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1.0 Introduction

This submission draws on recent academic research from [Project FIAS](#) at the University of Bristol Business School examining gender, media representation, and cultural production in mountain biking. Mountain biking is an excellent case study for exploring women+'s routes into 'action sports', i.e. sports that are more informally organised, often done outside in nature, have 'risky' and 'adrenaline' aspects and have less mainstream media presence. 20% of UK mountain bikers are women+, and this is lower in parts of Europe. Gender inequality is similar in other action sports. There are important benefits of action sports, such as nature connectedness, benefits to mental health and the emphasis on social connection, self-expression and individualised progression.

2.0 Synthesis of the FIAS research

The research provide a complementary account of how gender inequality in sport is produced and sustained through the interaction of cultural representation (marketing and media), everyday male-dominated participation practices, and institutional structures within the industry's media and marketing sector. Together, the research demonstrates that inequality is not simply a matter of access or individual choice, but is embedded within a self-reinforcing system that shapes who feels able to participate, belong, and progress.

A central contribution of the research is to show that sports media operates as a key "anchoring practice" in shaping sporting cultures. Media does not merely reflect participation; it actively constructs the meanings, identities, and norms associated with sport. In mountain biking, this takes the form of persistent hypermasculine representation, where the "authentic" participant is characterised by risk-taking, competitiveness, technical mastery, and physical dominance. These representations are overwhelmingly male, both visually and narratively, and are often accompanied by language and imagery that assume a male audience.

This has important consequences for participation. Women+ in the studies frequently reported feeling disconnected from mountain biking media, describing it as "blokey" and irrelevant to their experiences. The lack of diverse and relatable representation limits the "symbolic resources" available to women+ to see themselves as legitimate participants. As a result, women+ may experience imposter syndrome, question their competence, and feel that their way of engaging with the sport—often oriented around enjoyment, social connection, and wellbeing—is less valid. Media therefore shapes not only perceptions of the sport, but also women+'s confidence, identity, and sense of belonging within it. In action sports, the brands contribute heavily to its specialist media through product review, advertorial and sponsored content.

The research further shows that this cultural exclusion has practical consequences for how women+ enter and navigate sport. In the absence of visible pathways, many women+ rely on informal recruitment through male partners or networks, reinforcing gendered patterns of access. Women+ role models, leaders, guides and coaches are very important in changing and shaping women+'s experiences in the sport. Mountain biking is often perceived as extreme with clearly defined 'rules' about how to participate with legitimacy. Men are gatekeepers of these 'ways of playing' because they dominate the sport, including the media and other parts of the industry. These dynamics contribute to a narrower pipeline of women+ who might later move into more advanced participation or professional roles.

FIAS research also highlights that women+ are not passive recipients of these dynamics. Many actively disengage from traditional media, reject its representations, and instead curate alternative cultures through social media. These practices include forming women+-only groups online and in the real world, sharing diverse experiences of riding through story telling, and creating and sharing more inclusive narratives of participation from within women+-only groups. Through these activities, women+ contribute to a "culture in transition", challenging dominant norms and expanding what counts as legitimate participation. Nonetheless, legacy media continues to hold significant power as an authoritative source of meaning, meaning that these alternative practices coexist with, rather than fully replace, established structures.

2.1 Cultural production

Media and marketing representation content is a cornerstone of the masculine cultures of action sports. FIAS research also highlights the gender imbalance and institutional conditions that produce and reproduce masculine and male-dominated media representations. It shows that the cultural production sector—comprising journalists, editors, marketers, and brand professionals—is itself male-dominated, particularly in senior and technical roles. This gender imbalance shapes editorial decisions, organisational priorities, and definitions of audience interest, often resulting in a "universal male perspective" that marginalises women+'s experiences.

Importantly, the study identifies how these outcomes are sustained through informal and exclusionary structures. Recruitment and progression are frequently based on closed networks, described as "mates hiring mates", where professional opportunities depend on personal relationships and prior immersion in the sport. Given that participation itself is gendered, these networks tend to reproduce male dominance. Career progression is also linked to informal skill acquisition—such as product testing or media production—without structured pathways or mentoring, further disadvantaging women+.

The research also highlights specific industry practices that reinforce exclusion. For example, product launches and media events—key sites for content creation and professional advancement—are often attended predominantly by men and can be experienced as unwelcoming by women+. These events generate the imagery and narratives that populate media coverage, meaning that gender imbalance at the point of production translates directly into representational inequality. In this way, the studies demonstrate a recursive relationship

between participation, media representation, and institutional practice: each reinforces the others.

At the same time, there are “gender-progressive institutional entrepreneurs”—individuals within organisations who seek to challenge these norms and promote more inclusive representation. Their efforts include advocating for women+’s visibility in media, supporting female professionals, and pushing for changes in organisational practice. However, their impact is often constrained by entrenched institutional logics, commercial pressures, and wider cultural assumptions about sport as a male domain. As a result, progress is uneven and sometimes limited to symbolic gestures, such as tokenistic inclusion or “fem-washing”.

Taken together, FIAS research provide a systemic account of gender inequality in action sport, through the mountain biking case study. It shows that:

- Media representation shapes who feels able to participate and belong
- Participation patterns influence who enters professional and leadership roles
- Institutional structures within media and marketing reproduce gendered norms
- These elements interact in a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains inequality

3.0 The FIAS Framework

Overall, the FIAS research underlines that addressing gender inequality in sport requires attention not only to participation, but to the cultural and institutional ecosystems that shape it. The authors have used the research to develop The FIAS Framework, an evidence-informed roadmap to developing more gender inclusive action sports cultures.

FIAS FRAMEWORK

Core assumptions:

Women+ have unique barriers in action sport.

Inequality in action sport can be addressed through proactive action.

Women+ belong in mountain biking as valued riders, racers, leaders, and

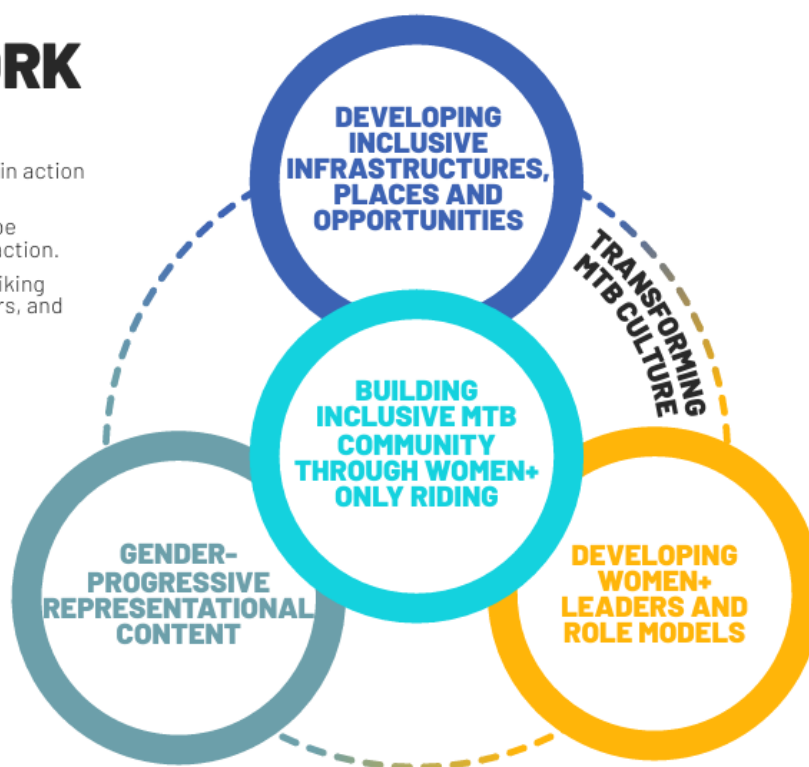


Figure 1: The FIAS Framework

The FIAS Framework identifies four interconnected areas where action is required:

1. Supporting women+'s participation and leadership pathways

- Developing women+-only spaces as entry points for women+'s participation
- Creating pathways into mixed-gender participation and leadership roles
- Supporting progression into coaching, volunteering, and industry roles

This directly addresses the pipeline issue into non-playing roles.

2. Creating inclusive environments in mainstream sport settings

- Reforming mixed-gender environments (e.g. events, clubs, competitions)
- Reducing exclusionary norms and practices
- Ensuring women+ can participate—and lead—without marginalisation

This tackles the everyday cultural conditions that sustain masculine dominance.

3. Diversifying leadership and decision-making

- Increasing representation of women+ in:
 - Media and marketing
 - Governance and administration

- Community leadership roles (e.g. ride leaders, organisers)

This is critical for shifting organisational cultures and priorities.

4. Transforming cultural representation

- Diversifying stories, imagery, and narratives
- Supporting women+ content creators and decision-makers
- Challenging narrow, hypermasculine portrayals of sport

This addresses the symbolic dimension of inequality, which shapes who feels able to belong.

4.0 Case Study: Driving women+'s inclusion in action sports with the FIAS Framework

The Forest of Dean FIAS project, launched in February 2025, is an ongoing initiative led by Forestry England and supported by the author. Forestry England is the largest landowner and manager of mountain bike trails in England. The Forest of Dean is Forestry England's only dedicated cycle centre, with over 50 km of managed mountain bike trails in the 105km² forest area. It has a dedicated cycling centre, and a privately-run mountain bike shop and cafe and numerous grassroots organisations operating on site, such as a children's club and races, volunteer trail maintenance teams and community riding groups. The project was designed to improve women+'s inclusion in the mountain biking culture at the Forest of Dean and was guided by the FIAS (Fostering Inclusive Action Sports) Framework.

The FIAS Framework is grounded in qualitative research on women+'s experiences in UK mountain biking. This research identified the sport as structurally gender-unequal and conceptualised it as a "practice ecosystem" made up of interconnected practices. These practices include riding in mixed-gender groups, riding in women+-only groups, consuming media, and producing marketing and media content. Some of these practices were found to reproduce inequality—particularly mixed-gender riding contexts, competitive events, and mainstream media—while others, such as women+-only groups and women-led media, were identified as transformative spaces that support inclusion.

Forestry England land managers used the Framework to design a coordinated programme that increases the visibility, accessibility, and support of women+'s participation. See Figure 2.

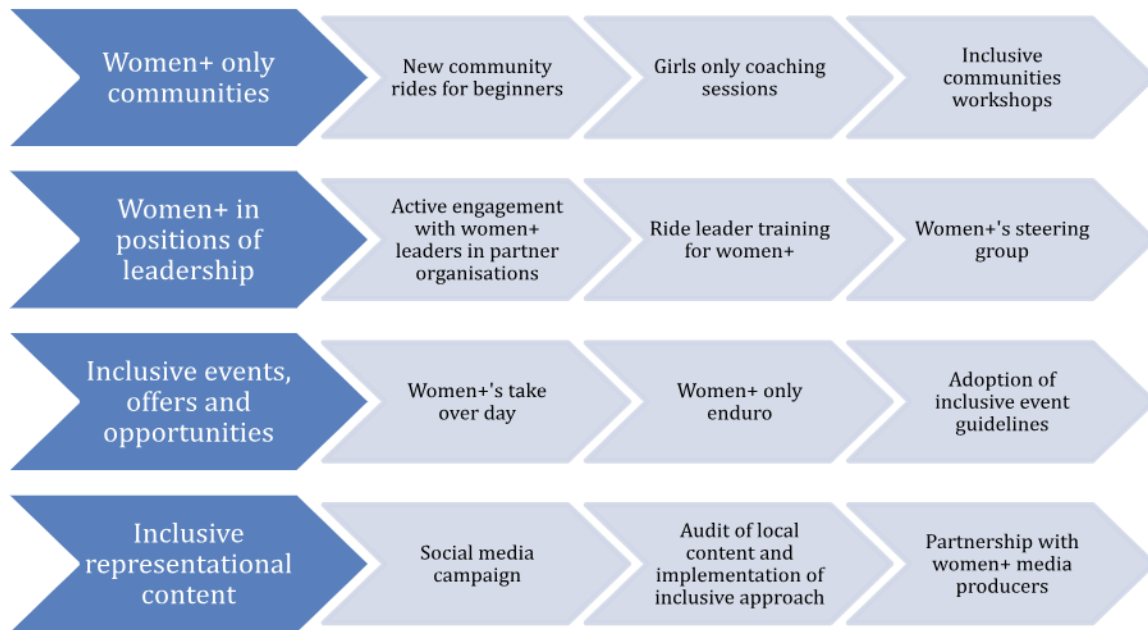


Figure 2: The Forestry England FIAS Project

Key activities include

- marketing campaigns that foreground women+ riders
- careful audit of signage at the centre
- the provision of free women+-only rides and a women+-only enduro race
- inclusion of girls only coaching
- initiatives to support women+ to train as leaders, coaches, and community organisers. These include funded training packages in partnership with local educator that delivers woman-led training.
- workshops to develop ‘inclusive community’ approaches for action sports participants, based on the FIAS Community Building Toolkitⁱ.
- Implementation of the FIAS event guidelinesⁱⁱ into Forestry England land use permissions processes. The guidelines support event organisers to put women+'s experiences at the heart of their event management and marketing.

These efforts aim to challenge entrenched masculine norms within mountain biking and reposition women+ as visible and valued participants at the cycle centre. A flagship initiative is the women+ “take over” day, which centres women+ in all aspects of participation and representation, both on-site and in subsequent media coverage. This event, alongside ongoing activities, challenges the dominance of men in the sport and has attracted growing community and corporate support.

The programme also emphasises the interconnectedness of practices through mechanisms such as a women+ led steering group for the cycle centre. This group brings together local stakeholders to identify gaps, coordinate activities, and ensure that opportunities are linked—supporting the development of sustainable participation pathways. For instance, they connect

beginner sessions with ongoing opportunities and adapt scheduling to accommodate participants' needs, such as childcare.

Attention to power dynamics is central to the programme. This includes addressing everyday experiences of marginalisation and the role of media and marketing in reinforcing gender inequality. In response, the project incorporates a counternarrative strategy that amplifies women+'s voices through social media, collaborations with influencers, and partnerships with brands. These efforts support women+'s own content creation and challenge dominant representations.

Finally, the programme leverages Forestry England's institutional role as a land manager to influence broader practices. By offering support and visibility to inclusive events and groups, and promoting guidelines for gender inclusion, the initiative seeks to reshape norms across the wider mountain biking ecosystem.

Overall, the FIAS programme represents a systemic, practice-based approach to gender inclusion, targeting cultural, social, and material dimensions of participation to enable more equitable and sustainable engagement for women+ in mountain biking.

You can find out more at www.fiasbristol.co.uk

References

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ⁱ <https://express-licences.bristol.ac.uk/product/fias-toolkit>

ⁱⁱ <https://express-licences.bristol.ac.uk/product/fias-event-guidelines>