

## Written evidence submitted by Women in Sport (PHS0490)

### Sport as preventative healthcare for girls and women

According to [NHS data](#), **physical inactivity plays a part in one in six deaths in the UK** and is estimated to cost the UK £7.4billion annually. Regular activity reduces the risk of and can help manage more than 20 chronic physical and mental health conditions, including type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression.

**Further, women and girls face gendered health inequalities which could be ameliorated through sport.** But the gendered stereotypes that limit girls' lives include keeping many girls (we [estimate 1.3m teenage girls in the UK](#)) away from sport with a profound impact on their mental and physical health.

There are two particular areas we suggest the committee could investigate:

#### 1. Sport to prevent or reduce anxiety in girls and young women

The [Mental Health Foundation](#) states that women between the ages of 16 and 24 are almost three times as likely (26%) to experience a common mental health issue as males of the same age (9%). 25.7% of women and 9.7% of men aged 16 to 24 report having self-harmed at some point in their life. Women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with [anxiety](#) as men. [Beat estimate](#) 75% of the 1.25million people in the UK with eating disorders are female. There is extensive literature demonstrating that sport and exercise relieves anxiety and promotes good mental health as well as boosting body image.

Sport could help but many girls are excluded. Women in Sport has extensive knowledge on the interface of teenage girls from diverse backgrounds with sport, and has developed two initiatives to demonstrate solutions for the committee's inquiry to consider.

- [Big Sister](#), which provides girls with an extensive range of resources and support – created and shaped by other girls – to enable them to find out about the changes that happen to their bodies whilst offering ways to access exercise, improve self-belief and wellbeing;
- [Time Together](#), which supports girls to be active with their mums by breaking down barriers to participation and offering accessible ways to try out new activities in supportive environments.

#### 2. Sport to build bone strength for later in life, tackling osteoporosis

According to [NICE](#) two million women in England and Wales have osteoporosis and nearly 50% of women will have it by age 80. [The Royal Osteoporosis Society](#) state that the economic burden of osteoporosis-related fractures in the UK is £4.5 billion annually. 50% of women over the age of 50 will break a bone as a result of osteoporosis compared to 20% of men. This is closely linked to decreased oestrogen during and after menopause but bone strength is built during childhood and puberty. Weight-bearing exercise during the teen years is essential to reach maximum bone strength.

Women in Sport research shows that **women and girls want to be more active at every stage of their lives but are prevented from being so by limiting and stubborn gender stereotypes.** Almost as soon as

they are born, girls are surrounded by expectations that sport matters for boys but that they are fragile and sport is 'not for them'. Girls under eleven are bombarded with messages that doing sport is not important or valuable, that they can be 'girly' or 'sporty' but not both. Their self-belief halves during Primary School years and they then face the challenges of female puberty. Teenage girls battle with a society that makes them feel they don't have the 'right' body for sport, whilst women in midlife are conditioned to put their own needs last and sacrifice their time to be active for the needs of the rest of their family, all whilst facing up to the symptoms and associated societal stigma of menopause.

**It is not the fault of women and girls that our society places so many barriers between them and physical activity, but it is women and girls that suffer as a result of worse health outcomes.**

2022 was a watershed year for women's sport and, with an amazing line up of international women's sporting events (including the Lionesses at the World Cup), 2023 looks set to be another. With interest never higher, **now is a perfect opportunity to discuss women's physical activity.**

Put simply, if more teenage girls in the UK were active and playing sport, many fewer would be held back by anxiety, self harm and eating disorders, and fewer would be likely to suffer as many fractures in later life. The NHS and Social Care sectors would benefit on both counts.

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