

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Barriers to women and girls in sport, HC 1416

Wednesday 29 October 2025

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Members present: Sarah Owen (Chair); Alex Brewer; David Burton-Sampson; Christine Jardine; Kevin McKenna; Rebecca Paul; Rachel Taylor; Nadia Whittome.

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Witnesses

I: Fern Whelan, Women's Football EDI Executive, Professional Footballers Association; Dr Emma Ross, Co-founder and Chief Scientific Officer, The Well HQ; Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Paralympic Superstar and Women's Sport Campaigner; Olly Scadgell, Managing Director of Tennis Development, Lawn Tennis Association; Hina Shafi, Doctoral Researcher and Co-founder of SupportHERS Collective, Birmingham City University.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Fern Whelan, Dr Emma Ross, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Olly Scadgell, Hina Shafi.

Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Women and Equalities Committee. Today we are holding an evidence session on barriers to women and girls in sport. We have a fantastic panel with us, and welcome everybody who is in the Public Gallery. I am sure that this is going to be a really interesting session and it is one that we cannot wait to get started on.

We will hear today from Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Cross-Bench peer and chair of Sport Wales, and somebody I used to watch when I was a kid and was absolutely obsessed with, so sorry for not being as cool as I should be. We also have Fern Whelan, women's football EDI executive at the Professional Footballers' Association; Dr Emma Ross, co-founder and chief scientific officer at The Well HQ; Hina Shafi, doctoral researcher and co-founder of SupportHERS collective at Birmingham City University; and Olly Scadgell, managing director for tennis development at the Lawn Tennis Association. Welcome to you all, thank you very much for coming. I am going to pass over to David.

Q1 David Burton-Sampson: Welcome to you all. Look, just before we start, what a year it has been for women's elite sport: the Lionesses, the Red Roses, and the England women's cricket team getting through to the semi-finals. We all in this room are incredibly proud. I send my congratulations to all those teams for the absolutely fantastic work they did—better than the men, might I just add? I would like to go to you all, but in the interest of time I am just going to come to Fern and Hina to start off with and ask, to what extent have these great achievements over the last year encouraged participation among women and girls? Have you seen a change since we have seen these great achievements? Fern to start off.

Fern Whelan: I am happy to start, thanks for the question. The answer to that is yes, participation is definitely increasing. For me, it is just nice when you go out and you see the backs of girls' shirts, and they have a woman's name on the back, or they have Chloe Kelly. Even my niece, she is in the garden doing a Chloe Kelly celebration and things like that. Yes, it has definitely increased, it is obviously on the up. From us as a union, from the PFA, it is a really positive sign to see that there are more girls wanting to get in the game.

For us, it is now all about giving them that place to play and giving them that access in terms of pitches and facilities, so that they have the place to do so because they want to play the sport and they want to do it more. It has inspired not only young girls to play but also young boys. My nephews and my family were all over the Lionesses, all over the results. I have a young son who is four, and he talks to me about the Lionesses now. What they have done can be catapulted for sure.



Hina Shafi: I definitely echo what Fern has said. In the greater scheme of sports, it has also increased participation in cricket. There were over 1,000 teams made after the Lionesses in the Euros. I had the absolute privilege to go for my first international away game in the Euros, I worked there, where we used intersectionality: ethnicity, race, disability, sex and so on. Those were the fundamental things that we were focusing on, especially with spectators and fan groups.

Coming back to England on the back of the Lionesses' win, across sports there has been an increase of women and girls playing but also men and young boys supporting us. It also amplified the crucial funding that is needed for this to get bigger and better. But I definitely echo everything that Fern said.

Q2 **David Burton-Sampson:** Fantastic. Great news, really good to hear. I am going to focus now on the new Women's Sport Taskforce, which I know Baroness Grey-Thompson or—

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Tanni, please.

David Burton-Sampson: Tanni, I know you have been quite involved in it. Tanni, what impact do you hope the new Women's Sport Taskforce will have on participation in women's sport?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: It is really important that we have that focus on women and girls' sport. I have been in sport a very long time, and we have these really stubborn inequalities that are very hard to shift the dial on. We have had only one meeting, and DCMS is going to be having some rotating membership to bring different people with different perspectives in to talk about the issues. For me, it is very positive that we have the opportunity to focus on it.

The summer of sport has been amazing, and there are always spikes in participation. We see this over the years with every Olympics and increasingly with Paralympics. This time of year, it is probably slightly easier to keep women and girls involved in sport, but when we hit the winter months it becomes harder. I was part of the bid team and delivery team for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, and we learned that you actually just have to have more than the inspirational moments. They are brilliant, and you need those to trigger the behaviour, but you have to have programmes that are set up behind it.

What we also know is that women's safety is paramount. Welsh Athletics has just launched a campaign called Own the Night, which is about women feeling safe to train at night. There are other organisations that have done this as well. This is where it is actually a societal problem, not just an issue for sport to sort, because women should feel safe if they go out running at night.

I am really hopeful that we will be able to bring all this together in terms of research and other areas, because we all want the numbers to change.



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We have been very successful in Olympics, Paralympics, football and rugby, but actually for me in the role I have now, what is really important is that we have a generation of women who are fit and healthy as well. Some 80% of women are not fit enough to be healthy because of all the barriers we know about to participation. There is lots going on, but we have to have a real focus as well.

Q3 David Burton-Sampson: I am just sticking with you for a minute. The last Government put in place the Get Active participation strategy and the National Physical Activity taskforce, and obviously the current Government have discontinued that, they are not taking it forward. Are you concerned about that at all?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I have been in sport a really long time, and there are lots of iterations of things that come and go. The current Government have to have the chance to put the focus where they want. Actually, as part of the Women's Sport taskforce, that element of physical activity is really important. I was part of a Select Committee in which we looked at whether we should move sport out of DCMS into Health. I would strongly support that because it is actually a better place for it to be. When you talk about intersectionality, it is pulling lots of different things together to be able to make a real difference. Names change and some priorities change, but ultimately, what we are trying to do is actually remarkably similar because the reality is we just do not have enough women and girls who have the opportunity to be active.

Q4 David Burton-Sampson: Do you think the Women's Sport taskforce is sufficient to replace the participation strategy, or do you think we need a separate participation strategy?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: It is hard to tell, one meeting in. We do not necessarily need a separate participation strategy alongside it because then it would divert resources. But having participation as part of a women and girls' strategy is important because with the success of football and rugby, which is amazing, over the next couple of Olympic cycles we might see women dropping out of Olympic sports to go and play football and rugby because of financial support. The absolute vast majority of Olympians do not earn any money. We have to look at the success of the big sports and see the long-term impact that will have on our medal success in other sports.

Olly Scadgell: Just for the Committee's clarification, the LTA is the governing body for tennis and padel in Britain. We likewise have seen increases in participation across the board and among women and girls, which we are really proud to have seen. In fact, I would say that tennis has probably led the way for women in sport over the last 150 years. It is seen as one of the most gender-balanced sports there is, and we are certainly very proud of that. We see that as a fantastic platform to push forward from and further grow participation among women and girls. Some 41% of the 5.8 million adults who pick up a racket and play tennis at least once a year are women, and 49% of the children who play tennis



at least once a year are young girls. That is a really fantastic platform to build from.

In respect of the Women's Sport taskforce, I know it is only one meeting in, but for us, facilities—places to play—are of the utmost importance. We have seen that first hand in respect of the investment that we have delivered, in part thanks to the Government putting in £22 million to refurbish 3,200 park courts across 1,000 park venues over the last three years. We know that more women and girls play their tennis in that environment, as do more people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We have seen half a million more people pick up a racket and play tennis in parks so far as a result of that investment over the last three years.

The final thing I would say at this juncture is that the importance of safety was mentioned. A number of those parks that we have invested in along with the Government and local authority investment, have seen floodlights being installed in park tennis courts. That creates a safer environment to encourage more women and girls to take part.

Dr Ross: Tanni said the big moments in sport should be more than a moment. What we need to do is ensure that when girls are inspired by the Lionesses or by the Red Roses, and they say, "I'd love to do that," and they go to their local club, they do not walk into environments where coaches are not knowledgeable about girls and women. We work with grassroots football clubs where there are no changing facilities for girls. We need the culture to be one where girls can show up and ask for a period product and no one has a fit, and they are not made to wear a kit that is not actually designed for their bodies.

There are so many things that have to change in the way we design sport so that it becomes equitable for girls and women. That is what our approach at The Well is. For a long time in sport, women have been driving towards equality: same pay, same media coverage. That is fine, but we cannot become obsessed with equality as in having the same. We know exactly what the barriers are; we have so much insight about the barriers to girls participating and performing, and what girls and women need is different from what men and boys need in sport. That is okay, because that allows everyone to have the opportunity to play and to perform.

We have to make sure to transition from these big moments, which is where your question started, into participation growing at the grassroots level, whether that is for girls or women. We have to make sure the environments are right. They are not at the moment.

Q5 **Rebecca Paul:** Thank you so much to all the witnesses for being here today. This question is probably to Tanni and Emma, but obviously if anyone else wants to respond, that is fine as well. The UN report on violence against women and girls in sport reports that, "600 female athletes in more than 400 competitions have lost more than 890 medals in 29 different sports," due to males competing in female categories.



What are your reflections on the importance of protecting single-sex categories in sports to ensure fairness and safety, as you have already mentioned, for women and girls? What do you think specifically the Women's Sport taskforce needs to be doing in this area?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: If you look at where this sits in terms of the history of sport, I was asked by the then Minister for Sport, Tracey Crouch, in 2016 to look at a piece of work on duty of care, which had come out of the revamp of sports policy. I was asked to look at a huge range of areas. One of the areas that I was asked to look at was trans inclusion. The IOC rules at the time were quite clear: to compete, an athlete had to go through full gender reassignment and four years of suppressed testosterone. Although I very actively sought opinions from a wide range of sports, not a lot came forward because the rules were quite clear at the time.

Obviously, in the last few years we have had much more discussion about this. The IPC rules are slightly different in terms of competing. In its rules, it is left to the governing bodies. In my sport, there are a few lines in the World Athletics rules to say what is possible and what is not possible. The sports councils did a piece of work back in 2021 looking at trans inclusion, and they were looking at fairness, safety and inclusion, and to some extent left the governing bodies to decide what to do.

The Supreme Court ruling, depending on which way you look at it, has had an impact on that. I thought the work on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 had made it quite clear where trans inclusion was sitting. I have to say, sport has to be a place for everybody. Everybody should have the opportunity to take part, be involved, and be fit, healthy and active, but where that sits is up for debate. It has become so unbelievably toxic that people are actually very nervous about even discussing it. Women are being shut down for having an opinion on women's sport. It is really sad that we are not able to find a compromise. For me, safety and fairness have to be part of it.

Early on, the reason I did not think it was terribly controversial was that I was coming from Paralympic sport, where we have classification based on impairment. We have people who are in and out. Some disciplines in some sports will have paraplegics competing against dwarves, other sports do not. It is possible to work through that. For me, there is a reason that we have had a segregation of women's sport. It is important that there is protection for that category. But there are sports where men and women compete happily against each other. This is a really difficult situation to get in to because it does not feel that we are able to have a calm conversation about where the best place for people to sit in sport is.

Chair: Language is incredibly important in this as well. If we are talking about people who are intersex or trans, it is really important that we respect that. Christine has a supplementary.

Q6 **Christine Jardine:** Tanni, can I just say I interviewed you early in my



previous career as a journalist, and I have been watching your career ever since with fascination. It is lovely to meet you. On that very topic, it is something I have often wondered about. In trying to resolve what is a very difficult situation over trans inclusion and intersex people within sport, should we be looking to the example of the Paralympics and the categories to somehow resolve what at the moment seems like an intransigent problem? There might be other difficulties with that about discrimination that people would raise, but do you think that there is the basis of an example that we might investigate?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: That would be a really interesting line of inquiry. I thank the Chair because what is quite often misreported in the press is the difference between DSD and trans. Actually, as part of this discussion we rarely talk about trans men and where their place is in sport, and safety and fairness as part of that. It is really important that we look at all that.

Having spoken to lots of different people, some people have suggested that there could be a new Paralympic classification. I have spoken to people who would potentially be in that classification who would then say actually they are not disabled. There are a lot of issues if someone who is trans is classified as disabled because you have to be disabled to be in the Paralympics. There are a lot of events, such as some big road races which have separate categories for non-binary. That is something that should actually be explored as part of finding a safe competition route for individuals.

Dr Ross: I was just going to follow up. Tanni, you mentioned many times the central tenets of sport, which are safety, fairness and inclusivity. When we have this discussion, which I agree we have not been able to have in a calm way where people are really listening, to be safe and fair, sport has never been inclusive; it has always had exclusive categories. That might be men's and women's sports, or it might be the classifications across para sport. We have had that example, and like Christine just said, we can learn from that.

I have a couple of points. I feel like NGBs were left to flounder a little in their decisions about what they were going to do. That is partly because it has to be sport specific; rugby is a very different sport in terms of safety and fairness from equestrian. But the NGBs need help because they were nervous about doing the wrong thing, but they just did not really have enough guidance. That is where the taskforce could come in.

Also, grassroots sport and elite sport are two very different things. When we want sport to be inclusive, we have to work out when someone can show up on a Sunday morning and be included in community sport, versus where they might not be allowed to compete. That is really difficult. I do not have any answers, but we just need to make sure we are creating guidance and rules that work for those different sporting environments.



Q7 Chair: We will move on to under-represented communities in sport. Fern, I am coming to you first. Can you tell us about the benefit of sporting organisations like the FA taking a more focused approach to promoting racial and ethnic representation among players?

Fern Whelan: Obviously, I work for the PFA, but I have been collaborating quite a lot over the last couple of years with the FA on the work that it has been doing around increased representation across the board. I started a project in 2022, which I spoke about here previously, called "See It. Achieve It". It was all around the visibility and lack of visibility of role models that we have in the elite professional game. It was almost like it was not enough for me to be able to do it on my own, and the FA had its thoughts around it. Since then, it has changed its model quite drastically in terms of how it attracts players to elite sport by developing a range of programmes.

A big one that it started was called "Discover My Talent". It was around getting more eyes on younger girls who were playing in and around the grassroots game, who maybe would not have been able to access the types of facilities that we know are needed to progress within the elite female game. For example, when I was playing, I knew there were a lot of facilities in and around leafy suburban areas. Those are the kinds of inner-city challenges for players to get out and play.

There is still work to be done. There is a lot of work ongoing in terms of where we are with that. But now they have managed to narrow it down so that whoever is playing in those Emerging Talent Centres does not have to travel more than 45 to 60 minutes to get to those centres, whereas before girls were doing four-hour round trips just to get to training. That makes the sport so inaccessible to play.

In terms of that work that is being done, there is a lot there, but for me personally we need to do a bit more and go a little further. For me, an hour is still quite a long time. Families that have more than one child may have to try to prioritise who is going to go to football training. I know there have been stories of players who have boys and girls in their families, and actually the boy gets prioritised because the pathway for them is probably a little clearer because there are more games and more teams for them to be able to progress in the sport, whereas when you see females, it is like, "Okay, well, she can miss training tonight, but I've got to make sure he gets to every training session."

For me, it is still really important that the girls in and around those cities have access to training sessions. For example, we were in Brighton just yesterday doing an event with its foundation, community, first team and academy, bringing them all together. It was in Lancing, which is their elite training centre. We take first-team players to those sessions, but we asked, "How are you getting the girls to participate?" We made sure that minibuses were put on for the girls who were from the wider areas and they were able to come in and experience what it was like to be part of



that environment, ensuring there is a follow-on for those girls in terms of staying within the sport.

Q8 **Chair:** If you say we have further to go than an hour, what would you say would be the ideal?

Fern Whelan: More access to high-quality coaching and training, as well as to that elite level. By making as many centres as we possibly can, it is great and it allows places to play, but when I speak to the elite clubs, they say, "Actually, we've had our funding pulled from our academies," let us say. We start it at 14 to 16 now, whereas when I was playing, I was in a centre of excellence from age eight and upwards. It is almost like we have increased participation, but that elite level is potentially getting lost a little in that.

Q9 **Chair:** I would just like to declare that I know Hina and her work. I just wanted to come to you, Hina, and see if you had anything to add to that, in particular, your PhD project's initial finding regarding the structural barriers for South Asian women in cricket, for example. I know you have had experience within football as well. I just think it would be really good if we could get your take on under-represented communities' participation in sport.

Hina Shafi: I really appreciate that. I just want to add to one point that Dr Emma mentioned earlier. Historically, we have been guilty of doing research on communities rather than alongside communities, and that is one thing I am really passionate about. When you are talking about trans sport, I am not someone who is transitioning, nor am I a trans woman. It is really important to include those with lived experience because that is the only way NGOs and individuals will not feel as though they are not informed. We need to be informed from the lower end and to bring in those individuals through the lower end and make them feel included, so that policies in Parliament and things like that can change. It is really important to do research alongside individuals, especially people with lived experience, but intersectionality as well.

My PhD is looking at talent ID and development in British South Asian women and girls. But my study one was actually looking at the sociodemographic data of the four talent pathways in the ECB. It is CAG—County Age Group—EPP, academy and professional level. The findings are just a bit damning to be honest. Although I am looking at South Asians, study one was looking at the overall sociodemographic. It showed that British white women were over-represented in all four pathways. British South Asians were highly represented at grassroots, which is the CAG, but then when you progress through the talent pathway, when you go from EPP to academy, there is a drop. There is then a massive drop from academy to pro. Now, when you compare CAG to pro, the makeup of British South Asians is less than 4%. Against the national norms, that is so damning.



What is even more damning is the fact that British black women and girls, from CAG all the way to professional level, are under-represented. The only way we can succeed in increasing these representations is by having targeted and tailored initiatives alongside intersectionality, in my personal opinion.

We are going to do a pilot study of something called SACA Women. That is the South Asian Cricket Academy. SACA Men exists, and that is because of Dr Tom Brown. Alongside my supervisor, Dr Adam Kelly, they helped to formulate SACA after the ICEC report. It highlights that talent is there, but opportunities are not, because they have had a vast number of British South Asian men able to gain professional contracts, but they were missed out in the normal stages where you are informed about it. We need to understand why the drop exists and how we can help tackle it.

Q10 Chair: Are there some initial findings as to why the drops exist? We know that, for example, young girls will be involved in sport and then there is a sudden drop-off as soon as they get to their teenage years. Quite a lot of work has been done on that. Is there a reason for some more sudden drop-offs?

Hina Shafi: In my opinion, it is structural. Organisations are often guilty of using cultural and religious barriers as an excuse, but it is actually structural. The ICEC report and Azeem Rafiq coming out and speaking about his lived experience really showcased that it is across sport. It is really interesting because my research is in cricket, but I worked in football, and the findings that I have in my PhD are everything that I saw when I was in football.

In women's sport, it is damning. Whether you are a person of colour or not, there are a lot of barriers that you go through, for instance, facilities. I know the dome is going to be built in Luton. Hopefully, there should be sessions each week that are just for women, whether it is six to seven, six to eight and so on. Things like that need to happen. There are stereotypes that have led to barriers, cultural ones, as I mentioned, such as South Asian women are not interested in sports. But it is about a lack of access, cultural sensitivity and even representation.

My coach at Luton women and girls—you know him, he is Ash Naseem—is male, but he is the best coach I have ever had in my life. That is because of his lived experience. That is because he understands intersectionality. It makes you want to retain players and continue in sport rather than drop off. Sometimes coaches are not equipped or knowledgeable on the cultural barriers. They are more focused on talent ID and the progression in the sport, which is absolutely fair enough, but you need to cater for those groups, whether it is kit, or the language that you use, all these things. The products that you use are also really important.

As I mentioned before, you need to do evidence and research alongside the women and girls. In our cricket club, Luton women and girls, we



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actually spoke to the women. We started up and we had white kit. It was really ugly, let me be honest, but it was white kit because it is traditional. But when we spoke to the women, they did not want white kits because when they are on their menstrual cycle, having to bend down to get the ball is embarrassing. Sometimes you leak, you do not know. When you are batting, the only thing that is covered is your head; your body is not covered. We actually had a pilot study with them and then spoke about what they want, and now we have a black kit, which is so much nicer.

That is what I mean. It is really important to include these individuals in the conversations. We have all heard the typical barriers, that it is cultural, or about family priorities, and South Asians want to prioritise families, their husbands and so on. But that is an excuse. It is structural.

Chair: I saw Olly, Tanni and Emma all nodding at that, but Olly did you want to come in?

Olly Scadgell: Yes, if I just may add, in terms of under-representation in sport and in tennis more broadly, we feel that PE and school sports are a critically important area. It is an opportunity to reach children and young people from all backgrounds. The LTA Youth programme, which has a school strand to it, has been successful in getting into over 15,000 schools across the country. That is over half the schools in Britain. We have trained up 30,000 primary and secondary school teachers to deliver tennis in a school environment. That has the ability to reach children and young people from all backgrounds.

Further to that, as a result, we are obviously supportive of the reintroduction of the school support partnerships in the national curriculum review. We would absolutely advocate for the delivery of two hours of PE curriculum time, and in addition to that, obviously adherence to the CMO's guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity a day, both inside and outside the school environment. That is something that we are very supportive of.

Dr Ross: Hina made a point about her amazing coach. Coaches are just so integral to retaining girls and women in sport. You can become a coach, a PE teacher, or a personal trainer and you will never have been taught about anything that goes on in women's bodies: menstrual cycles, breast support, pelvic health issues. You can turn up in front of a group of girls and not know what girls are going through during puberty. You can turn up to be a trainer in a gym and not have ever been taught about the menopause, yet 50% of your clients might be middle-aged women.

We talk about creating this system where, when girls and women arrive, it is ready for them. "This Girl Can" is an amazing activation, and it has got millions more women moving; it is incredible. But my worry is that those women get off the sofa because that is what it is saying, and get into a gym and meet a trainer who has absolutely no idea about women. They go to a club that is not catering for women, which has white kit, or men's kit, and they just get there and say, "Yes, no, I knew it wasn't for



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me.” They have been activated, and then they have been lost. You get only one or two chances to keep them before they start identifying as non-sporty or non-active, and it is not a habit.

For us, coach education is really important. The trouble with coaching is that we rely a lot on volunteers. We keep putting more of a burden upon them—“Oh, now you need to do extra learning and qualifications”—so it has to be integrated into existing coaching qualification pathways, teacher education, and so on.

Q11 Chair: Is that lack of knowledge and lack of requirement across all sports?

Dr Ross: To give you an example, in football in the WSL we have just done three years of work, where we did some insight work, and we asked what it is like to be a woman footballer, what it is like to coach women as a man or a woman, what it is like to be a sports science practitioner supporting them, and how confident they feel acknowledging the things about them that are female as well as the football stuff. The insight was, “We literally have no idea what we’re not doing. We don’t know what we don’t know,” and the players said, “Yes, I can’t talk about any of that here.”

The WSL has mandated that every WSL and WSL 2 club has five members of staff who go through a particular CPD to learn about coaching and supporting women players. Every single WSL 1 and 2 club has a female athlete health lead. They are the people who hold everyone to account for doing that training, but they also challenge culture, they write strategy, and they make sure the strategy is embedded in the broader club strategy. That is mandated, so clubs cannot get their professional licence unless they have that.

Q12 Chair: Have you seen a drop-off in the people wanting to do that, or have more people just wanted to learn more?

Dr Ross: More people have wanted to learn more. Arsenal gave an example last week when we were speaking with it. It was trying to attract someone who at the time was the highest-paid professional women’s contract player. This girl was quite young, her parents came with her, and it said, “We understand what it’s like to be a female in sport, and we have bra fits, period products, and kit that works for women’s bodies. Our coaches are trained in what it is like to be a woman.” That side of its club support was what attracted talent.

It helps clubs attract talent and gives value to the workforce. They now move across clubs, and having this understanding and knowledge is a value-add for them. When they are going for their next job, or they are trying to get into a higher-level club, they actually are seen as more valuable. But my point is that it is mandated. At the moment everyone says it is a great idea to learn more about women’s experiences and how



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to coach women, but no one has time to do it until you say, "Well you can't be a coach or you can't be a professional club unless you have it."

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Can I just add really quickly to that? Sport Wales is doing a lot of work on menstruation and menopause because we recognise how important that is, but it is not universal across British governing bodies. We are dealing with phrases such as "Throws like a girl, runs like a girl," which are meant to be derogatory. But we have this cycle where it can be hundreds of pounds to do each level of coaching, and coaching courses are run at weekends, which is not a time when women are necessarily able to do them. British sport would die without volunteers; there are very few paid opportunities. That then feeds into the expectation that girls are not meant to like sport, we are not meant to be sporty, and how we are portrayed: we are meant to be beautiful and be good at sport. There is pressure on women now to wear makeup to compete in sport. You saw it at the World Athletics Championships. It is not good enough to just be good at sport.

I will add very briefly, and will follow up on it, I sat on the board of Yorkshire Cricket for two years after the allegations of Azeem Rafiq, which were then proven. Not that long before I joined the board, one of the questions that the boys were asked in order to go through the different levels was, "Did your dad or grandfather play cricket for Yorkshire?" Not even your mother or grandmother. That immediately excluded rafts of people.

We look to drop people out of talent programmes too early. We have these arbitrary cut-off ages of 15 or 16, and we should be looking to do more to keep people in sports. With the rising academies in women's football, there will be girls dropping out. We should seek to get them involved because in football, especially with boys, they are in an academy and are taken out of school sport—I have some recommendations in my report on that—and then where do they go? If you are told from the age of five that you are going to make it because you are talented and at 16 by some arbitrary cut-off limit you are told you are not talented, you are not going to stay involved. We should learn from what has happened in boys and men's sport to think about what we do for girls and women.

Chair: I am just going to give the last word to Hina on this point.

Hina Shafi: I will be really quick. I might throw a spanner in the works, but with regard to volunteering, when we look at the volunteering workforce, there are a lot of women of colour. If we are speaking about women, there are a lot of women of colour. There is a fine line in what we are showing: are we able to progress those who are volunteering into paid roles? There is also a fine line when it comes to the question of how valuable we see your lived experience as being. I am a big believer that when it comes to black history month, for instance, and you ask a black individual to be a guest speaker, they should be paid for their lived experience.



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When individuals are pushing for growth in the women's game, there should be a progression for them to be able to get paid, because what they are doing is not only helping us; there are massive expectations on them in a volunteering capacity. That is just something I wanted to add.

Chair: We have to explore this point around volunteers and how much of our boys' and girls' grassroots sports actually rely on fantastic volunteers, and how we can help them progress.

Q13 Rebecca Paul: My question is to Hina. Hina, you have talked about the structural issues that you have seen in terms of getting under-represented communities involved in sport, and you said that you do not see much being cultural. I just wanted to explore that a bit more with you, because the structural issues are almost easier to solve in some ways because we can clearly see what they are, and we can address them.

Cultural issues tend to be more challenging, but we need to recognise them in order to understand those communities and try to create the right environment. We obviously saw the east London fun run the other day, with the exclusion of women and girls above the age of 12, which I would have put probably into the cultural bucket rather than structural, but it might well come down to how you define structural and cultural. I am just wondering if you could talk a little more about that.

Hina Shafi: That is a fantastic question. I will give you an example of my lived experience. My mum is here—shout-out, Mum. When I wanted to progress into sports, I wanted to be a cricketer. In a lot of the conversations I was having in my house, I was trying to convince my mum that I could belong in cricket and that I could belong in a sport. The cultural and structural issues are interesting. The reason why I am saying it is structural is that there were not many women who looked like me in that space across sport, not just cricket. Therefore, it made her think, "Okay, can I see my daughter in this space? Will she be safe in this space? Will she be able to progress? Will she be able to earn a living from here?"

The reason why I really want to be specific is that in my opinion it is structural not cultural because a lot of organisations say South Asians do not want to play sports because they prioritise their careers and go into safety careers: working in the health sector, being a doctor, becoming an accountant, or a lawyer. We have heard this so many times, and it is still going on. That is just the one thing that I want to differentiate: it is because of the structure. It is not inclusive, so how can women of colour progress at the top when my mum is not able to see it? That is structural, not cultural. Then organisations are turning around and saying, "Oh, but they don't want to play." We may not, but if we had the pathway and opportunity to progress we would.

Chair: Some of us are going to vote, not all. There are enough of us to continue because Rachel, you are next anyway.



Rachel Taylor: I have been reminded by the Chair to declare any interests that might be relevant to this. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on sport and physical activity, I am an officer of the women's football all-party parliamentary group, and I am a registered LTA tennis player, just to set that straight.

Chair: Rachel is the sportiest member of our Committee.

Q14 **Rachel Taylor:** Yes, this is the sport Committee, so this is obviously my favourite inquiry. I really want to focus on the barriers for secondary school-aged girls in sport. Emma, I know you have already touched on some of this, so this is really a chance to expand on it. I have a campaign called Get All Girls Active, or GAGA, and as part of that I invited a group of secondary school girls from my constituency to come down to Parliament and talk to us about the main barriers that they faced. The No. 1 thing they said was that they just lost interest in sport when they started their period. What do you think we can do, in terms of what can girls, their parents and schools do, to overcome that drop-off?

Dr Ross: Some 64% of girls stop doing sport by the end of puberty. As you have said, we know the power of sport and physical activity for long, healthy, happy lives. It is really critical. If we can get that right, we are on a winning streak in terms of the physical activity levels of women across their lifespan. Periods are a really interesting one because it is still very much a taboo topic. Unfortunately, we still have generations of mums—I do not include myself but perhaps my mum's generation—who were very much, "We don't talk about it." It is time of the month; it is something we euphemise.

Therefore, everyone has grown up with the idea that it is not something we can talk about. Yet actually, what we want girls to do is say, "I don't feel like doing sport today." "Oh, why not?" "I'm on my period." "Oh, what is it about today that's challenging for you?" Everyone's experience will be slightly different. One girl might have very heavy periods and struggle to manage them. She is going to need help finding products that work for her or having kit that does not make her feel anxious. Someone else might have really bad symptoms: they might be feeling tired or have a migraine and will need help with solutions for that. Some girls might just feel really low emotionally.

Giving them an opportunity and letting them know that it is okay to say, "This is what's showing up for me," and having someone on the other side, whether that is a PE teacher or a coach, who empathises and supports is important. That is not easy to do, but it does not require money, and it does not require big fancy programmes. It requires everyone in that space feeling comfortable talking about that topic, and often they do not. For example, it surprises me how many girls' mums have introduced them to tampons and pads, but now we have innovation—thank goodness—in period products and period management, where things like period underwear exist. That means that a girl does not have to get to grips with tampons but can still have increased duration of



protection when she is having her period, so she does not have to worry about leaks.

People who make those products realise that they are great for sporty people, and they have partnered with Puma and other brands. The product is there, but the conversation and the education are not. To your point about how you get girls in the room and they say, "I just fall out of love with sport when I'm starting my period," sport is an amazing place for us to teach girls about their bodies. In schools, it is a PSHE thing, which is fine because it should be; pregnancy and all sexual health should be there. But actually, when girls move their bodies, we know that over half of girls will stop doing sport or skip sport when they are on their period. We know that over half of girls—50% of girls—have issues with their breasts during physical activity: pain, embarrassment, movement, sensitivity, fear of judgment, yet 50% of them are not even wearing a sports bra. We know that 40% of young, fit girls during puberty have urinary stress incontinence. That is something that we thought was within the confines of post natal and menopausal women, but we know that really fit, active young girls also have these issues.

You ask girls to use their bodies, and then their bodies do things that do not feel like they work with sport, like having periods, developing breasts, or leaking urine when you are jumping around. But we do not create an environment that says, "By the way, when this happens, this is normal, this isn't, and there are things we can do about it."

Q15 Rachel Taylor: I am happy for anybody else to come in, but do you think it should be something that is taught on the PE curriculum within schools and not just in a PSHE-type class?

Dr Ross: A girl can be in a classroom and nodding along saying, "Okay, my ovaries produce eggs, and then this happens," which is fine. What about when a girl goes to put on a swimming costume and she is on her period, or she is wearing her gymnastics leotard and suddenly her breasts have budded, and she is a different shape because body fat increases naturally during puberty, so she becomes rounder. When boys go through puberty, testosterone arrives, and they become taller, bigger, stronger, faster, and more powerful. It is tricky for them; they are emotional—I have my son here today; we are in the realms of that now—but girls get rounder, they can often feel heavier, they develop breast tissue and start periods. It does not feel like a time when your body is made for sport. Using sport as a way to get girls comfortable with their bodies is an incredible opportunity, actually.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: We should educate boys as well.

Fern Whelan: I was just going to jump in there—or try to—because yes, in terms of schools, it is vital, and I would completely agree it needs to be on the PE curriculum. I agree with the point you made about having that conversation with young girls and making sure it is not a taboo subject. We try to do it in the professional game now with the players we



have to find out whether they even understand their bodies, and they do not, even at elite level. We have been trying to explore the research around pelvic health, and it is limited in access around the clubs. Some will have consultants who come in, some do not even talk about it as a topic in terms of that research.

As you say, it starts early, potentially from the age of 13 with urinary incontinence. It is a massive barrier. Potentially, we are losing so many talented girls really early on. For me, it is all about empowering young girls and our elite female athletes to talk openly and honestly about their bodies and what affects them. I spoke to a couple of players who retired alongside me a couple of years ago, and only now is this conversation starting to come up about urinary incontinence, pelvic floor issues, and similar topics. People say, "Oh, that's for pregnant women." No, it is not. It affects not only women, but men. Why are we talking about it in relation to only women? Why are we not talking about it across the whole of sports in general, male and female? It is something that potentially will affect sport.

For me, it is about having that conversation with them and letting them be empowered to talk about their own bodies so they do not say to themselves, "Oh, I can't really speak because it's only something that affects me." Actually, no. It is probably something that is affecting the wider squad.

Q16 Rachel Taylor: I wanted to touch on something that Emma brought forward: the fitting of bras. It is something that is a big passion of mine. I used to own an independent lingerie shop. We fitted a lot of young girls as they were coming up to puberty and beyond, and we always said, "And are you sporty? Do you do sport? Because if so, you'll need another sports bra." Is that something that you think we need to have more education on, particularly for those more active girls?

Dr Ross: Yes. Who got taught about bras in school? No one. There is some brilliant research around breast biomechanics and how it is not just about what you look like or what other people see. Breast movement shortens stride length and makes exercise feel harder. If you said to an athlete, "Would you like to increase the amount of ground you cover on a football pitch, and would you like that exercise to feel easier?" Of course they would say yes. But we know that over 80% of girls and women are not in the right bras or sports bras, and often girls want to follow fashion and not function.

It is about that key education because these sporty girls want to be good at their sport. We should say, "This is a tool, and it's just as important as you having the right technical bit of equipment, the right racing wheelchair, or wearing your shin pads and your gum shield. It's about having the right kit." Also, in the WSL we have had some real issues because the clubs want to give the girls professional fits, but the sponsors very much dictate the provision. As much as you think the big



brands have amazing R&D, their provision is not as good as some smaller, more bespoke ones.

Olly Scadgell: I would like to add that my understanding is that only 6% of sports science research is female-specific, which is a worrying stat. From the LTA's perspective, we have taken that on board and have a female athlete working group that focuses on four key pillars. The first is medical health screening tailored around female health and menstrual cycles. Secondly, education has already been mentioned, but that is critically important, so we have a library of online resources and a podcast series addressing some key topics for female athletes.

Thirdly, nutrition is a really important one, so preventing relative energy deficiency in sport—RED-S—and the disruption to menstrual cycles and potential for stress fractures in that regard. Fourthly, further research related to the point I mentioned earlier. It is a shocking stat that only 6% of sports science is female-specific. We need DEXA screening to assess bone mineral density for injury prevention and energy balance. Specifically in respect of the topic that was talked about, we are pleased that we have partnered with the University of Portsmouth on breast health and Lululemon to provide a bra fitting service for our female athletes.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I will come in really quickly. If you look at some contracts that women have in terms of their sponsorship deals with some clothing brands, as part of your contract, you might be contracted to wear underwear made by that company. I know when I was an athlete, I had to wear the underwear of that brand. I do not know who was going to come around and check.

Q17 **Chair:** I was going to say, how do they know whether you are or not?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Some competition kit is actually fairly skimpy, but the support you need for a bra might not fit within the competition kit. The reality of female athletes in certain sports is that it is about how you sell yourself. It is really difficult because female athletes are asked to almost sell sex in many cases as part of their sponsorship deals. We may go on to talk about social media; there are all these things where men and women are still treated differently. Women are still more likely have comments on how they look while performing, as much as their performance. We do not really do that with men's sport.

In my 20s, I had a male coach who was in his 70s, and he talked to me about menstruation. I thought that was what every coach did, but when I was then coached by a woman, we did not talk about it. These things are so important. We need to be educating boys about menstruation. We need to be educating men about menopause. We need to look back to primary school and teach girls skills. We do not expect children to do trigonometry without doing all the maths to get you to that point. We expect children to play sport without teaching them the skills: physical literacy, progression steps, and asking girls what they want to do.



At Sport Wales, we do the biggest per capita survey of children in schools and ask them what they want to do. Our funding model is partly based on that because actually it is really important that we make those connections. We are not doing enough to tick off all the points where girls could drop out. We need to think about little things that would keep them involved.

- Q18 Rachel Taylor:** Just moving on from that, I have two more questions. One is about sports kit. I know in the sport that I play there is that predominance of the white rule in tennis clubs and I know that is the same in cricket, and it can put people off. Are we doing enough to make our sports kit more inclusive and get to a place where women can play in what they feel comfortable in?

Olly Scadgell: There is absolutely more that can be done. From our perspective in tennis, we see the barriers to more women and girls playing our sport as facilities, for example, finding somewhere local for them to play that is accessible and welcoming, or finding someone to play with, which is important but so is the environment that is created there. We have talked about the education of coaches or teachers in that regard as well. Kit and equipment is very important and could potentially be a barrier to more young girls getting involved.

In respect of tennis, given our vision, we have tried to open tennis up. We want more people regardless of their background, ability or disability to get involved in our sport. We have invested in marketing campaign activity that presents our sport in a way that is open and accessible to all. It has images of girls and women playing tennis in whatever kit and equipment they choose to, not traditional sports clothing. The visual representation of your sport and people's association with it is really important. Also, in terms of our tournaments and the competitions that we stage in this country, we do not have stringent clothing rules: you can wear coloured clothing and different brands that you might like.

- Q19 Rachel Taylor:** Do you think we need to move to a position where all sports clubs provide free menstrual products in their changing rooms, and should that also be the case in schools?

Hina Shafi: With regard to providing free menstrual products, we automatically think of women's toilets but do not think about the men's toilets. For instance, if a single father is with their child who is on their period, and they do not know how to use a pad, but the father is educated on it, it is important to have it in both toilets.

With regard to the previous question, from a grassroots perspective we are changing the colour of our kit, but when you progress into elite, the same rules are still there. In the pyramid, you are making all these changes at the bottom, but as you progress it is harder. There are the same rules in tennis. The kit that you would wear is a bit revealing. We need to ensure that the transition is happening along the pyramid.



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I am a big believer in co-creation and collaboration. You gave an example about the media that you have pushed out, and how it is showing different kinds of women in different clothing and so on. "This Girl Can" really emphasises the body types of women and different sports that women can play.

If we co-create and collaborate, we can filter the gaps that we are seeing with 14 to 15-year-old girls. We can help filter the information that goes into schools. When I was taught about the menstrual cycle, or boobs and stuff, I was privileged because I went to an all-girls school, so the maturity level was there. But I know if I went to a mixed-sex school, I would have shied away because of the taboo of speaking about boobs and periods. If we had bigger organisations that just advertised it as if it was normal on TV, it would be easier to have those conversations with younger audiences.

Dr Ross: As well as kit colour, it is really important to recognise that football boots and technical clothing have not been designed for women's feet. At the moment, there is only one boot on the market that has been designed specifically on the foot biomechanics of the women's game, which is ridiculous, and it is obviously at a certain price point. At the moment, girls are wearing boots and socks that are too big for them, and that is a massive issue.

One of you mentioned the word belonging. If you go to a sport and you put on boots and socks that are made for men, or they have put a pink tick on them and called them girls' but are actually still designed for men, you do not feel like you belong at all.

Q20 **Rachel Taylor:** This really shows us how much more there is to unpack in this area. The need for period products is also so essential when you hit the menopause because it may be that you have just not thought about them for such a long time, and then suddenly, bang, and you do not have any on you.

Dr Ross: I have a story of a mum who was a volunteer at her daughter's swimming club. She stopped volunteering because the officials' kit was white, and she said, "My cycle had become so irregular in perimenopause and often very heavy, I couldn't wear white." That sport lost a volunteer because they had not created an alternative. Often when we go into sports they say, "Oh, we have the girls' kit," and I say, "But I look at all your coaches, and all the women coaches are still having to come to work in men's tracksuits. You have the girls wearing different coloured bottoms, but actually on the netball court, all the officials have to wear white." We need to make sure we look more broadly than just the athletes themselves.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Or if you are told that if you have your period, you can wear a different colour kit, then that immediately makes you stand out.



Q21 **Chair:** That was not done with collaboration, was it?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Tess Howard from hockey has done some amazing work. She has changed the hockey rules, which now allow women to wear shorts rather than a dress. Some rules were written a very long time ago and were mostly written by men. If you look at any sports, whether it is gymnastics, volleyball, all these sports, what men and women are allowed to wear is quite different.

Q22 **Chair:** I do not know who would be best to answer this—probably Emma—but we have talked about quite mainstream sports that we are seeing an increase of women and girls play, which is fantastic, but there are other sports, and we have talked about under-represented communities, but we have not talked about under-represented sports for girls. I did karate, and I represented the country for karate, which was fantastic.

The kit I wore was predominantly for men. It was always so uncomfortable and it was bright white. If we had had period pants, that would have been brilliant. The breast protection that we had to wear was just this hard plastic. It was so hugely uncomfortable that by the time I was 19, it was a complete barrier for me. Also, I had discovered going to university, and drink, you know, but it has a massive impact. We cannot just look at the level that certain sports are getting to, we have to look at it across the board. Have you done any work into sports that are not your mainstay sports? For example, the slightly more unusual sports and arts for girls.

Dr Ross: Yes, and those challenges exist. We did some work with fencing, and it was exactly the same. Their breast protection looked like a Madonna kind of outfit, and it was rigid, but no one had thought to question it. No one. It was Millfield School, which has a centre of excellence. Again, we do not know what we do not know, and often in sport we accept. When you are in a small sport where you might be the only girl, you do not feel you can ask questions such as, "Is this made for me?" Again, it is about empowering girls to actually feel like they can challenge the status quo and people being open to that.

Olly, have you mentioned padel yet? I am slightly obsessed with padel, so I bored him earlier, and I told him that it is the perfect sport because it addresses a lot of the issues that are barriers for women. It is a new sport, and if we can sell it, and get girls playing it in schools, then we have suddenly given women an opportunity to do something different. One of the things we know girls want is to enjoy the sports they do. That means they have to have a bigger choice with access to sports that perhaps are not mainstream because they just want to find something they love. That will increase their participation.

Q23 **Chair:** I loved every minute of karate, but you are right, the kit itself makes a big difference to how you train. For example, having to learn to punch over somebody else's breast protection because if you clock that



with your knuckles, they are done, and having to learn to adapt constantly. Actually, until we had these conversations, I had not realised how much I had to adapt, and how much more I could have just enjoyed it, and how important it is because the number of hours spent playing sport as a child proves to be a big indicator for your later success in life.

We know that working women who played extracurricular sports as a child were 50% more likely to be in senior professional roles as an adult. I can wholeheartedly say that I would not be doing this job if it was not for sport because I was far too shy. Once I discovered I was good at some sport, everything else fell into place. I know that we are focusing very much on unlocking potential sporting talent, but we also have to focus on unlocking talent as a whole and the gift that sport can give. Hina?

Hina Shafi: I will just link it to my systematic review and quickly explain what a systematic review is. It is essentially a look at the existing research that is out there. Mine is looking at talent ID, but my whole PhD is actually on cricket. For my systematic review, I had to look at sport as a whole for women and girls due to the lack of research that there is in cricket. As Sarah mentioned about underdeveloped sports, the majority of the research that came out was on football and a little on tennis. Even then, it was on women only because the male counterparts were looking into talent ID in men or development in boys. There were only a handful on women, and now with your research and the conversations that are being had, we are looking more into women. It is so important because we are so far behind.

My systematic review also looks at intersectionality. Intersecting factors such as religion, race, ethnicity and disability were all left out of the picture. The things that were included were gender, age and external factors such as education, but the relative access to wealth was also non-existent. It is really important when we look at research that it is through an intersectional lens, and it has to be inclusive and include them in the research. There is honestly a lack of research, and only now can I see research and conversations actually happening.

Dr Ross: Sarah, just on your point about sport being so valuable, we did some research with Vitality last year looking at women's relationships with sport and exercise across their life. Some 1,000 women of every decade of life were surveyed, and only 4% of women do group sport. Women are solo exercisers, walkers, and gym-goers. All the benefits you mentioned about being a leader, a team player and helping you access your talent more widely often come from sport done in a group setting, whether that is in a dojo with your teammates around you for karate, or whether that is in an actual organised sport. Only 4% of women do organised sport. We have a massive issue with engaging women. We understand what the barriers are, we just have to design sport better.

Q24 **Nadia Whittome:** I have a few questions, first starting with Fern and Olly. To what extent is the abuse of women athletes getting worse, and



what do you think are the factors driving that?

Fern Whelan: It is getting a lot worse. I came back from maternity leave in June. I had a year off, and in that year, it just seems to have catapulted from where we were in 2024 to now. I work on the equalities team, and we get the discrimination reports. It is not just the female game, it is the male game as well, but it has catapulted. My email inbox every Monday just seems to be, "Abuse at the weekend, abuse at the weekend, so-and-so player, this has happened, this has happened." Obviously, we saw within the female game in the Euros, the Lionesses and Jess Carter, and players speaking out about it.

It has escalated to the point where it is becoming dangerous for players, and especially for the female athletes that I deal with. It is top of my agenda of things that we really need to work on as a union, including pushing the clubs to see how we can protect the players better. Obviously, you have the platforms themselves, but there are things that we can really affect in terms of the security in place for players. We have instances of players who are talking about how they are scared to stay in their own home because of the threats that they are getting online which include rape threats and death threats; they are severe threats to players that are playing in the game. For us it is about how we support those players, knowing that unfortunately they are going to be in the spotlight in the public eye.

It has definitely increased since they won the Euros, the World Cup final, and then the Euros again. There are more eyes, more of a spotlight on the game. As you say, it has increased participation. We spoke about it before, and that is what we want. But again, it is going to be a massive barrier to young girls who now want to get into the sport because they are all over social media. It takes only two seconds to pull up a post and then to see all the comments that come up under the post. It is affecting not only the elite players I am working with now, but as I say, it is a massive barrier to young girls, who ask, "Is it really worth it? Do I really want to put myself out there, if that is the abuse I am going to get? Getting back in the kitchen," all that type of stuff.

For me, it is a real problem that we are dealing with. We have to make sure that the people who are looking after the footballers in general are taking it really seriously, because I would hate for it to come to a point where those threats become reality, and then we act. It is almost like we need to get ahead of this.

In terms of the union and what we do, we work with the players from the moment the incident happens. We encourage them to report, we work with the football policing unit and obviously the police in terms of making sure those perpetrators are held to account as much as possible. A lot of the work I do is around going into clubs and educating the players on what they can do because it almost always falls on them, with people saying, "Oh, come off social media," or, "It's your responsibility." It is not their responsibility; they are just doing their jobs, at the end of the day.



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When we are out in clubs, we are encouraging them. Again, we are empowering them to use their voices because as much as they want to just ignore it, actually it is more powerful for them to report it so we can hold perpetrators to account.

When we go in, we try to encourage and show them as many of the actions that have taken place as we can. There are perpetrators getting three-year bans, education, football banning orders from going into clubs and things like that. We want to try to encourage the players to know that it will make a difference if they report. It is not a quick process; it is going to be long, and it is going to be dubious for them. But we want to make sure that they know that they can come to us, and we will make sure that we are supporting them from a wellbeing perspective off the field as well. We are trying to support them as best we can, but in answer to your question, yes, it has become alarmingly worse.

Olly Scadgell: Yes, I agree. It is a big issue in sport, and it is growing as an issue. We absolutely recognise the impact that it has on players and athletes. Katie Boulter, a top 100-ranked British player, spoke out very passionately about the online abuse that she has received and the impact it has had on her, and she was very brave to do that. We are supportive of the Women's Tennis Association's work with a company called Signify and specifically their threat matrix, which every player competing on the WTA tour, the ITF tour and Grand Slam events has access to. That is an important AI-driven tool, which helps to protect athletes from threatening messages.

The LTA has done a lot of work with our performance lifestyle team to support athletes in thinking about how they manage online abuse, both preventing it and the impact that it has when they receive it. I understand that 40% of online abuse is linked to gambling, and that is something that needs to be addressed. For us, it is really important that Ofcom plays a leading role in implementing the Online Safety Act 2023 and the recommendations that have been identified there. In doing so, it must also hold social media companies to account in the role that they can play, whether that is filtering or blocking measures on their platforms, or effective verification of users, and then obviously consequences for those users who are issuing this abuse online.

Dr Ross: Can I just also extend that point? The players are obviously the ones in the limelight, and they are really front and centre when it comes to this type of abuse, but we also know that sport is still a very male-dominated environment. In football, for example, most of the coaches are still men. About 10% of the coaches in the Olympic and Paralympic system are women. Women in Football released some research earlier this year, which said that regarding the workforce in women's football, nearly 80% of women who work in football said they had suffered sexual harassment or abuse. Some 50% of those who reported it said nothing was done, and 30% said they would not report it because they do not believe that there is follow-up and it would harm their career. Players and



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athletes and the women working in these sporting environments are still very much subject to it.

Fern Whelan: It is important to look at it from a holistic point of view as well. The players, and as you say, people in the workplace are affected but so are the families supporting these players. Parents are seeing it and, again, it is going to be another barrier, is it not? Even now when I watch my daughter, I feel sick if she is going to take a penalty in case she misses because I know full well that straightaway her phone will be blowing up.

We have to look at it from a wider lens. A parent knows that the benefits of sport are huge but also knows the impact it can have on you and your life, essentially, if nothing is done about these problems. From a parental point of view, that is going to be a huge barrier. They are certainly not going to want their kids to play a highly visible sport.

Olly Scadgell: There have also been calls for athletes to come off social media as a result of receiving online abuse, which is not the right way to be looking at it. It is a really important medium for professional athletes to connect with their fans, and there are links to commercial sponsorship arrangements that are driven through social media. It would feel like you are not focusing on the perpetrators, but rather the victims. That is something I know has been mentioned, but we need to think about it differently.

Chair: We are going to come on to social media and responsibilities in the next section.

Q25 **Nadia Whittome:** To what extent do you believe the abuse directed at some women athletes is also driven by other forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia and transphobia? I am thinking particularly about examples of the horrific abuse that was directed towards England defender Jess Carter, as you mentioned, Fern, in the 2025 Euros; the abuse directed towards Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, who, while not trans, was perceived to be trans by some people and received a huge amount of transphobic abuse; and of course, the Chelsea and West Ham players Sam Kerr and Kristie Mewis, after they announced that they were having a baby last year. Fern and Olly, would you be able to give some thoughts on that, please?

Fern Whelan: You were talking about intersectional discrimination, and that definitely adds another layer and another factor to it. Personally, from my own experiences, I have been subjected to it online on my own social media platforms. I got married a couple of years ago, and straightaway I got abuse for that. Then I had a son, and straightaway I got abuse for that because I have brought a child into the world in a homosexual relationship. For me, it adds so many more complex layers to it, but it adds to the abuse that players are facing for sure. We have to make sure we take that into account.



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We do not want to single people out, but we also need to protect those players we know are probably going to be more likely to face those types of abuse, especially, like you say, Sam Kerr, within that. We have to have focused interventions on how we do that, and how we protect players from the abuse that they are going to face. It adds another element and another complex layer to it.

Hina Shafi: Discrimination does not work in isolation. You gave an example of Jess Carter and all the other examples you gave. It is gender, race and sexuality. It does not just work in isolation. We need to get together and try to figure out ASAP how to tackle it because as all the games progress, women's sport is progressing rapidly, and it is easily becoming clickbait on social media. I know we will discuss that a little later on, but it does not work in isolation.

Q26 **Nadia Whittome:** On that, can you say a bit more about what you think the factors are that are driving it?

Hina Shafi: That are driving what?

Nadia Whittome: The increase in abuse.

Hina Shafi: It is the individuals we see on social media, such as Andrew Tate, and people liking, retweeting and so on. Because they are not being held to account, removed from social media, or being blocked from platforms like Instagram, it allows that conversation to continue in society and mindsets to change. A lot of the time when we talk about women's sport and equality, it is women who are speaking about it. It needs to be co-creation and collaboration. We need men and women of colour, as well as men of colour, pushing it. We need to work collectively to make that change, but these so-called influencers and individuals who have a platform are adding to normalising the hate.

Olly Scadgell: The only thing I would add is that this is a wider issue than just in sport. There is not one silver bullet to address it. It needs a co-ordinated plan. I know we are going to talk about it shortly, but the Online Safety Act is a really important tool to help fight against online abuse. As soon as we can start implementing some recommendations, so much the better. Of course, if this is a barrier to young girls wanting to get involved in sport, which we all believe that it actually is, then we must address it. There are already enough barriers to women and girls getting involved in sport and physical activity.

Q27 **Nadia Whittome:** I just have one final question, and this is to Fern and Tanni. To what extent do you agree with a recent study's conclusion that sports organisations are shirking their duty of care to protect women players from harassment?

Fern Whelan: I can speak only for the organisations I work for or that I have been involved with. If you look at the Euros in 2025, UEFA tried to put an online social monitoring tool in place to block and filter any harmful messages that came through to players directly. Unfortunately,



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after speaking to players and seeing the results of that, only two thirds were filtered out. A third still reached the players. The mechanisms are in place, but obviously it is how well those mechanisms are working to protect the players.

From an organisational point of view, we need to push the platforms, like you say, to try to limit the content or completely reduce it if possible. In terms of what we do for players, we encourage them to do the right things in terms of reporting and supporting them as players first and foremost. We talk about players coming off social media, and we did a social media blackout in 2021. I was a player at the time, not working for the PFA, and I did it.

It was a step, but we are still talking about it in 2025, so obviously that is not the solution. That was something we pushed for as a union and a football association collaboratively, but we need to do more now. It needs to go to Ofcom—the regulators—to make sure that the Online Safety Act is taken seriously, rather than football being the problem, essentially. It is not football that is the problem; it is the perpetrators behind it all.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I worked on the Online Safety Bill. When we were doing it, it was already out of date in terms of trying to catch up and fix problems. This is a wider societal problem as well, but sport is an easy target. Some is misogyny: how dare these women think they can play football? For the crazy keyboard warrior at home, they all think they can play football better than Ronaldo or anybody. There is the intersectionality of it, but there is quite widespread misogyny. It is bigger than that. Every female politician will have had a significant amount of hate. I am not going to be opening my social media this afternoon. We need to be looking at it in the widest context.

Governing bodies are trying really hard to work with their athletes, but they are not necessarily experts in this. There is a real balance between it being filtered out and somebody looking at it, and female athletes actually knowing what has been said about them so they can take appropriate measures. That is wrong when there have been other issues, such as women walking home with their keys in their hands and making sure their phones are charged. These are all things that women subconsciously have to do, which many men do not often even think about. This plays out in into a bigger sphere.

Governing bodies need to take some responsibility, but also there are different types of harassment. It is not just in terms of online, there are a number of sports where we have had cases of harassment of women within the sport or within coaching. There is a really big bit of harassment which is not necessarily just in terms of online safety.

Q28 **Rebeca Paul:** I should just mention that I am actually an officer on the APPG for women's rights. I was meant to mention that right at the beginning, so I will just put that on the record now. My apologies for referencing that later. Thank you, it has been really interesting to hear



about the experiences of elite players.

Emma, I am interested in your thoughts about the grassroots, and girls at school and in local communities and getting them involved in sport. We have seen this move away from single-sex changing rooms to mixed-sex changing rooms for lots of different reasons. We have also seen that the number of sexual assaults, voyeurism episodes and harassment tend to take place in mixed-sex changing rooms rather than single-sex changing rooms. In order for us to get girls and women involved in sport, how important is it to make provisions that keeps them safe?

Dr Ross: It is essential. It is not just about them being safe but feeling safe too. Perception and reality are often slightly different. Even when we go back to the sports bra—our favourite topic—when we go into schools and teach the girls about wearing a sports bra, if you do not have somewhere to change into a sports bra, it feels like a very exposing thing. We all know how hard it is to wrestle oneself into a sports bra, or out of it. Is there actually a space? It is not just about whether they know how important it is, but do they have a space where they can change into it? That is really important.

The research that Women in Sport has done has time and time again shown that girls have a real consciousness about being observed and a fear of judgment. Not giving them space that feels safe is a huge barrier. It is very logistical, but it actually is really important.

Q29 **Chair:** Emma, do you have any statistics in any of your research to back up some parts of the question that Rebecca raised around the mixed-gendered sports facilities causing issues?

Dr Ross: No. Rewinding back to the conversation we had about how some conversations are trickier to have, this exactly plays into it. It can be an inclusive space, but it also can sometimes feel less safe.

Chair: Yes. That goes back to the point that Hina said about collaboration and making sure that it is a space that everybody feels comfortable with.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Just quickly, there is some research. If it is all right, I will write to the Committee about it. Ukactive is doing some work in this space, in terms of changing rooms in the fitness and health sector. I did not declare all the all-party groups I am part of. Shall I do that in writing?

Q30 **Chair:** You can do that in writing, or you can just refer us to your register of interests, and I am sure it will be on there.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: There are lots.

Chair: I am sure there would be. Probably even more than Rachel. Thank you. I know we have covered this a bit already, but it is really important because of the online world that we live in. Alex is going to talk about social media.



Q31 Alex Brewer: It is fascinating to hear all your insights. It is completely understandable that in a conversation about abuse, the focus almost instantly goes to the online abuse at the moment because that is so real. I would like to ask some questions about tackling that, and where some of the responsibility lies. Tanni, if I could come to you first, because you mentioned about the Online Safety Act already being somewhat out of date. Are there any particular steps that you would like Ofcom, social media companies or legislators to take right now?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: The platforms have a huge responsibility, which they quite often absolve themselves from in terms of that line between freedom of speech and what people feel they are allowed to say. Education is not going to fix everything but helps in actually understanding the impacts. I have had someone post about me on social media, "Be careful what you say, I know where you live," and that person did know where I lived. So it is things like that. When I challenged the person—man—he said, "Oh well, it's a phrase I didn't mean it." He went to his wife, who very robustly explained to him why it was not a laugh, and he just did not understand the impact of the comment.

Some of what women get is way worse than that, but if I could, I would completely change the school curriculum in terms of how we educate our children for a modern world, much as we should teach boys about menstruation. There are also women who post very unforgivable things on social media; there needs to be a way of tracking these people down. If it is in a sporting context, I would actually endorse a life ban from sporting events. People will say they are a fan, and then hugely abuse women. If they are a fan of the sport, they should love the sport and should not pick and choose which bits of it they love. There is lots of responsibility, and to an extent the governing bodies have a responsibility of supporting the women who get abused.

It is very difficult to report these things as an athlete, especially on Pathway, to raise your head above the parapet. And it is difficult, as a woman, to keep being the woman that is complaining about things, because over time we have seen that if women do that, the side language around them becomes, "You know what they're like, they're a bit flaky, they're a bit delicate, it was a joke," and then that is the victim-blaming again. That will have an impact on girls' desire to come into sport. Sport does amazing things, but actually if you start seeing the abuse you are going to get, is that a choice? I have a 23-year-old daughter and I would be worried about her being involved in some bits of sport now because of the backlash that you get.

Fern Whelan: I would second that in terms of even coming out of the sport. I know I am going a bit further on, but those pathways that we are talking about, we always tell the young girls coming into sport, "You don't have to be a footballer, you can work in sport, go in the media or whatever."



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I work in the media as well, and for me it is a huge barrier. I have been offered to go and do men's games numerous times, and I have turned them down because I do not want the abuse. I do not want to open myself up to that because I know it will affect me mentally, wellbeing-wise, and my whole life in terms of being a mum to my kids, it would really take over that side and I do not want that. But that should not be the case. I should be able to develop myself in that world and develop my career in that sense, and things like that. It is a huge barrier for the whole journey of young girls getting into sport and then following through their careers as well.

Q32 Alex Brewer: You are potentially faced with a choice between shrinking and reducing your own career or essentially being branded a difficult woman, is that the kind of trade-off?

Fern Whelan: Yes.

Dr Ross: If I can just also add—Olly mentioned it before—the power social media actually has for female athletes to grow around getting commercial partnerships, but also to grow the sport. We saw Ilona Maher—the American rugby player—who has a huge social media following, bigger than most male athletes. She got signed by the Bristol Bears and it had to move stadiums because the ticket sales went up. So suddenly you have a lot more money and resource coming into that club because they have a player who is robust enough to put herself out there. She also has a powerful, physically amazing presence as a rugby player and is a very important voice for girls and women to see that people of all shapes and sizes belong in sport. But she is probably one of very few women doing that because of what you say about how vulnerable it makes you, but actually the power of it is huge.

Q33 Alex Brewer: That is really good to hear, thank you. Fern, if I could come back to you just quickly. We have talked a little about victim-blaming, and obviously we do not want women to have to take the brunt of this, or to have to change because of this, but just on a hypothetical, would it be economically feasible for athletes to boycott any social media platforms?

Fern Whelan: Obviously I just spoke about it before; we did do that in terms of as a whole wide athlete kind of campaign, shall we say, which began four years ago. There are still players now that I see on social media and they have accounts, but they are not run by them. They are run by other people; they have their own kind of personal stuff. So there are athletes that are doing it across the league that have already come off social media; we just do not know it because they are still on there and people are posting for them, which is a way of them protecting themselves.

Alex Brewer: It is a work-around.



Fern Whelan: Yes, they are working around it in their own way, but we would never ask for them to come off social media, because effectively they are not on it. Like we have talked about, they are not the issue, they are not causing the problem. We would not want them to feel like they had to take themselves away from something that they say effectively could affect them with brands, and financially they get a lot of money out of the commercial deals so would lose out massively from doing so. So, it is not something we would encourage because of reparations from it.

Q34 **Alex Brewer:** Olly, if I can come back to you just briefly, you mentioned about the gambling link, and I think you said that it was 40% of online abuse is linked to gambling. Do you think gambling companies have a responsibility to protect athletes from gambling-related abuse, and what actions would you like to see them take?

Olly Scadgell: Yes, you are right, I did say 40% of online abuse is linked to gambling. In fact, tennis is the third most bet-on sport in this country behind football and horse racing, so it is a significant issue in tennis. Absolutely we would like to see the gambling operators support a more responsible approach that takes actions against individuals who abuse players. How that is done is not that straightforward or easy to implement, but the gambling operators definitely have a responsibility in this space. We have already talked about social media companies having a responsibility, but yes, the gambling market does as well.

Q35 **Christine Jardine:** Can I also refer people to the Register of Members' Financial Interests before I start? I should probably also declare an interest in my first question, as someone who has a knee that does not work because of a sports injury. Fern, could I ask you to update us on the progress of Project ACL, which has been investigating the reasons for the disproportionate prevalence of ACL knee injuries in women's football?

Fern Whelan: Yes. A bit of insight in terms of project ACL is that it actually came about from the players themselves. Obviously we could see a need for it from afar, but it was the players who came to us and requested that more be done in that area. It is something we have acted upon with the other stakeholders in FIFPRO, Nike and Leeds Beckett University in terms of looking at the first research project to focus on environmental modifiable risk factors—sorry, it is a tongue-twister—that could potentially contribute to ACL injury.

We have just gone into year two, but phase one is complete from year one. We had really good buy-in and all 12 clubs from the WSL participated in phase one. They all completed the questionnaire, which was based on practises in injury prevention, perceptions of the club conditions, the MDT, their staffing, and their return to play strategies and what that looked at.

We have already started phase two, and as of a couple of weeks ago we have been interviewing the players themselves to get a real insight into the players and their experiences. We are looking to interview around five



to six players from each club, and from a range of experiences, so they do not have to have done their ACL to take part in the study. Then we want young players and more experienced players so we get a breadth of knowledge of the different experiences that those players have faced. Alongside that, they are being monitored in real time with a workload tool that will look at workload and travel; that is on the women's player workload monitoring programme, so that will be happening in the background. We have consent from players, which we are working on so that we can monitor them through phase two to gain as much knowledge as possible around the environments the players are operating in today, which we may not have previously known.

Q36 Christine Jardine: That sounds like a huge amount of work. Emma, if I could ask you about the identified systemic gender inequality in sports and exercise research, the sort of thing that Fern has been talking about that we have not really seen. Thinking about other specific gaps in research that have been identified about female health issues, do you think this is now being addressed? What is happening with elite athletes to help them do things like manage menstrual cycles in training?

Dr Ross: I am slightly divided on the research stuff. We wrote the paper where the 6% comes from, and it is so important that we have more really good-quality research. What often happens when we say we do not have enough research is that lots of people say, "Oh, we will do research," and they do it really badly and it does not serve anyone particularly well. So it needs to be high-quality research, the ACL project being a really great example.

But we should not let the lack of research lead us to believe that we do not have enough good information. Injury is a really good example. About 10 years ago—actually more than ten years ago now—FIFA released a programme called the FIFA 11+. It was a programme that was designed to reduce ACL injury risk, and it was researched and it showed it reduced ACL injury risk by over 40%, and overall injury by 27%. It required coaches to deliver 10 minutes of this particular conditioning programme three times a week, so it was really easy to deliver in terms of not being a time burden. You could walk into any football club over the past 10 years, and people had either never heard of it, were not doing it or coaches had not been educated about it in their coach development. The activation of some of this research is really important, so whilst we have a research gap and we need to keep doing more good-quality research, it needs to be funded and it needs to be led by real experts rather than chancers who want the funding.

We also have to make sure the translation does not take years to get on to the ground in sport. In research, we cannot just look at women as a homogenous group. As we have talked about today, there are so many different ages and life stages, which carry different barriers when it comes to physical activity in sport, and then in elite sports, and there are so many groups of women that we need to research.



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Research into elite sport is very sparse, partly because elite sports people are a very small population, and actually the best bang for our buck is going to be getting everyone more active for the benefits of health. That does not mean to say we cannot do research in elite sport. Motorsport is a good example, not because of the research, but the design and technology that goes into an F1 car ends up in our Ford Focus. So actually what we learn in the sporting arena can be really valuable, but you have to set up the structures of research, funding and publication to allow that to happen.

Just a final point, research on women—women's health, women's sport—is usually done by women, though not exclusively. We do not have enough women in academia or in STEM; we do not have enough women in those spaces who are driving, perhaps from lived experience, some of these really important questions. So again, there are lots of things to put right before that shifts the dial, but the translation is really key.

Q37 Christine Jardine: Tanni, can I come to you now and ask what the new taskforce role is going to be in driving research, and maybe trying to change that, and get more women involved?

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I hope a big part of it is highlighting where the gaps are. One area I am really keen that we look at as part of that is around pregnancy. UK Sport now has guidelines on pregnant athletes. When I was pregnant, there was no research in the UK about a pregnant Paralympian. My team manager at the time wanted to put me on the injured list, even though I trained all the way through. People do not tend to consider the pressure put on female athletes who want to have a family, in terms of how you make that work. So I have a wry smile for every male athlete I see whose wife may be pregnant during a major games or around that. Actually, what I and every other female athlete did was get out your training diary, work out where 40 weeks takes you back to, and work out where six months takes you back to. I know myself and several of my friends all had cut-off dates for being pregnant. I am not talking about sacrifice, because it was my choice to stay in sport and to try for a family, but there are these things. So when it comes to some of that data on what you can do when you are pregnant, there is still a lot of misinformation out there.

Dr Ross: It is very conservative.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: It is about stopping training. You would not say, "Tell you what, you're pregnant, go run a marathon," but actually I did a half marathon when I was six months pregnant. I had a much lower heart rate; it was in very controlled conditions and was absolutely totally safe. I would not recommend that to anyone, but that information is really important because actually as a woman it is really important that you are fit and healthy if you are pregnant, and the impact afterwards, and that data—

Chair: We are going to come on to maternity and pregnancy in the next



section with Kevin.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Sorry.

Chair: I will just hand back to Christine.

Christine Jardine: I was going to ask you what your priorities were but actually you have answered that.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I might have to come back to you on that.

Q38 **Kevin McKenna:** I have very few interests in this, but in terms of the APPGs, I am on an APPG in health. I have a big interest in the rest of my family, because the strongest sports people in my family are my nieces in Australia who are all competitive hockey players, and some of you will get to see their hockey club at Labrador in the Olympics and Paralympics on the Gold Coast. They will be watching this with interest because all this has been fascinating.

Fern, I have something for you around pregnancy. When you gave evidence in 2022, you spoke about the need for culture change. That was a few years ago, it would be really interesting to hear from you what change there has been since then, if there has been any. Has there been any culture change around pregnancy and motherhood?

Fern Whelan: It is talked about a lot more within the players, but at the same time, it is still a bit of a taboo around players. So there is still that taboo for players who want to be able to be open and say, "I would like to start a family while I'm playing." There are still a lot of players—like myself—that will say, "I'm going to play until I cannot, and then I'm going to retire and then I'm going to play."

So I do not forget the point about research, it is really important that we look into the impact of elite sport on athletes, and then when they transition, about what that looks like for them playing, going out of the game, and around fertility and things like that. That is really important as another research project. Sorry, I just wanted to add that.

In terms of the conversation around pregnancy and motherhood, players will talk more around it, but there is still a nervousness about, "Are contracts safe?" "Are clubs equipped to deal with me if I am pregnant, in terms of whether I can train and how hard I should train?" "Do I have access to a doctor and a pelvic health specialist?" I would say they do not; it is not part of the minimum standards across the board, as such. But an area we have recently been looking at is whether the league, as a union, can supply us with the maternity policies for all the clubs across the board because players are scared to ask for them from their club. So if we can hold them as a union then they will trust us and come to us. They can ask, "What is my club going to do if I decide to get pregnant?" and we can show them that, and then they can make an informed decision. At the moment it is not something they are informed about, so they say do not know.



There is a lot of work going on in the background around trying to educate the players on that, so they can make decisions around whether they are going to be able to have a child whilst playing. There is still a long way to go in terms of that kind of culture shift and change so it is not taboo. But can we really work with the females around what they need in terms of a work-around. We have set up a group within the PFA around working mothers' groups; there are a lot of players in that group, and we have conversations with them around what they need. It is more around four stages: pre-planning, pregnancy, then obviously what that essentially looks like when you get pregnant, considerations postpartum and also the kind of family-friendly policies once you have a child. So in my opinion there is still a long way to go.

Q39 Kevin McKenna: I know Tanni wants to come in, but just specifically on mothers returning, how much further do we need to go and what does the PFA want to see?

Fern Whelan: I would like there to be a minimum across the board for all clubs that they are all educated in this area and all have plans, policies and strategies. What we are seeing is a bit of a disparity across the league where some clubs are doing it amazingly, fantastically well: they have all the education and access and pay their players throughout. We have a minimum of 14 weeks in the contract, but some clubs go above and beyond that. It is about how we make it equal across the whole league, rather than just if you are the best player in the league you are going to get access to the best services.

Dr Ross: There is now best practice guidance in the league: the WSL 1 and 2 around pregnancy and return to play, but like you said, the problem is sometimes with resources because pregnancy is so individual, every woman's pregnancy will be different, every woman's birth will be different, every woman's physical and emotional return from that will be different. So actually you cannot just say, "These are the rules," you have to give people guidance.

But there are so many more people giving us role models to say, "You can have a family and come back and be an elite athlete," that we will only see it increasing. We need to have really good minimum standards of what a club has to have to be able to support athletes really safely.

Just a last point: it is not just the conventional pregnancy in the best practice guidance that we wrote. We talked about baby loss, women who are going through IVF, maybe to donate eggs, or in a same-sex partnership where they are having a child but they are not going to carry the baby. So it is thinking about this in a much more inclusive way because a lot of players at the moment are saying, "Well, maybe I could freeze my eggs." In America some clubs are paying for athletes to freeze eggs. It is a completely viable option; it is not 100% success rate. You have to be really well-informed about the process of doing that, physically and emotionally, and then the likelihood of success to be able to have a family with those eggs because the urban myth at the moment



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is, “Oh, I could just do that and then I could definitely have kids.” So it is about a holistic and inclusive education as well.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: I just wanted to come in quickly on what you said in terms of miscarriage. All those things are really important. We are still in a situation where some women who choose to have a baby while they are competing have their commitment called into question. I am not particularly aware of male athletes who have their commitment to the sports called into question, which is quite interesting.

Chair: It takes two.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: Yes, but it is also things like having policies around where you are in the world ranking if you do not compete for 12 months. Some sports are based on your world ranking. What happens there if you drop your world rankings and do not go to major games? Things about how you are able to be reintegrated back into elite performance and things like childcare, what you do with your children. There are still issues where, in some cases, the majority of childcare falls upon a female athlete. Or I have known a case where both partners are competing in one sport with the assumption that the woman would retire. So there are lots of things like this that we need to look at because that does filter down.

Q40 **Kevin McKenna:** Olly, I know there have been some high-profile female tennis players that have come back after motherhood, and you have introduced a Maternity Fund programme. How is that going, and what impacts has that had?

Olly Scadgell: I would agree with the panel that more needs to be done, but in our sport there have been some positive steps made over the last few months. Specifically, the WTA—Women’s Tennis Association—has introduced a pregnancy and maternity policy that sees pregnant players eligible for 12 months’ worth of paid leave. They have also announced grants that are available for fertility treatment.

To Tanni’s point, their ranking is protected while they are away from the game. Importantly, since the last report from this Committee around support in terms of the return to play, the LTA has introduced its own pregnancy policy, which sees all the support services that are available to our elite athletes being made available to athletes while they are away from the sport pregnant, and also enhancing our return to competition support when players are coming back.

Q41 **Kevin McKenna:** Tanni, I was going to finish with you and ask about the taskforce, but actually you have already talked a lot about that. What else do you want to deliver specifically around pregnancy? Hina, I do not know if you want to come in on that as well.

Baroness Grey-Thompson: One of the things I was really delighted with when I was with Yorkshire County Cricket Club was that we brought in a policy for the female players having that kind of gold standard. When



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we are talking about women and girls, there are so many things that we need to look at, and questions about priority. It is quite hard to figure out what would be the thing that we need to look at first.

In Wales, we have the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and a lot of what we do in Sport Wales looks through the lens of young people. It may be more challenging to fix some of the things that we know of, but it is actually what we do for the young girls in trying to get them in, because the benefits of changing behaviour will be felt. There is so much that we need to do; it is quite a challenge, but where I am, it is young people we need to really think about so that we stop them having these really poor experiences and fix the things that are wrong.

Chair: Thank you. I just want to check, does anybody on the Committee have any other questions? No. Then it is left to me to say a massive thank you. What you have actually done is opened our minds into other areas to explore, so would you be open for us to come back to you at some stage just to ask if there are other people who we should be pushing on this issue, or other organisations that could be doing better and more work in this area? Thank you very much for your time, you have been very generous. That brings this session to a close.