

Barriers to women and girls' participation in sport and physical activity

Participation rates among women and girls are much lower than among men. This gender gap is caused by many barriers, which can be categorised as 'practical', 'personal' and 'social and cultural'. These play a significant role in women and girls' attitudes and behaviour. Below is a list of the main barriers, with recommendations of how sports deliverers can help to overcome them.

Practical barriers

Lack of time and lack of childcare. Women's leisure tends to be reactive to the needs of their families. They often have less leisure time than men, as they take on the greater burden of responsibility for housework and care for children and elderly relatives.

Recommendation: provide crèche facilities or classes for toddlers and children, so that adults can bring their children when they go to exercise.

Lack of money. Women tend to earn less than men. Scottish women working full-time earn on average £529 less per month than men¹, and the disparity is greater for women working part-time. Low income families may not be able to afford to invest in club membership or pay for sporting clothing and equipment, and mothers from low income families are unlikely to be able to afford childcare to give them the time to take part in sport.

Recommendation: subsidies for women's activities can make them more affordable. If subsidies cannot be sustained, consider offering them at the start of a new project or activity, and then gradually introduce fees.

Lack of transport. This is a particular problem for women with young children, elderly women, women and girls with disabilities, and women and girls living in rural areas.

Recommendations: explore partnerships with transport providers. Provide information about public transport. Develop a system so participants can organise share-a-ride systems.

Promote physical activity which doesn't require transport, such as walking and running. Walking and running groups can be accessed through organisations such as 'jogscotland'² and running groups such as 'Running Sisters'³. These organisations can support women to take part in easily accessible physical activity in a friendly, supportive group.

Personal safety. Personal safety on the streets, on public transport, and in and around sports and community venues is a particular problem for women. Some groups are particularly vulnerable. For example, black and minority ethnic (BME) girls and women can become the focus of racist behaviour. People with disabilities are often the targets of bullying and abuse. Travelling to and from venues for sports or physical activity can present particular barriers for these groups.

Recommendations: make a safety assessment of the venue, taking into account the security of the area, street lighting, transport links, etc. Ask participants about their experiences and views of personal safety in those areas. Offer self-defence lessons and personal alarms.

Ensure activities are offered in locations or facilities that are safe and appropriate for women and girls. Also exercising in groups can make physical activity safer for women and girls.

Funding. At most levels, women's sport attracts less funding than men's. During 2006/07, 41% of female athletes were funded through various programmes. At community sport level, girls' teams tend to attract less sponsorship from local businesses because they do not have large supporter bases. The result of this funding gap is poorer facilities, equipment and kit.

¹ Annual Government Survey of Hours and Earnings Data, (2007)

² <http://www.jogscotland.org.uk>

³ Running Sisters clubs exist nationwide. One example is in Croydon: <http://www.croydon-running-sisters.org.uk>

Recommendations: review existing practice and allocation.

Allocate equal funds, prize money and sponsorship to male and female athletes.

Access to facilities. Women and girls cannot play sport if they cannot get access to the necessary facilities. Too often, sports halls prioritise male sport when it comes to pitch time so that men and boys get facilities at their preferred times, while women and girls have to make do with less convenient times.

Access to sporting facilities is particularly limited for women and girls with disabilities. For example, one third of disabled young people feel excluded from local sports opportunities. Access can be limited by physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, reception areas, changing rooms and sports facilities, or lack of accessible transport and parking. Barriers can also be created when information is presented in formats which are inaccessible to visually impaired and/or hearing impaired people.

Recommendations: review the allocation of facilities and pitch time, and work to save some pitches during peak times for women's sports and teams.

Provide information in a variety of formats so that all groups have equal access.

Ensure all staff are trained in working with people with disabilities.

Personal barriers

Body image. Research shows that in general, female adolescents report greater body image dissatisfaction than males. However, body image is a particularly important issue in sport – research shows that women are far more self-conscious than men when taking part in sport and physical activity. For girls and women the relationship between body image and physical inactivity is a vicious circle; the more self-conscious they feel about their bodies, the less likely they are to take part in sport, and yet participation in sport has a positive effect on girls' perceptions of their bodies.

Western fashion promotes increasingly revealing clothes for women and girls, whereas social norms in some cultures prohibit exposure of the female body and promote modesty. As a result, the dress code in swimming pools and leisure facilities might clash with cultural norms and customs.

Girls and women who are obese or have disabilities may be particularly affected by problems around body image. With an increasingly body-obsessed culture, these women are frequently judged negatively. Generally, girls or women can be put off certain sports by the prospect of revealing uniforms attracting unwanted sexual attention.

Recommendations: ensure girls and women can have privacy in changing rooms and in facilities.

In the design and layout of venues, prevent exposed areas between changing rooms and facilities such as a swimming pool. Allow swimmers to wear T-shirts over their costumes.

Use a variety of images in publicity, not just those which show the idealised female figure.

Provide single-sex activities, staffed by women and make sure that they are not running next to a men's session. There is no point in running a women-only aerobics session in one half of a hall with men's football in the other half.

Clothing and equipment. Clothing and equipment for sports can be expensive. This is a particular problem for women, given that, on average, they earn less than men. Images of sportspeople can promote the idea that, unless you're dressed in fashionable clothing designed for a particular sport, you'll look out of place. Some sports clothing is also quite revealing, which creates problems for women and girls, linked to the issues about body image and culture mentioned earlier.

Strict requirements about clothing can also prevent some BME women from participating. For example, swimming pools which don't allow women to wear T-shirts over their swimming costumes, and clubs which insist members wear tight-fitting and/or revealing uniforms, can exclude those who follow certain religions – and people who are self-conscious of their bodies.

Equipment can be inappropriate for women and girls. For example, women's development in golf has at times been hampered by women being forced to play with inappropriate equipment for their build, strength, level and swing speed.

Recommendations: 'Fit for girls' (a partnership initiative between sportscotland and Youth Sport Trust) found that allowing girls to wear whatever they like, to do physical education and in clubs, helped increase participation.

Coaches, instructors and leisure centre staff could wear casual clothing during activities, rather than formal or expensive sportswear.

Make sure the equipment available for women and girls is suitable (e.g. that there is a variety of sizes) and that it is suitable for women with disabilities.

Lack of self-confidence. Girls, on average, have less self-confidence than boys and rate their performance or ability more negatively than boys do. This is linked to issues about body image: girls who don't feel good about their bodies can lack confidence in their physical abilities and may be over-negative about their performance.

Self-confidence is also linked to competition. Although most sportswomen enjoy the competitive element of sport, many girls and women are turned off sport because it is competitive. This is one of the reasons why 'aesthetic activities', such as aerobics, gymnastics and yoga, are increasingly popular among girls and young women, and why some traditional team sports are less popular.

Recommendations: make sure all women and girls, regardless of skills or experience, get the chance to be an active part of activities and teams.

Set up mentoring systems for older or more experienced women and girls to mentor those who are younger or less experienced. Promote beginner and intermediate activities for girls and women as fun, open and non-competitive.

Parental and adult influence. The influence of parents, coaches and other adults affects girls and boys differently. Adolescent females place greater emphasis on self-comparison and comments from adults than do adolescent males, who rely more on competitive outcomes as their basis for personal judgement of physical competence. Negative comment from coaches and teachers is one of the main reasons for girls becoming discouraged from playing sport.

Recommendations: parents and sports staff should act as positive role models for children, be involved in the child's sporting activities and have positive, realistic beliefs about the child's competency.

Organise Parent and Daughter sessions to help create a familial culture of support for sport.

Ensure there are female role models in your facility, club or leisure centre: these may be staff, coaches, organisers or managers.

Social and cultural barriers

The male-dominated culture of sport. The culture of sport itself presents a problem. Some argue that sport has traditionally been defined, organised, promoted and constructed as a male activity. Some women are turned off 'sport' altogether because they see it as a male-dominated activity. For many girls, being sporty is felt to be at odds with being feminine.

Recommendations: challenge sexist assumptions and behaviour inside your organisation and among participants.

Women and girls are more open to ideas about 'health' and 'wellbeing' than sport. Combine physical activity with health promotion; offer guest speakers on active lifestyles, nutrition, body image, smoking, etc.

Combine physical activity with expressive arts. There is scope for developing physical activities in conjunction with drama, dance and other expressive arts.

Attitudes and prejudices about sexuality.

Homophobia is the hatred or fear of homosexuals (i.e. lesbians, bisexuals and gay men). It includes another factor which is particularly relevant to the world of sport – 'homo-negativism' – which is a fear among heterosexuals that they may be perceived as homosexual. Women's sport (especially male-dominated sport such as football and rugby) is still regarded by some as fundamentally unfeminine. Lesbians are also regarded by some as unfeminine. The resulting, erroneous, conclusion is that all sportswomen must be lesbians.

There are several consequences: some women refrain from certain sports for fear of being perceived as unfeminine or lesbian; some parents discourage their daughters from taking up sport; some lesbian athletes avoid going public about their sexuality in case they experience prejudice from other athletes and coaches or lose public support/sponsorship. Ultimately, homophobia and 'homo-negativism' can stop women from participating or excelling in sport.

Recommendations: confront discrimination. Be aware that homophobia can be subtle as well as open. There is a need for more open discussion in this area, as well as educational projects to raise awareness and stimulate debate.

Be aware of the tendency to depict sportswomen as overly feminine in a bid to counter 'homo-negativism', or as unfeminine.

Be aware that girls and women who use your services and facilities will include straight, bisexual and lesbian people, who might all like to see different kinds of images and publicity.

Positive role models can help people who feel isolated because of prejudice about sexual orientation.

Attitudes and prejudices about disability. Girls and women with disabilities are less likely than women without disabilities to participate in sport at all levels. There are several reasons:

- physically inaccessible facilities, venues and equipment
- coaching staff who don't know how to adapt their teaching to help individuals take part in enjoyable, fulfilling activities
- unwelcoming attitudes by other sports participants and staff
- a lack of role models to inspire, motivate and encourage.

Attitudes and assumptions about people with disabilities can make sport seem even more inaccessible. The assumption that all disabled people are wheelchair users (when only about 5% are) ignores the diversity within and between different impairment groups and their needs. The assumption that removing physical barriers will automatically increase participation is also damaging; more significant barriers are discriminatory attitudes, lack of training and lack of awareness.

Recommendation: it's important to have more girls and women with disabilities as role models. Think about the publicity material and information in your sporting venue; does your organisation work with and promote coaches and staff who have disabilities?

Attitudes and prejudices about ethnicity.

Although many people believe that different ethnic groups share similar experiences, differences between black and minority ethnic groups are significant. For example, rates of participation in sport among different ethnic minorities vary from considerably lower than the national average to somewhat higher. Similarly, the gap between men and women's participation in sport is greater among some minority ethnic groups than it is in the population as a whole.

Assumptions about BME people – for example, that Asian people don't play football, that no Asian girls are allowed to wear swimsuits, that all African and Caribbean people are good at athletics and basketball – can limit their

opportunities to take up sport or to participate in the full range of sports. Low participation rates lead to low rates of volunteering, coaching, employment and leadership in sport.

Recommendations: having positive role models of BME women and girls taking part in a range of sports and a range of roles in sport is important and can make a difference to individuals and groups of BME women and girls.

Be aware of religious and cultural festivals such as Eid and Ramadan when arranging events. Ensure all your staff are trained in issues about ethnicity and diversity and are inclusive in their practice.

Sexual harassment and abuse. Sport-based research on this topic is lacking, but recent studies indicate that sexual harassment and abuse is a problem in sport, just as it is in the wider community. Research shows that the vast majority of perpetrators of sexual harassment and abuse are men, and that women and girls are more frequent victims than men and boys.

Many women and girls drop out of sport rather than continue being subjected to the undermining effects of constant harassment and abuse. Others endure the sexual attention of their male coaches or peers because of fear, desire for athletic reward, low self-esteem or ignorance of who to turn to for help. Typically, abused athletes keep quiet because they fear that they will be accused either of consenting or of inventing their claims.

Risk of sexual harassment or abuse arises from a combination of factors such as weak organisational controls within sport clubs, dominating and controlling behaviour by coaches, and vulnerability, low self-esteem and high ambition among athletes.

Recommendations: adopt rigorous screening procedures and establish codes of ethics and conduct for all staff and volunteers, whether they work with adults or children. Staff and volunteers should be required to sign an agreement to abide by the code.

Ensure all your staff and volunteers who work with children are trained in Child Protection and have gone through the necessary checks.

Distribute information about sexual abuse and child protection for all parents, athletes, coaches and volunteers. Foster a climate of open discussion about issues of sexual harassment and abuse so that athletes feel confident enough to speak out if they experience them.

Get involved in coach education programmes, which inform and advise about the ethical and interpersonal issues of sexual harassment and abuse and about the technical aspects of physical touch in coaching the sport.

Be constantly vigilant and avoid complacency. Expect and demand the highest standards of accountability at all levels of sport.

Female invisibility – media representations and lack of role models in sport. At all levels and in all roles – community participation, elite athletics, coaching, leadership – women, especially those from marginalised groups, have been under-represented in the sports sector. Working in a sector where they are in the minority can give women the sense that they do not belong in the world of sport.

In addition, media coverage focuses almost entirely on men's sports. On average, only 5% of sports coverage in national and local print media is dedicated to women's sport. This is significant because the media plays a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions and attitudes about women and sport, which, in turn, influence participation levels. A few sportswomen such as Kelly Holmes and Paula Radcliffe have high media profiles, but in general, a lack of coverage of women's sports leads to a dearth of female role models to inspire sportswomen and create the next generation of healthy, active women.

Recommendations: use press releases and good relations with your local journalists to promote girls' and women's sports achievements. Seek media coverage of your club or organisation's achievements at all levels and regardless of the gender of the athletes. Include representatives of all your local community in any press coverage: for example people with disabilities and BME women and girls.

Think about which local women you could promote as role models – they could be coaches, volunteers or athletes at any level. Work with them to help inspire and motivate other girls and women. Research has suggested that people respond best to role models they can relate to.

Work towards an equal balance of males and females as coaches, organisers, participants, workshop leaders, etc. Around 40% is the suggested minimum for either gender.



Contact

sportscotland
Caledonia House
South Gyle
Edinburgh
EH12 9DQ

Tel 0131 317 7200
Fax 0131 317 7202

www.sportscotland.org.uk

The **sportscotland** group is made up of **sportscotland**, **sportscotland** Trust Company (National Centres) and the Scottish Institute of Sport.

Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation

Third Floor
Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square
London
WC1B 4SE

Tel 020 7273 1740
Fax 020 7273 1981

info@wsff.org.uk
www.wsff.org.uk

Registered charity number 1060267

The work of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation is motivated by our vision of a nation of active women, where sport and exercise is an integral part of everyday life.

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Published by **sportscotland**

ISBN: 978 1 85060 532 4
WISF9 1108 1M