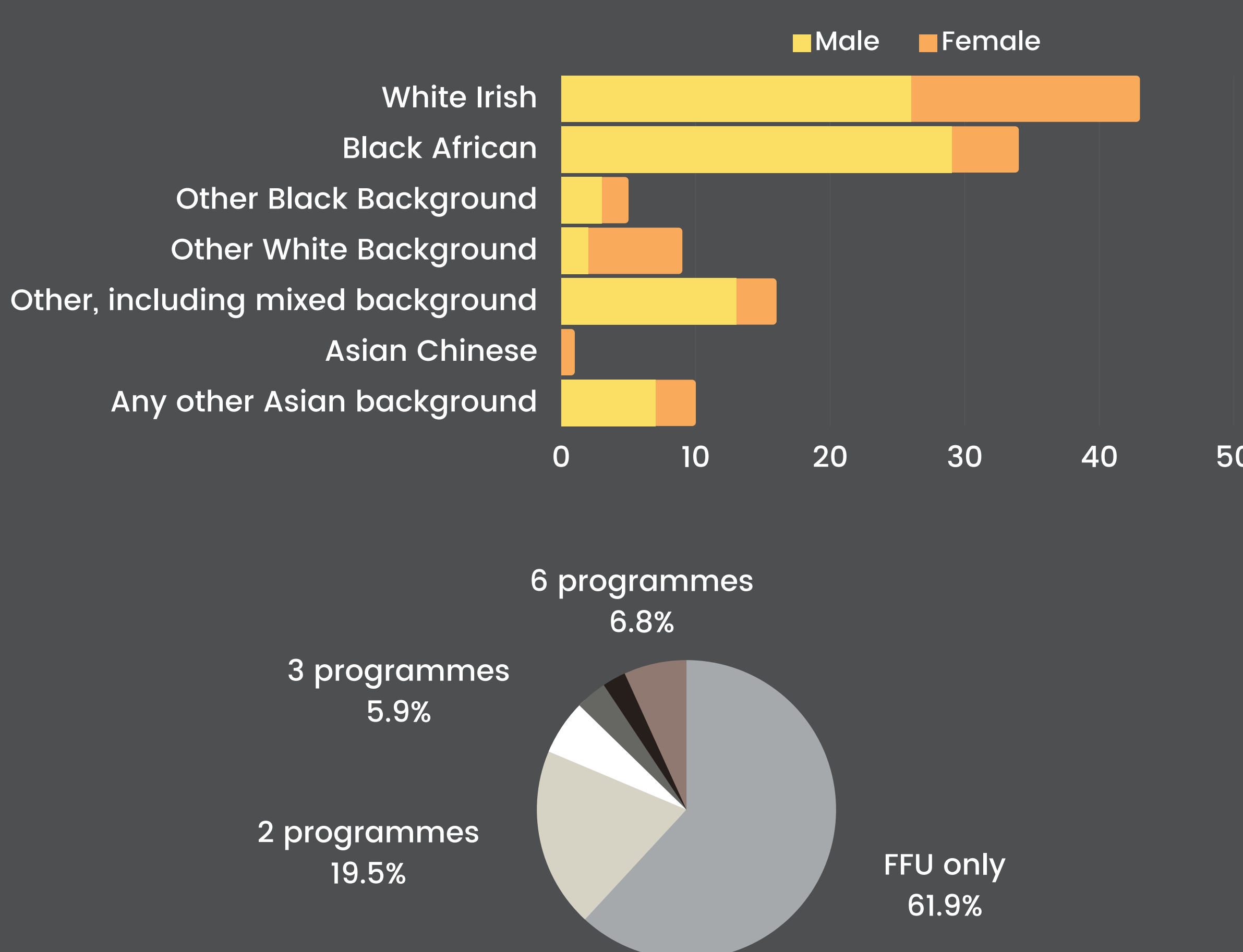
### Key Themes:

**Feeling like a Local** - Several participants referred to the formation of strong relationships within the local Dublin community as a result of the tournament. Manav\* and Hakim\* both spoke about their initial reluctance to participate in the tournament given its inner-city location and predominantly white Irish population, explaining that after three years of the tournament they now felt that "the people there treat me like their own".

**Increased Community Visibility** - Interviewees repeatedly commented on the positive image that teams made up of ethnic minority groups could present to the host community. Fatima\* believed that seeing a team of women made up of a mix of hijab and non-hijab wearing players would help show native Irish residents that "we are here...to actually see in your [Irish native] community you also have that [ethnic minority] group".

**Strengthening Intra-group Networks** - Interviewees from teams made up predominantly of migrant players all reported practices of information and culture-sharing within their team. Koffi\* described joining his team as a "way for me to give back but also to guide people that just came or people...that didn't have knowledge".

**Competition as a 'Pull' Factor** - Interestingly, the increased level of competition was cited as a positive element of the tournament by a number of interviewees. Khadija\* said her team "get much more [players] during the tournament" because "everybody wants to win". Manav\* also believed the high level of competition meant teams "focus more on winning than saying.. he's from other countries, stuff like that"



## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the SARI Football For Unity Tournament has helped facilitate the long-lasting integration and inclusion of migrant communities in those areas where the tournament is hosted. Ethnic minority participants described the tournament as a safe space within which they could interact with people from different cultural backgrounds and provide support to those who have recently migrated to Ireland. The tournament was also viewed as an opportunity to showcase minority communities in a positive light.

However, interviewees also expressed doubt that tournament participants were explicitly aware of the socially-integrative aims of the tournament. Future iterations of FFU ought to clearly signpost the integrative purpose of the tournament to ensure those involved are actively fostering an inclusive atmosphere.

This study highlights the importance of conducting further research into the efficacy of community-led social integration programmes given current trends of rising political tensions towards migration levels in Europe and Ireland.



## REFERENCES

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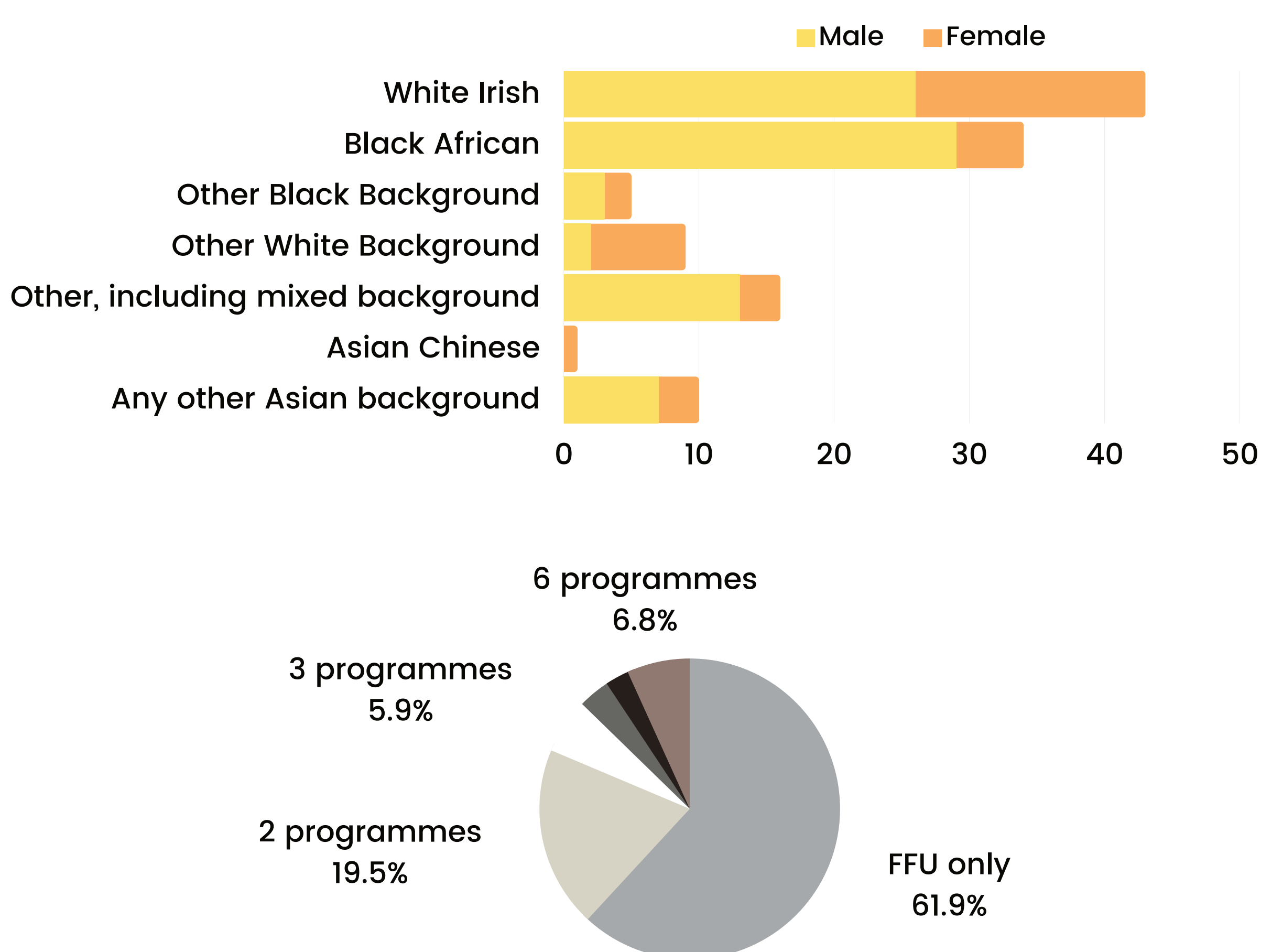
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