

Written evidence from Rugby Football Union [BPS0043]

As the national governing body for rugby union in England, the Rugby Football Union (RFU) is dedicated to introducing more people to rugby union and developing the sport for future generations. Rugby is more than just a game – it is a sport that enriches lives, improves the health and wellbeing of its players and helps to create stronger, more connected communities. Together our work helps deliver an estimated £2.03bn in social value annually to the UK economy in an average year.

The RFU is the world’s leading union for the development and growth of the women’s and girls’ game. We invest more in the women’s game than any other union and we are growing participation across all age groups.

Our Women’s and Girls’ Action Plan, *Every Rose: Our Time*, sets out a clear ambition to position England as the global leader in women’s rugby, on and off the field, while inspiring the next generation of players, fans, coaches and match officials.

The Women’s Rugby World Cup 2025 hosted in England demonstrated to the world what we have long known: women’s rugby is powerful, unifying and full of possibility.

Yet, we also recognise that routes into sport for women and girls can be more challenging than for their male counterparts. We therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and to support the Committee’s work in driving greater equality, representation and opportunity across the sporting landscape.

- **To what extent are masculine cultures in sports still presenting barriers to girls and women taking up non-playing roles? What is being done to break down these barriers and what more could be done?**

Despite the progress made through increased visibility, elite success and targeted grassroots interventions, cultural attitudes continue to act as a significant barrier to women’s and girls’ participation and progression in sport. Within rugby, stereotypes and longstanding perceptions of rugby as a “male” sport mean that many girls still enter the sport with preconceived ideas that rugby is not for them.

Research by *Women in Sport* (Boys will be Boys, 2024) demonstrates that gender stereotypes around sport are already well established among primary school aged boys, with sport commonly framed as a core part of male identity and status. Parents play a significant role in reinforcing this: 37% of parents describe their sons as “sporty”, compared with 27% of parents describing their daughters this way, and many subconsciously steer boys towards team sports associated with strength and competitiveness, while girls are encouraged towards less physical or individual activities.

The more recent *Dream Deficit* report (Women in Sport, 2026) reinforces the long-term consequences of these early perceptions. It identifies a critical drop off in girls’ confidence, ambition and sense of belonging in sport as they move through childhood and into adolescence. When sport is constructed from the outset as a “male domain”, it limits not only girls’ confidence to participate but also their likelihood of seeing themselves as future

coaches, referees, administrators or decision makers. These beliefs translate into behaviours, including boys excluding girls from games, questioning their competence or dominating shared sporting spaces such as playgrounds and clubs.

Meaningful action is already underway to address these issues. Governing bodies are investing in girls only provision, coach education, leadership programmes, and increasing the visibility of female role models across sport. Education focused interventions are beginning earlier, reflecting an understanding that gendered perceptions form in primary years, not adolescence. National campaigns and updated safeguarding and inclusion standards also play an important role in challenging harmful norms. However, more remains to be done. Breaking down barriers requires systemic and sustained change, including improved school sport provision that values inclusivity over dominance, national education campaigns targeting parents and boys as allies, deliberate reform of club cultures, and greater representation of women across coaching, officiating, governance and media coverage.

The RFU's *Celebration of Rugby* campaign, delivered alongside the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025, offers a practical example of how targeted intervention can help shift these cultural barriers. Recognising that girls aged 6–12 often perceive rugby as “not for them,” the campaign began with an understanding of the audience, rather than the sport itself. In partnership with the iconic Barbie brand and Merlin Entertainments, the RFU created a series of inclusive, high impact activations placing the Red Roses at the centre as visible, relatable role models. The campaign achieved national and global reach, showcasing players who embodied confidence, teamwork and self-expression, and engaged parents and guardians, who are key decision makers in participation.

This approach was supported by a comprehensive community programme which equipped clubs with resources to engage girls locally, creating a scalable and sustainable model for impact. More than 400 clubs signed up to host Girls' Activity Days, attracting over 10,000 participants in environments intentionally designed to feel welcoming, safe and relevant. Within a month of these events, over 2,300 girls had registered on the RFU's Game Management System, an early indication of the campaign's long-term potential to grow participation at scale.

By connecting rugby to activities and values that resonate with girls; creativity, friendship, self expression and play, the campaign reimaged what rugby could mean in their world, enabling them to explore the sport without the weight of stereotypes. Crucially, this demonstrated that opportunity alone is not enough: meaningful engagement requires meeting girls at the intersection of their passions and presenting a version of rugby in which they can see themselves belonging. Celebration of Rugby provides a clear model for how cultural barriers can be addressed through insight driven, audience focused approaches, helping reshape perceptions of the sport and broadening who sees rugby as a game for them.

- **To what extent do gender bias, discrimination and misogyny exist in areas such as coaching, sports science, officiating, administration and governance, and journalism/broadcasting? How do women's experiences vary across different sports? Is enough being done to address the issues?**

Whilst progress has been made, these challenges are often more pronounced in traditionally male-dominated sports such as rugby, where outdated perceptions of expertise, limited visibility of women in leadership, and a historic imbalance in recruitment pathways have contributed to slow progress in diversifying the workforce.

The RFU recognises both the scale of this challenge and its responsibility to drive meaningful change. In November 2022, ahead of the Women's Rugby World Cup Final, the RFU signed the International Working Group on Women and Sport (IWG) declaration, committing to building a fairer and more equitable sporting system for women and girls. This commitment is now being delivered through long-term investment and targeted programmes. Central to this is Impact '25 - the legacy programme of the Women's Rugby World Cup 2025 - which was supported by £14.55m of government funding. The programme provides broad support to clubs across five pillars, with coaching and officiating forming a core focus.

To address gender imbalance within these areas, the RFU has implemented a suite of targeted interventions. Our Women's Leadership Collective supports female chairs by fostering networks for peer connection and the sharing of challenges and successes. To complement this, the Women's Development Programme provides structured support for female leaders across clubs, referee societies and Constituent Bodies, whilst the Inspire programme is designed to engage and develop the next generation of young female leaders.

In coaching specifically, we have introduced subsidised access to England Rugby coaching courses, tailored voucher schemes and the creation of dedicated learning environments for female coaches. Over the past three years, the RFU has also hosted six Women in Rugby conferences, offering structured development, mentoring and networking opportunities in partnership with the England Rugby National Programmes team. The impact is clear: as of August 2025, 3,385 new female coaches and match officials had undertaken training through Impact '25, and women now account for 24% of England Rugby coaching course participants, up from just 9% between 2017 and 2021. This represents a significant and measurable improvement in both recruitment and retention, demonstrating that targeted investment and tailored support can help break down longstanding barriers to women's involvement in the sport.

We are also currently undertaking a joint project with Women in Sport to better understand and address the experience gap between male and female volunteers in rugby, spanning coaching, officiating and club governance roles. Our findings indicate that women frequently feel undervalued, emotionally drained and are more likely to experience discrimination compared to their male counterparts. Women are also disproportionately represented in roles that are traditionally perceived as more 'appropriate', such as safeguarding or involvement in minis and junior rugby, rather than in governance or coaching positions.

Whilst instances of misogyny and sexism can be overt, they are more commonly subtle and cumulative in nature. Such behaviours are often not explicitly captured in formal policies, but instead embedded within everyday norms, including 'banter', patterns of decision-making and informal power dynamics. Although serious incidents do occur, they are not the sole or primary driver of inequality. In response, the RFU is introducing a game-wide anti-sexism

and misogyny policy, with clear responsibilities for the NGB, CBs, Clubs and Individuals. This is supported by the creation of education and guidance tools for the wider game, alongside ongoing reflection on the representativeness and inclusivity of the RFU's own governance structures.

- **To what extent do employment/contractual issues (for example, access to childcare, mentoring, pay and expenses etc) act as barriers to women's access and progression in non-playing roles? What should sports' governing bodies or the Government do to tackle these barriers?**

Employment and contractual arrangements continue to present barriers to women's access to, and progression within, non playing roles across rugby. Many roles within the rugby landscape are part time, voluntary or relatively low paid, and opportunities are often limited in number. These roles can also require significant travel, irregular hours and availability at evenings and weekends. Taken together, these factors can disproportionately disadvantage women, who are statistically more likely to have primary caring responsibilities.

Even where roles are permanent or better paid, the structure of the rugby environment itself can present challenges. Match schedules, coach education, meetings and competitions are frequently weighted towards evenings and weekends, and progression into higher level roles may involve extensive travel across the UK or internationally. For those with childcare or elder care responsibilities, this lack of predictability and flexibility can make progression difficult, particularly where children are of school age and require routine and stability. As these barriers apply to entry level roles post playing, the pool of women available for progression into senior, leadership or specialist positions over time is disproportionately impacted.

The RFU recognises these challenges and is actively working to reduce barriers for working parents within the elite and pathway environments. One example is the introduction of childcare support during camps. We are also exploring enhanced support for parents who bring children into camp environments, recognising that reliance on external support networks is not always feasible, particularly for dual working households or those without extended family support. However, there is more we need to do in the space to ensure how scheduling decisions are made, including the timing of meetings and activities, to better accommodate family responsibilities where possible.

However, broader structural issues remain. Access to affordable and available childcare is a well documented challenge across the UK workforce and is not unique to sport. For those working in sport, the impact is often intensified by non standard working hours and travel requirements. Addressing this effectively will therefore require both action by governing bodies and continued Government focus on improving childcare affordability, flexibility and availability.

- **To what extent are there additional barriers for some groups of girls and women, for example those from minority racial and ethnic groups and girls and women with**

disabilities and sensory impairments? What steps should be taken to break down these additional barriers?

Evidence indicates that certain groups of women and girls face additional and compounding barriers to entering and progressing in rugby. A Flower et al. (2025) study highlights the complex and interrelated nature of these challenges, showing that experiences vary significantly by age, the playing environment, and geographical location. Socioeconomic factors play a particularly influential role in rugby, where girls from lower income households or rural communities often encounter structural barriers such as limited school provision, fewer local teams and the need to travel long distances to access competitive rugby opportunities.

Age further shapes how these barriers are felt. Younger girls frequently report feeling intimidated in male dominated settings, especially when they are the only female participant, while older girls describe increased social scrutiny linked to stereotypes around femininity and sexuality, which can discourage continued engagement in the sport. Together, these intersecting factors demonstrate that barriers are not uniform: they intensify for those with fewer resources, reduced access, or greater exposure to social stigma.

The RFU is committed to tackling these disparities and embedding inclusion across the game. Over the past year, we have strengthened access for under-represented groups by expanding ACE Leagues to widen pathways for state-educated players, engaging 27,000 young Black and South Asian people through our Rugby United programme, delivering active-bystander training across 40 clubs and academies, and introducing a dedicated neurodivergence toolkit to support players, volunteers and staff. These initiatives aim to reduce the cultural, practical and attitudinal barriers that disproportionately affect marginalised groups. Looking ahead, our 2025–2030 Inclusion and Diversity Plan—supported by a new game-wide inclusion framework developed in partnership with Premiership Rugby, Premiership Women’s Rugby and the Rugby Players Association—will launch later this year. This will provide coordinated and long-term action to break down additional barriers, ensure equitable access, and create a rugby environment in which all girls and women, regardless of background or identity, can participate and progress.

- **Are there good examples of progress towards equal representation of girls and women in these areas of the sports sector? If so, what could be done to disseminate and coordinate best practice across all sports?**

Across the UK sporting landscape, women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles. The Women’s Rugby World Cup 2025 (WRWC 2025) provides a compelling example of what can be achieved when gender equality is embedded by design rather than added as an afterthought. From its inception, the tournament was guided by inclusive leadership principles, with women positioned at the centre of strategy, delivery and narrative. This resulted in 100% female senior leadership and a workforce that was 74% women, demonstrating not only that representation at scale is achievable, but that it can enhance the quality, ambition and public impact of a major sporting event. In doing so,

WRWC 2025 offers a practical model for how systemic barriers can be dismantled when there is a deliberate commitment to equality at every stage.

Crucially, the tournament also acted as a development engine for women across the sports sector. More than 1,500 women secured meaningful professional experience through roles connected to WRWC 2025, strengthening pathways into an industry where women have traditionally been excluded from operational and technical opportunities. Symbolic yet important breakthroughs, such as the first-ever 100% female grounds crew for a Rugby World Cup final, further demonstrated the power of visibility to shift longstanding perceptions of who “belongs” in these roles. Initiatives such as a photography development programme in partnership with Getty Images, and a Content Creator Programme, reflects an ambition to help close the gender gap and inspire more women to pursue careers across sport.

To accelerate progress across all sports, the model established by WRWC 2025 should be captured and shared systematically through cross sport best practice networks, to ensure that the lessons of WRWC 2025 become a catalyst for sustained, sector wide transformation rather than a singular success story.

May 2026