

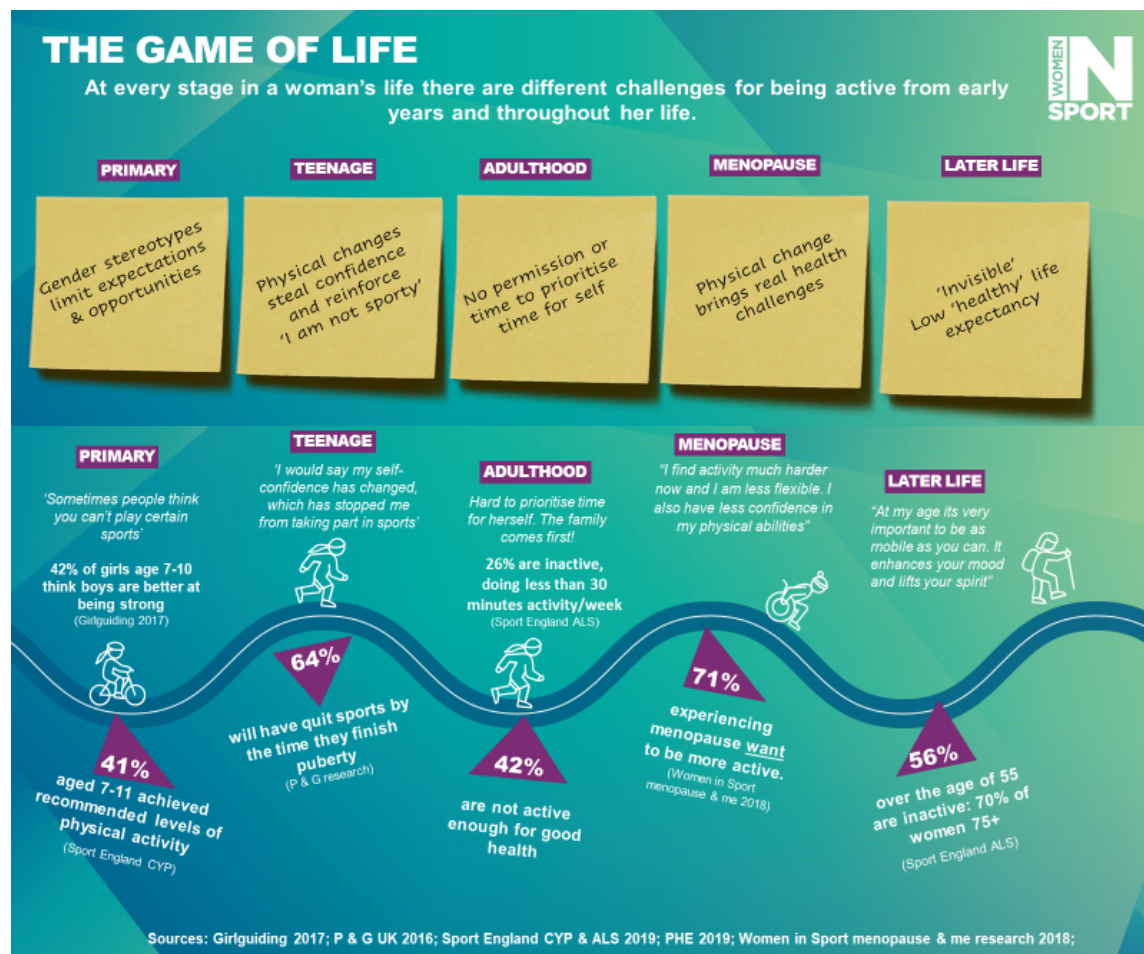
Women in Sport – Written evidence (NPS0093)

INTRODUCTION

Women in Sport is a charity formed in 1984 to further the cause of women in sport. Our vision is that no-one is excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport and exercise. We deeply understand the needs and aspirations of the full diversity women and girls at each stage in their life. We welcome the House of Lords' focus on sport and recreation. In this submission we are focusing solely on the ways that women and girls are impacted by the questions.

Sport builds confidence and communities and it is a fundamental part of any successful civilisation. To exclude people from sport is to exclude them from a healthy society. Inclusive sport can help tackle social and economic inequalities and the distinct physicality and needs of women and girls must be reflected in sport.

The gap between men's and women's sport is vast. It is not a gap in quality but in opportunity. Gender inequality in society is particularly stark in the sporting landscape. The visibility of elite women's sport has been gradually increasing with viewing figures surging and sponsorship rising, but the legacy of historic inequality remains very evident.



1.

There is a public facility crisis in sport and exercise. Core cuts to Local Authorities and therefore public leisure budgets – combined with LAs contracting services out – is what lies behind this. And this has a disproportionate impact on the types of exercise that girls and women currently favour such as swimming, gymnastics and exercise classes. The Government should be looking at a long-term solution to pools and leisure facilities, with local authorities having both a statutory responsibility for provision and the necessary funding.

It is important to recognise that funding amounts are crucial for good provision; even the best structures will fail without enough funding. Local government planning should be incorporated into this thinking, connecting leisure facilities with the use and design of public spaces. For equality of opportunity to be achieved, spaces must be designed with women and girls in mind and different communities of women and girls. A place-based approach, factoring in how we get to work, socialise, eat and interact with each other is crucial to the success of any activity strategy. This means local authority integrating decision making between transport, housing, education and health as well as sport.

There are good examples in Europe of female socialisation being incorporated into the design of spaces and public activities:

- In the mid 90s research by local officials in Vienna found that from the age of ten, girls' presence in parks and public playgrounds 'decreases significantly'. And they found that single large open spaces and single narrow entrances were a problem because these forced girls to compete with boys for space. So they subdivided the parks and provided more and wider entrances, subdivided courts and also allowed space for more informal activities. The female drop-off was reversed. Girls used the parks more and all spaces in the city began to be designed this way.
- In Malmo officials found that girls made up only 10-20% of those who used leisure spaces and facilities. So they asked girls what they wanted and, as in Vienna, they now provide better lit, different sized spaces on different levels. Looking at how girls and women use public spaces and how we can enable them to make more use of them should be fundamental to public policy.

2.

Just 41% of girls aged 7-11 achieve recommended levels of physical activity (Sport England).

Girls develop deep-rooted negative attitudes towards sport at an early age. **42% of girls age 7-10 think boys are better at being strong. But there is no physical evidence for this.** It is not the case that girls are innately less able, less strong or less confident. **Gender stereotyping starts young.**

This Always ad campaign illustrates how girls are taught to believe that they are not strong, that 'running like a girl' is an insult. The difference in attitudes between girls of primary school age and teenagers is stark and shocking: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjJQBjWYDTs>

For this to change, it is not about encouraging girls but about changing the society around the girls.

Society needs to recognise, mitigate and address and eventually eliminate the factors that lead to these attitudes. Physical activity must be reimagined and reframed and as something that girls perceive differently, that enhances their lives and gives them confidence. For girls to have a different attitude, society and the structure of sport need to see them and their relationship with sport differently. Physical activity must be designed into every-day habits. There must be opportunities and solutions that will have a long-lasting and sustainable impact on girls' lives. There is an assumption that it's only young boys from under-privileged backgrounds whose lives are turned around by sport, not girls. This is plainly not the case. Less privileged girls are the least able to access sport and the only way to ensure equality of access to sports is through school. **64% of girls will have quit sport by the time they reach puberty.**

Girls experience a uniquely complex arrangement of issues as they grow. They experience extreme bodily changes during puberty just at the time when involvement in sport is crucial for their health and self-esteem. But instead of it helping them, the way they currently experience sport leads to many girls feeling embarrassed, humiliated and isolated by it. Sports clothing, the communal changing rooms, the fear of how their body will react or cope; these issues must be addressed and fully understood by coaches and teachers. Girls should not be made to feel 'different' or 'othered' by this experience.

By age 14, one in four girls report experiencing high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to one in ten boys (MCS, 2018).

60% of girls aged 11-16 know a girl or young woman who has experienced a mental health problem.

62% of girls report having the lowest wellbeing compared to 38% of boys.

[Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls – Girls tell us how they feel about sport on Vimeo](#)

[Puberty & Sport: An Invisible Stage- Animation on Vimeo](#)

The different sports that girls can access has an impact in later life. Given the history of men dominating leadership positions, sport is designed around the requirements of boys, so it's not surprising that girls can become disengaged. Girls are steered towards the aesthetic activities such as gymnastics and swimming rather than team sports.

Football is our national sport with estimates suggesting 11 million people play the game in England of which only a small proportion are women. This is not a

natural phenomenon. **Post WW1 women's football attracted crowds of 53,000 but in 1921 women were banned from playing.** The impact of this is still being felt today and girls' football is only now beginning to recover. It is crucial that all schools offer football to girls. The FA ban and girls were given school detentions right through to the 1980s. Girls must have an easy pathway to continuing team sport as they grow into adulthood. And access to football must be accelerated.

Boys' sports tend to focus around sports that need little in the way of apparatus or organisation – a 'ball and a yard of grass' is all that's needed for a kick-about in the park. Netball and hockey, for many years the staple of girls' school sports, require nets, courts, sticks and protective equipment. Once they leave the structured environment of school or college, women opportunities for team sport diminish. And yet they want – and need – social activities and the wider benefits that team sports bring.

Boys need to grow up with an understanding of girls' natural strength and potential in sport too. Their attitude needs to be influenced. Our Daughters and Dad's programme helps fathers challenge their attitudes towards their girls' physicality.

Educational leaders must be committed to the value of sport and physical exercise to girls' development. It is a fundamental life skill and should be treated as such alongside core subjects. The Department for Education must ensure that teacher training includes an understanding of the specific needs of girls in sport.

3.

Encouragement is not the key factor. Barriers have to be removed, time, facilities and activities need to be available and the structures of society and sport must enable and support women. Women can suffer a loss of confidence as a result of conditioning and childhood experiences detailed above. But this is not just about self-confidence. Women need to be confident in the environment in which they exercise.

Women work longer hours than men and have less leisure time. UK ONS figures show that men have 5 more hours leisure time per week and women's leisure time is more fractured and combined with other tasks. They have few enablers and positive influencers in their lives, and women in lower socio-economic areas have limited or no spare money for paid activities. And yet most perinatal specific exercise classes, for example, are high cost and therefore not accessible to all women. Access is obviously strongly affected by affluence and this has to change. Wealth should not be a prerequisite for active and enjoyable activities. Women need access to affordable classes, gyms, pools and safe green spaces, and how a whole family exercises should be taken into account through childcare provision or adults and children being able to exercise together.

The gender gap in team sport (20%) is of great concern. Men use team sport as a way of socialising, connecting, sharing and doing business. But studies show that women are not as active as men in later life and are missing out on all the

health and social benefits of sport. Team sport builds the widest range of wider life skills and too many women are missing out on social and community experiences. And the absence of some of these skills, experiences and networks can deprive them of economic opportunities.

Boys and men have a wider range of sporting levels they can access. Men's football covers a casual kick-about through community games, 5-a-sides, 11-a-sides, work teams, non-league, through to elite. Women, essentially, have two choices in most sports; elite sport or community activity. And only equestrian sport has higher participation rates from women (Active Lives survey).

In light of Government naming physical activity as one of five legitimate reasons people could go out in the height of lockdown its importance was emphasised. The elevation of this as an essential part of daily life particularly resonated with women with 46% saying that it has become more of a priority in their life whilst 61% said they will put more effort into being fit and active after lockdown. This points to women feeling that lockdown rules have given them permission to allow themselves time to exercise.

4.

We support these priorities and would like to ensure that consideration is given to access to sport or exercise in educational institutions, prisons or hospitals.

There are significant gender disparities in the areas of mental and physical health, and these should be taken into account. For women and girls, critical life stages have particularly different impacts on physical and mental health. Exercise is a crucial factor in these health issues both as a preventative measure and a positive reducer.

R&D Funding

There is a considerable gender data gap when sports technology and apparatus is being designed. The calorie counts on treadmills, apps and smart watches are all based on male data. When VR headsets were designed the measurements used were all male. And AR glasses don't take into account female sizes either, leading to significant anomalies. Smart watch connections sit flat on a man's straight forearm but may give a less accurate reading on a woman due to the narrowing of the arm at the wrist.

Isometric exercise fatigues women less (relevant for post-injury rehabilitation) because men and women have different ratios of types of muscle fibre, but there is limited understanding of the difference because there is a limited number of published studies.

Research and development in sport science/technology should therefore ensure that women can fully benefit. Public funding should be dependent on women being considered in the design, test and use phases.

5. We have no comments to make regarding the data.

6.

The issues listed here affect many people. Misogyny is listed last yet potentially affects 51% of the population and much of it is so long-standing and accepted that it goes unnoticed. Far from diminishing, misogyny is on the rise, with organised social groups focused on it, and levels of abuse so high that virtually any woman in the public eye experiences it, leading to them avoiding attention or the public gaze. Women who succeed in sport pay a particularly high price. The threat of such attacks is a key factor in preventing women either from progressing in sport or if they do, from expressing their views beyond this.

Racist, homophobic and disability abuse can then add another layer and is prevalent for women in sport, who can suffer from double or triple discrimination due to multiple identities of race, gender, disability and sexual orientation. BAME women are likely to suffer both misogynistic and racist attacks and the impact can be devastating. One in five women have experienced or witnessed racism in their sport.

A safe environment must be created for women to be involved in sport and appear in the media, and for their roles and sports to be taken seriously. Girls and women should be inspired by role models; the current situation means the reverse may be happening, with girls more likely to be put off by the experience of those they admire. And male allies are crucial. Boys need to see women coaches and learn to respect women in sport from an early age.

The focus tends to be on elite sport and is in inverse proportion to the amount of abuse suffered at that level. Participants in grass roots activities are more likely to suffer abuse. And participants at community level, where they are statistically more likely to experience abuse, have no route. This is more problematic, and the law is their only avenue. Participants in sport at every level should know that they are protected and have a space to go to where concerns will be addressed, or incidents can be reported.

7.

There has been a lot of media focus around the issues facing young boys who suffer abuse in sport and its devastating and lasting impacts. This is terrible and must be addressed but it must also be remembered that girls are even more vulnerable to abuse and that this vulnerability continues into young adulthood and beyond. If girls cannot trust that they can play sport in safe environment, they will not participate and their opportunity for a healthy lifestyle may be lost. And they are far less likely to be active into adulthood.

Young people have a high dependency on their coaches and governing bodies for their progress. An independent sports ombudsman would be more likely to be trusted and participants would feel less vulnerable in raising issues. Protection is clearly needed for 16-18 year-olds, who are not protected from relationships with their coaches as schoolchildren are, and against coercive control at all ages.

8. In a recent BBC Survey, just 45.3% of women said they believe their governing body supports them equally, compared with male colleagues.

The funding of elite women's team sport is clearly inadequate. In the free market model of elite sport, those that earn the most can distribute the most; so while market values are based on television viewing there is a disparity between men's and women's sports. The structure and scheduling of sport favours men too, with the 'showcase' events dominating prime television slots. They attract more viewers but with more marketing money and media attention focused on these men's events, this is an inevitable consequence. If there is to be a genuinely level playing field, then there needs to be more, rather than equal, public money for women's sport. And public broadcasters have a responsibility to help level the field. Coverage of women's sport has doubled in recent years, but from a base of just 4%.

The most public argument is arguably that of parity in pay in elite pro-sport, with high-profile campaigns and legal cases resulting in some equal allocations of prize money.

Anya Alvarez, professional golfer:

"The root of the problem isn't what women are getting paid: it is the lack of foundation that they have to build from to capitalize on their talent. When we make equal pay the central part of the conversation, we miss all the smaller things that enable a system that hurts women's advancement in sports and their opportunity to generate equal revenue, and in return warrant equal pay. And when the marketing isn't there, it gives ammo to the usual critics who say: "See? They don't generate enough interest". The truth is, women's sports will not achieve parity if the barriers that keep them in the trenches remain. We can talk about equal pay all we want, but it doesn't matter until we start investing equally in how we market and promote these athletes."

There are broader issues around the need for a regulator. If a sports regulator were to exist, then it must have a role in ensuring that women and girls have equal opportunities and access routes to the sports they choose. And it should look at how new sports can be funded and developed, and routes for women to have careers in refereeing, coaching and in the administration of sport.

9.

Title IX is a US federal civil rights law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that receives federal money. This should be adopted in the UK and linked to public funding for sport.

10.

A cross-governmental approach to supporting the new Sport England plan and ensuring it can be successfully delivered should be prioritised.

29 January 2021