



FAIR PLAY FOR GIRLS

A REPORT BY THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON A FIT AND HEALTHY CHILDHOOD

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This Report was prepared by a Working Group of the All-Party Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood and we are grateful for the contributions of:

HELEN CLARK	Lead Author
PHIL ROYAL	APPG Secretariat
LISA ROBILLARD WEBB	APPG Secretariat
DR GERALD GRIGGS	The University Campus of Football Business
KAREN COOKE	UCEN Manchester
DR JACKIE DAY-GARNER	University of Central Lancashire
DR VANESSA KING	Association for Physical Education
STEVE CLAPPERTON	Youth Sport Trust
DR EMMA WHEWELL	University of Northampton
JACK EDDY	Public Policy Specialist
PROFESSOR FRASER BROWN	Leeds Beckett University
MARK BALCAR	StreetGames
DR DAMIEN FITZGERALD	Sheffield Hallam University
JOE LOWTHER	KICK
DR KRISTY HOWELLS	The University of Canterbury
DR LOUISA EDWARDS	The University Campus of Football Business
DR ALISON MURRAY	University of Stirling
DR PAMELA MURRAY	University of Worcester
RACHEL WILLIAMS	Women in Sport

Acknowledgement - Front Cover:

With acknowledgement to the artist Laura Callaghan for the image of the mural of Rachel Corsie on West North Street, Aberdeen.

Rachel Corsie is the captain of the Scotland women's team and plays for Aston Villa WFC. She has amassed more than 100 appearances for her national side.

Special thanks to Jack Eddy for telling us about this inspirational image.

THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP AND THE WORKING GROUP

The Working Group that produced this Report is a sub-group of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood.

The purpose of the APPG is to promote evidence-based discussion and produce reports on all aspect of childhood health and wellbeing including obesity, to inform policy decisions and public debate relating to childhood; and to enable communications between interested parties and relevant parliamentarians. Group details are recorded on the Parliamentary website at:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmallparty/190911/fit-and-healthy-childhood.htm>

The Working Group is chaired by Helen Clark, a member of the APPG secretariat. Working Group members are volunteers from the APPG membership with an interest in this subject area. Those that have contributed to the work of the Working Group are listed on the previous page.

The Report is divided into themed subject chapters with recommendations that we hope will influence active Government policy.

The Officers of the APPG are:

CHAIR

Steve McCabe MP

CO CHAIR

Baroness (Floella) Benjamin OBE

VICE CHAIRS

Diana Johnson MP, Lord McColl of Dulwich, Julie Elliot MP, Adam Holloway MP

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INTRODUCTION

'Women's sport has proven that it has the power to inspire people and positively impact lives.'

Holly Murdoch, FA Head of Operations for the Women's Professional Games,
30 October 2023.

On 23 December 2023, the UK Government backed the recommendations of former England and Great Britain professional footballer, Karen Carney in her independent review into the future of domestic women's football. Culture Secretary, Lucy Frazer pledged:

'We are completely committed to delivering equal access to sport for girls in schools, alongside an unprecedented £400 million investment in grassroots facilities outside of school.'

2023 ended on a high when Mary Earps' victory as the BBC Sports Personality of the Year notched up a consecutive hat trick in the history of the award, showing that far from 'bottling it' women's football and indeed, sport for women and girls was 'kicking on' with confidence. The future seemed bright indeed ---- but was that the whole story?

What cannot be denied is that the history of girls' sport bears testimony to the resilience, progress and sheer determination of female athletes throughout the world. From overcoming societal barriers to achieving unprecedented success, girls' sports have evolved into a powerful force for empowerment, equality and social change. However, this is set against a persistent backdrop of unequal provision and reward compared to what men and boys are accustomed to expect as their due. Gender inequality, limited resources and unequal pay continue to be reserved for the girls and in communities, schools and playgrounds in the UK's cities, towns and villages, the experience of many of them is woeful.

Too often (and especially in their teenage years) girls are deterred from physical activity and denied opportunities that might encourage them to make dreams of a sporting career a reality – or simply to see sport as an integral component of their daily lives. The Lionesses have made huge strides in smashing the barriers of prejudice and inequality and their determination to challenge stereotypes is not for themselves alone but on behalf of the generations of young women who will

succeed them. They are trailblazers but they are also women and participation in elite sport is as helpful as a lifebelt in a tsunami in the face of misogyny.

FIFA's action in banning former Spanish FA Head, Luis Rubiales from all football-related activity following his public humiliation of Spanish World Cup winning striker, Jenni Hermoso has been widely applauded but his grotesque behaviour tarnished Hermoso's enjoyment of her own superb achievement in a wonderful World Cup Women's Football final. It also sullied the event for all the girls and women worldwide who had followed the competition from start to finish. Similarly, Mary Earps had no sooner been crowned as BBC Sports Personality of the Year when she was trolled on social media by some famous male commentators, giving rise to a crushing 'put down' by Guardian writer, Marina Hyde:

'So what is it about the brilliant, victorious sportswoman Mary Earps that bovine men just can't abide?'

Opinion: The Guardian, 22nd December 2023

The Lionesses, by virtue of their excellence and unalloyed joy in their sport on view for all to see take no prisoners and have established new norms in their own image. They will continue to do so. Yet if their effect is to outlast their generation, the enthusiasm and interest that they have inspired must be harnessed to found a lasting legacy for the girls and young women who will come after them. Addressing funding disparities is a crucial step in establishing a more equitable playing field for female athletes. However, the young girl who 'switches off' from sport as soon as she hits puberty deserves nothing less than a revolution in the culture.

This is a daunting task and will entail challenging ingrained gender stereotypes day in and day out; championing inclusivity and diversity and fostering supportive environments where girls feel valued not despised, encouraged, not mocked and empowered to pursue their own sporting ambitions rather than reigning as unchallenged queens of the touchline.

Every day is an opportunity to 'change the game' for girls and young women and provide the support that they need to achieve their potential. The first step must be to listen to what *they* have to say and this report is for them.

Helen Clark
Lead Author

CHAPTER ONE: GIRLS AND SPORT: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The 2023 Women's Football World Cup was a landmark; showing just how much had been achieved in the women's game and by the same criteria, how much still remained undone. However, women commanding the pitch are neither a 21st nor a 20th century phenomenon. They clearly enjoyed a kick around in the sixteenth century:

*'A tyme there is for all, my mother often sayes,
When she, with skirts tuckt very hy, with girles at football playes.'*
Sir Philip Sidney: A Dialogue Between Two Shepherds, 1580

According to the diary kept by her jailor, Sir Francis Knollis, Mary Queen of Scots watched a game of football in 1568 during her imprisonment at Carlisle Castle.

Three hundred years later in 1863, Football Association (FA) rules were designed to deter pitch violence and protect women's safety and on 1 May 1881, Edinburgh was chosen as the venue for the first women's football match: England versus Scotland. Pitch invasions caused further fixtures to be abandoned but later on, a goal from Lily St Clair became the first recorded goal scored by a woman and by 1921 about 150 women's football clubs had been set up for competitive purposes.

However, on 5 December 1921, the FA called time, banning women's football and excluding them from professional pitches and facilities because *'the game of football is quite unsuitable for females and ought not to be encouraged.'* Registered referees were prohibited from officiating at women's games and for the next 50 years, girls and women were restricted to honing their skills in the local park.

It is extremely likely that the blanket ban was imposed because women's football had simply become too popular; exemplified by the Dick, Kerr Ladies FC of Preston. While the men were away at war, women were commanding the pitch and drawing huge crowds. A reported 53,000 spectators turned up to Goodison Park to watch the Dick, Kerr Ladies FC; more than the audience for the previous men's FA Cup final. Increased media coverage reached an all time high in the 2023 Women's World Cup when the England v China match produced at 53.9 million, the highest ever audience for a single match, but it is therefore true to say that an audience for women's football has always been there.

Knowing a woman's place to be on the pitch, the English Ladies Football Association (ELFA) was formalised on 12 December 1921. It became a driving force for women to encourage girls into football and proceeded from strength to strength until in 1969, the ban was lifted and women were freed to play on

grounds affiliated to the FA. In 1972, the Women's Football Association (WFA) held trials for the first international game between England and Scotland with England emerging as 3-2 winners at Ravenscraig Stadium, Greenock. The second international against France was on 22 April 1973 and 1984 saw the first European Championship in Women's Football.

Some members of the 1972 squad reunited to watch the Lionesses playing their 2023 World Cup final against Spain and 1972 squad goalkeeper, Sue Whyatt, was optimistic about the future:

'It was very emotional. I cried, we all did but I'm so proud of the girls. The Lionesses won the Euros and they are one of the top two teams in the world. That in itself is a huge achievement'

<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/aug/20/im-so-proud-of-the-girls-lionesses-squad-of-1972-celebrate-achievement-despite-final-loss>

However, despite the fact that the Lionesses are now paid the same to play for England as the men, at the FIFA World Cup, the prize fund for the women's teams was £86 million compared to £344 million for the men's teams. Similarly, Sarina Wiegman's outstanding achievement as manager of the England women's national team is all the more remarkable considering that the appointment of her first full time predecessor, Hope Powell, was only made in 1998.

Much has therefore been achieved, but much remains to be done before sport of any kind can say that it offers 'fair play for girls'. The legacy of the 2023 Lionesses in football for example, is counterbalanced by a weightier history of assumption, stereotyping and exclusion, often deriving from 'Victorian values' that have been and remain, remarkably resilient.

Britain and North America oversaw the development of 'sport' as an overwhelmingly male preserve, Guttman A, 1994, *'Games and Empires'*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Boys' public schools were lynchpins of a culture designed to foster a particular type of 'manliness' in which institutionalised and codified team games were seen both as essential components of the curriculum and 'character-building' tools in their own right. Qualities honed on the pitch became part of a value system above and beyond schooldays, McIntosh P, 1987. *'Sport in society'*. London: West London Press, and an entire romantic and idealistic sporting mythology evolved around qualities such as loyalty to team mates and institutions, bravery and feats of daring.

The 'cult of athleticism' involved educating young men to be leaders and was embedded within the Muscular Christianity movement which professed the moral benefits of physical exercise and sport, Mangan JA, 1981, *'Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian public school'*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In addition to its celebration of physical prowess, the cult of athleticism prized the ideal of gentlemanly conduct embodied in amateurism:

'Games playing in the boys' public schools provided the dominant image of masculine identity in sports and a model for their future development in Britain and throughout the world.'

Hargeaves J, 1994, *'Sporting Females'*, London: Routledge

The male sporting mythology, reeking of moral judgement was reflected in literature such as *'Tom Brown's Schooldays'*, Rees C and Miracle A, 2000, *'Education and sports'* in J. Coakley and E. Dunning, *'Handbook of Sports Studies'* London: Sage and the Duke of Wellington claimed that his victory against Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo was *'fought on the playing fields of Eton'*. The poem *'Vitae Lampada'* by Clifton College 'old boy' Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938) crafts a straitjacket of manliness, patriotism, honour and sacrifice and leaves no room for girls and women:

*There's a breathless hush in the close tonight
Ten to make and the match to win
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play, and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his captain's hand on his shoulder smote
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

*The sand of the desert so sodden red-
Red with the wreck of the square that broke
The gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed its banks,
And England's far and Honor a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks-
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

*This is the word that year by year,
While in her place the school is set,
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.*

*This they all with joyful mind
And bear through life Eke a torch in flame, falling fling to the host behind-
'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'*

Professional sport grew apace in the early years of the 20th century including the slower development and innovation of women's sport rooted in the English middle classes, Tranter N, 1998, *'Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750-1914'*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Progress was accompanied by persistently gendered assumptions and discourse belonging to the Victorian era when true femininity was supposedly characterised by an attendant frailty; again reflected in the literature of the time (Dickensian characters Dora Spenlow and Little Nell) and medical debate about the benefit or otherwise of physical activity to the delicate female form, Theberge N, 2000, *'Gender and Sport'* in J Coakley and E Dunning *'Handbook of Sports Studies'*, London: Sage. In practical terms, activities were modified to 'suit' a woman's physique such as running shorter distances in athletics, Cahn S, 1995, *'Coming on strong: Gender and sexuality in twentieth-century women's sport'*, Cambridge; Harvard University Press.

In 1896, the first modern Olympic Games took place minus the participation of women, due to the insistence of founder, Pierre de Coubertin, that doing anything more active than watching would cause damage to their health. The door creaked ajar in 1900 when women were permitted to participate in sports deemed socially-acceptable (largely the preserve of middle and upper-class women with clothing and exertion levels to match) such as archery, equestrian, golf, sailing and tennis. Women were not allowed to be members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) until 1981 and it was not until the 2012 London Olympics of that all sports had women competitors. However, a gap in the number of medals awarded remained.

An ambivalence in which a largely Victorian view of femininity with moral implications for conduct and 'behaviour' became mixed with 'scientific' perceptions of women's physical capacity has continued to determine the nature of competitive sport for women and girls.

The culture has been predominantly imposed by men and internalised by middle-class women, inculcated with bourgeois norms. It has served only to confirm differences between the sexes described as 'natural', Theberge N, 1989, *'Women's athletics and the myth of female frailty'* in J Freeman *'Women: A feminist perspective'* (4th edition) Mountain View: Mayfield. A modern-day example of how this practice perpetuates disparity is still to be found in elite tennis where men play five set matches and women only three sets in grand slam events. As these

prestigious matches attract more televised coverage and visibility, an image of *'culturally exalted masculinity'* via sport becomes embedded, *Connell R, 1995, 'Masculinities'* Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Against a background of received prejudice, it has remained to individuals to change the course of history; notably Billie Jean King who formed the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) in 1973 and Martina Navratilova and Serena Williams who have pushed the boundaries of what women can be seen to achieve in their sport. In 2022, the US women's soccer team won their fight for equal pay.

Attitudinal indoctrination (conscious or unconscious) together with an accompanying ambivalence begins at school. A 20th century initiative to adopt a greater openness towards bodily functions is illustrated by the fact that in school, discussion of menstrual cycles is now a familiar component of children and young people's education. However, this is accompanied by a parallel unspoken notion held by society that girls are 'delicate' and should not get 'dirty' by partaking in brave or daring activities.

Such stereotyping undermines girls' confidence; they are exposed to less physical activity from a young age and the limited expectations of them lead to them being disadvantaged. The disparity is life-long, affecting their interactions with sports, often leading to stereotyping around puberty and also barriers when girls' bodies change. Throughout the menstrual cycle, 71% of girls do not exercise and the national news coverage of fact that in 2023, the Lionesses and female tennis players at Wimbledon, were permitted for the first time, to wear dark shorts to protect against visible period leakage is indicative of the double standards to which women in elite sports are subjected. Again, the role of Heather Watson in publicising the fact that women tennis players have periods has allowed changes to be made in accordance.

The issue of sports kit in itself is an historical source of discrimination faced by girls and women from school right through to elite sports competition. According to the organisation Women in Sport:

'Just 36% of girls aged 11-18 wear a sports bra when participating in PE or sport at school. This has a negative impact on their experience of sport, with more than two-thirds (69%) admitting they cannot jump or run about freely and 72% than they feel self-conscious about movement or bounce.'

<https://womeninsport.org/news/only-a-third-of-secondary-school-girls-wear-a-sports-bra-for-pe/>

In the 2023 World Cup:

'Much has been written about the players who will be missing this tournament because of ACL injuries, such as England's Leah Williams and Beth Mead'
<https://inews.co.uk/sport/football/magda-eriksson-men-football-boots-injuries-female-players-change-2437022>

The fact that some women players wore the new 'Phantom Luna' boot made headlines because it is the first boot designed for Nike for female players.

The issue of poorly-fitting kit was publicised by the work of the UK Women and Equalities Select Committee in March 2024 and the comment by Committee Chair, Caroline Nokes MP, can be used both to encapsulate the entire argument about the historical positioning of women and girls in sport and offer a direction for the future:

'While there are positive signs of progress.....the sector needs to evolve quicker when interest in women's sport is soaring.'

Much has been achieved. There is much more still to do.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SCHOOL OFFER: PROVISION FOR GIRLS

For many girls, involvement in PE and sport at school offers a first (maybe a sole) opportunity to be physically active. The school environment is potentially the only place where some will experience a variety of sporting activities and it is vital that this results in them feeling the pure joy that participation in sport can bring. Schools have a unique opportunity to contribute to closing the gender gap in physical activity and enjoyment that already exists by the time girls begin primary school.

PE and the curriculum have been traditionally embedded with gender bias and gender stereotypes, leading to girls feeling marginalised and excluded which can impact their participation in sport whilst at school and subsequently. What is needed is a culture that is inclusive, inspiring and diverse and a supportive environment in which they can truly thrive, embracing *'powerful, athletic, fit and healthy femininities'*, Azzarito L and Katzew A, 2010, *'Performing identities in physical education'*, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 81, pp.25-37.

Physical education and sport teachers therefore have a wider duty to support girls to develop a critical stance towards the ways in which the media and societal expectation can influence their own body image within the perceived social construction of body 'ideals.' Ultimately all girls and women should be enabled to celebrate what their bodies can do rather than feel shame and embarrassment because of what their bodies are.

Much discussion around girls' experience of PE and sport at school is centred on secondary education. In primary school, there are some marked differences; boys and girls are often taught together, receiving a diverse curriculum offer that can be engaging for both. An England Football report found that 72% of schools provided equal football coaching, demonstrating that when the sexes are taught together, team sports are prioritised and there is more equality than when provision becomes gendered at secondary level. However, 'gender appropriateness' is still evident in the provision of extra-curricular activities where girls and boys replicate the pattern evident within secondary schooling, Green K, 2008, *'Understanding physical Education'* London: Sage.

Making definitive value judgements between provision at primary and secondary level would be simplistic.

Primary school teachers with responsibility for school sport and physical activity are often not specialists and lack confidence in their ability to facilitate gender equality in participation. Teacher training experiences remain gendered with little time for reflection, Flintoff A and Scraton S, 2006, *'Girls and physical education'* in

Kirk D, Macdonald D and O'Sullivan M (Eds) *'The handbook of physical education'*, London; Sage, 767-783. As a consequence, many teachers are compelled to revert to their own school-day experience; usually of a dated and unsatisfactory nature causing them by default, to fall back upon inherited and gendered styles of subject delivery such as command and practice for men, Green K, 2008, *'Understanding Physical Education'*, London: Sage.

Sport England's 2023 *'Active Lives Survey Results'* revealed that only 56% of primary school teachers felt sufficiently equipped to deliver PE; mostly because of a lack of focus and prioritisation within their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses. The Association for Physical Education (AfPE) has advocated a radical increase in the amount of appropriate training delivered to primary school teachers through extended and far more intensive ITT and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) plus ring-fenced funding in every primary school for guaranteed access to a primary PE specialist. The Youth Sport Trust has shown that PE loses time and facilities in comparison with other subjects because it is not included in the core curriculum. As children get older, the situation becomes dire because of a parallel reduction in extra curricular opportunities and PE teaching time.

The Youth Sport Trust *'Our Girls Active'* programme:

<https://www.youthsporttrust.org/programmes/targeted-interventions/girls-active>

has been recognised by the Women and Equalities Select Committee as a source of best available evidence, Women and Equalities Committee, 2024, *'Health barriers for girls and women in sport'* and has worked extensively with school practitioners across all stages and phases to equip them to understand the barriers, perceptions and motivations of girls in each school's own setting. The *'Our Girls Active'* programme is designed to support educators to take positive action via a framework that is designed to underpin effective practice in encouraging girls to be physically active.

The programme's six principles for each school's policy and practice are:

- A long-term approach to engaging girls
- Placing developing self-confidence at the heart of physical education
- Making physical education and sport relevant to girls' lives
- Recognising the power of friends to drive progress
- Developing role models for the future
- Empowering girls to design and deliver physical education and sport.

However, centuries of societal stereotyping and conditioning will not be overridden without resilience and persistence. The scale of the problem is demonstrated by the fact that as early as 12 months old, boys are more physically active than girls, *'Predictors of objectively measured physical activity in 12-month-*

old infants: A study of linked birth cohort data with electronic health records, Haider Raza et al:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30729733>

The pattern continues into the transition from early years to school, and when they reach Key Stage 1, 56% of boys are sufficiently physically active compared with 46% of girls, Sport England, 2023, *'Active Lives Survey Results'*:

<https://www.sportengland.org/news-and-inspiration/childrens-activity-levels-hold-firm-significant-challenges-remain>

Active Lives Survey data show that in Key Stage 1, 67% of boys report 'loving' sport compared with 56% of girls. The survey suggests that enjoyment levels may not be entirely linked to pupils' views on competency. 82% of boys at Key Stage 1 said that they find sport easy compared with 77% of Key Stage 1 girls. Factors other than competence are colouring the overall level of enjoyment and it has been suggested that one of these is the increased requirement for primary-age pupils to wear a uniform which may restrict physical activity for girls.

'Dr Esther van Sluijs, senior author and MRC investigator, said: 'Girls might feel less confident about doing things like cartwheels and tumbles in the playground, or riding a bike on a windy day, if they are wearing a skirt or dress. Social norms and expectations tend to influence what they feel they can do in these clothes.

Unfortunately, when it comes to promoting physical health, that's a problem.'

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/feb/15/school-uniforms-may-be-barrier-to-physical-activity-among-younger-girls>

By the time girls have reached secondary school, participation in school physical education has dropped and their motivation has decreased, Bracco E et al, 2019, *'A case study of disengaged adolescent girls' experiences with teaching games for understanding in physical education'*, Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education, 10(3), pp.207-225:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/25742981.2019.1632724>

The Youth Sport Trust (YST), *'Our Girls Active'* as above, found that the biggest barriers to girls being active at school were a lack of confidence, having their period, other people watching them and worries about their appearance with 59% of girls indicating that they preferred 'girls-only' physical education. The YST findings showed that 7% of girls never engaged in physical education while they had their period and stressed that it was important for teachers to be empathetic and sensitive about menstruation.

Girls surveyed wanted more flexibility about participating at this time and would feel less self-conscious with a wider range of kit options being made available to them both during their period and in general when participating in physical

education. They also disliked being made to change in front of others although the fact that this does not apply to such an extent when engaging in sporting activities outside school indicates that the school environment itself is responsible for creating embarrassment and self consciousness.

Prior to puberty, there are no sufficient physical differences between boys and girls in order to require gender separation for safety reasons. However, even at this stage, society stereotyping, reinforced by traditional and modern media outlets already creates gender segregation in mixed-gender activities which can result in boys dominating the activities. Non-PE specialist teachers at primary school often lack the knowledge and confidence to prevent this and can make inadvertent contributions to gender stereotyping through language used and recognition given. At the onset of puberty, gender stereotyping in mixed gender activities is intensified.

The dominant message in the media is that girls should have 'feminine' bodies and the requirement to be slender owes much to the persistence of Victorian conditioning (frailty). A tension exists between wishing to appear conventionally 'attractive' and the sweaty, muscular image attached to active women, Cockburn C and Clarke G, 2002, *'Everybody's looking at you! Girls negotiating the 'femininity deficit' they incur in physical education'*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 25: 651-65.

Girls must be enabled to feel empowered to challenge the media rhetoric and embrace '*powerful, athletic, fit and healthy femininities*', Azzarito, as above and it is therefore a responsibility for physical education and sport teachers to encourage girls to think critically and challenge stereotypical ideas.

Adolescent girls' perception of their body and sense of self is lower than that of boys at the same age. Girls who have a higher regard for their body are likely to have a positive perception of physical education describing it as '*more stimulating*', Kerner C. et al, 2018, *'Body dissatisfaction, perceptions of competence, and lesson content in physical education'*, *Journal of School Health*, 88 (8), pp. 576-582. doi:10.1111/josh.12644.

Feelings of self-worth linked to body image can be life-long for girls, Ropers-Huilman et al, 2016, *'Embodied minds; college women's experience and the panopticon of higher education'*, *NASPA Journal about Women in Higher Education*, 9(2), pp. 1154-13 doi:10.1080/19407882.2016.1100384. There is an opportunity for physical education to help girls to better understand and feel comfortable with their bodies through a school curriculum that emphasises cooperation and self expression and supports them to explore the potential of movement.

To a large extent, traditional sporting programmes are still dominant in the school secondary curriculum, Griggs G and Ward G, 2012, *'Physical Education in the UK: Disconnections and Reconnections'*, Curriculum Journal 23(2): 2017-229, including gendered groupings and indoor and outdoor activities determined by season. Girls Active data shows boys' agreement that *'some sports are for boys and some sports are for girls'* which intensifies as they age, with 49% of Key Stage 4 boys concurring with this statement. However, at the same age, just 44% of girls consider that they are afforded the same opportunities as boys in school to do the sports and activities that they want. Stephanie Hillborne, OBE, Chief Executive Officer of Women is Sport has said:

'Girls aren't born under-confident, they are held back by gender stereotyping..... We know that sport can teach pivotal life skills like resilience, courage and self-belief, but far too many girls are missing out as they've been pigeon-holed into what society expects of them.'

<https://www.twinkl.co.uk/news/girls-and-sport-new-research-on-gender-stereotyping>

On 8 March 2023, International Women's Day, following a campaign launched by the Lionesses squad and the FA, the Government announced new standards for equal access to sports, emphasising that girls and boys should be offered the same choices during PE and extracurricular time in schools. Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak said;

'We want schools to...give every girl the opportunity to do the same sports as boys, as well as provide a minimum of two hours of PE. This means every child can benefit from regular exercise.'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/school-sports-given-huge-boost-to-level-the-playing-field-for-next-generation-of-lionesses>

However, the cycle of exclusion and marginalisation perpetuated by the weight of a history characterised by misogyny and sexism will not be readily overcome. Change will only occur if there is a conscious effort from all stakeholders to challenge the embedded gendered norms and stereotypes and to promote an equitable, diverse environment where all girls can thrive and succeed; affording them the opportunity for autonomy over their own curriculum choices and to feel welcomed, supported and above all, that in sport and PE they simply 'belong'.

The experience of girls in fee-paying schools however, can differ at every level both internally and externally from that of their counterparts in the maintained sector. The opportunities within these schools often allow greater flexibility in timetabling to enable students to experience a balanced approach to their athletic

development and their academic studies, allowing girls to select which sports they wish to focus on competitively. At times, this can involve schools replacing general PE lessons with specific sports that girls choose for competitive purposes so that they have much greater autonomy to pursue the activities that they enjoy.

Within the independent sector, a body of support is available to girls during their time at school and also after they leave through alumni organisations. These networks allow access to an extensive level of support to girls from mentors and role models which can promote their athletic development. The resultant impact of this dichotomy is the level of inequity between girls at fee-paying schools and those at state schools; demonstrated by the statistics of medallists at international events. Girls at state schools encounter far more obstacles and enjoy far less opportunity to access the assistance, encouragement and resources that they need to become successful.

At any and every school, girls should be empowered to thrive within an environment that leads to life-long participation in sport and physical activity – at a level determined by each girl herself. If the cycle of exclusion, marginalisation and misogyny is not addressed, they will be deprived of the numerous benefits associated with PE, physical activity and sport. In turn this can impact girls' physical and mental health and wellbeing while denying them opportunities for personal growth and the development of leadership skills.

Unless this situation is addressed, society itself will be the loser.

CHAPTER THREE: ELITE SPORT, LOCAL AUTHORITIES, VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS AND OTHERS: THEIR ROLE IN PROMOTING AND FACILITATING SPORTING OPPORTUNITY FOR GIRLS

Attracting more girls to participate in sport and physical activity demands a 'team effort' involving the cooperation and collaboration of different organisations and concerns. The good news is that many have already signed up to the task; less encouraging is the fact that there are multiple hurdles to overcome before real progress can be made.

The Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation; a foremost advocate for girls in sport has identified some of the main barriers to involvement including:

- Lack of transport
- Personal safety concerns
- Lack of (access to) quality facilities and opportunities
- Season/Climate:

<https://www.wsff.org.uk/content/women-and-sport-barriers-and-recommendations/>

Specific barriers exist for ethnic minority women, such as religious and cultural issues. The traditional view that 'a woman's place' is in the home as the primary carer and time-honoured family responsibilities take priority may prevent participation in sport. Similarly, religious prohibitions such as requiring women to be covered at all times and for unmarried women to shun free association with men may also inhibit girls joining mixed sessions, Shibili S, Gumber A, Ramchandani G, *'Provision of tackling racism and racial inequality in sport – data gathering and analysis services'*, pp. 1-2).

Sport at its best is a unifying activity but the exclusion of girls can make it a pernicious tool of discrimination. At present, thousands are missing out on the chance to discover their talents, build their confidence and boost their mental and physical wellbeing – all proven benefits of regular participation in sport at any level. Sadly, the route to success in elite sport for many women and girls begins and ends at the very first base: participation.

The mission of StreetGames (via their delivery model, 'Doorstep Sport') is to support community organisations to make sport enjoyable and accessible to those who might never have considered themselves to be 'sporty.'

Doorstep Sport uses five 'rights':

- Sport delivered in the right style

- Sport delivered in the right location
- Sport delivered at the right price
- Sport delivered at the right time
- Sport delivered by the right people:

<https://www.streetgames.org/research-and-insights/lessons-of-doorstep-sport/>

Doorstep Sport works through a network of over 1,600 local community organisations; from sports clubs and community groups to housing associations, leisure trusts and local authorities. Its particular responsibility is to create opportunities for girls from disadvantaged communities.

The award-winning StreetGames programme 'Us Girls', found in '*Us Girls Insight Report 2023*', targeted 'hardest-to-reach' female participants, working from the proven premise that outcomes for girls and young women are most auspicious when supported by local organisations in local communities.

For some, a 'safe space' in the 'right place' would be a female-only session for girls and young women delivered in a friendly and informal style that allows friendship bonds to develop and flourish. Anxieties and the social pressures of adolescence can cause some girls to switch off from sport in secondary school even if they have enjoyed it during the primary years.

StreetGames works to instil girls with confidence, building their 'sporting capital' in a way that enables them to make positive choices and acquire a sporting habit for life. The attraction of the offer might be enhanced by incorporating music and food into physical activity sessions with the aim of making the entire experience vibrant, varied and welcoming so that girls can branch out into different sports, share experiences with new friends and feel that they belong.

In StreetGames' '1,000 Young Voices' research gives further insight into girls' relationship with sport and physical activity:

<https://www.streetgames.org/research-and-insights/1000-young-voices-research/>

While 67% of girls said that they enjoy taking part in sport/physical activity and 67% say they would even like to do more, 37% observed that the cost-of-living crisis had meant that they were taking part in less. 47% of girls said that they had previously felt discriminated against when doing sport for physical activity and the main reasons given for perceived discrimination were:

- Being a girl (35%)
- Ethnic background (10%)
- Having a disability (85)
- Sexual/gender identity (5%).

A key element of StreetGames' ongoing work has involved supporting local projects such as a yoga and mindfulness pilot together with a variety of community organisations in the North West and Yorkshire:

<https://www.streetgames.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Yoga-and-Mindfulness-Pilot-Report.pdf>

In 2021-22, StreetGames and SEWSCAP (South East and Mid Wales Collaborative Construction Framework) combined on a collaborative Peer Research and Social Action Project in five low-income communities throughout South East Wales:

www.streetgames.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Us-Girls-Wales-Peer-Research.pdf

Five teams of entrepreneurial young people from across Wales secured almost £80,000 of investment to deliver new physical and sporting activity sessions designed to encourage more women and girls to participate in sport and physical activity.

One beneficiary was the Valleys Gymnastics Academy (VGA), a community gymnastics club, where peer researchers Olivia, Mia, Carys, Charlie and Maddy (club athletes, young leaders and coaches) investigated ways in which to attract more girls. They secured funding for weekly multi-sport sessions led by fully-qualified staff and coaches.

StreetGames' Us Girls approach aims to:

- Deliver a year-round Doorstep Sport option in every under-served community, giving women and girls access to safe spaces, supportive environments, trusted adults, positive female role models and a tailored sport and physical activity offer
- Develop a highly-skilled community and voluntary sector workforce that understands the unique barriers and motivations faced by young women and girls in under-served communities and ensures that their needs are met
- Work to increase the representation of females in coaching, volunteering and leadership roles within the StreetGames' network
- Work to establish pathways into and from Doorstep Sport that enable girls to sustain their participation in sport and physical activity and adopt healthy habits for life.

The work is underpinned by the conviction that to address the gender gap in sport and physical activity, the voices of women and girls themselves must be at the heart of those efforts.

A report by Women in Sport '*Daring to Dream – The Gender Dream Deficit in Sport*' has tracked how the increased visibility of elite women's sport has inspired girls.

However, the latest data shows that despite the success of the Lionesses and netball's Vitality Roses in summer 2023, the overall number of girls aspiring to play elite sport actually declined by 2% compared with similar findings 12 months previously:

<https://womeninsport.org/news/girls-are-still-unable-to-dream-of-reaching-the-top-in-sport>

Despite the increased visibility of women in elite sport, 82% of girls still believe that it is not taken as seriously as men's. They are additionally hampered by a lack of funding and opportunity and the ever-present gender stereotyping leading 35% of girls to believe that they are not expected to be good at sport, compared with a mere 4% of boys. The blatant public flaunting of unashamed misogyny following Spain's triumph in the 2023 Women's World Cup had a deep effect on the way girls feel about the treatment of female athletes, encapsulated by the thoughts of a 15-year-old girl:

'Typically, a man took all the media attention away from the women's amazing achievements.'

There is a world-weary, cynical and demoralised sense that 'the men will ruin it somehow.'

Women in Sport CEO, Stephanie Hilborne said:

'As children we are all asked what we want to be when we grow up. For most boys they will aspire to be a successful footballer, but generations of little girls have been denied this classic dream.....We are determined to challenge negative narratives around women in sport, fight against misogyny through policy change and work to change stereotypes so that all girls feel they belong in sport – and boys make them feel welcome. We aren't prepared to sit back and watch misogyny and gender stereotyping stifle girls' dreams.'

IN 1974, Billie Jean King founded the Women's Sports Foundation which is committed to ensuring that all girls and women enjoy equal access to the lifelong benefits afforded by sport and physical activity.

The Women's Sport Foundation's research paper '*Keeping Girls in the Game*':
https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/articles_and_report/keeping-girls-in-the-game/

analyses how and why girls enter sport, why some drop out and others persist. The checklist below shows what can and must be prioritised if future generations are to make ephemeral dreams a reality:

1. Disparities in participation and dropout are influenced by gender, ethnicity and race, household income and locality
2. Parents play multiple roles in supporting or hindering girls' participation in sport and improving parental engagement and involvement in their child's sports participation can reduce girls' higher rate of drop-out
3. Gender stereotypes in sport persist, must be faced and addressed. The lack of support and teasing that girls endure from their peers can result in heightened awareness of appearance and self-consciousness while playing sport
4. The provision of role models is particularly important for girls and there is also a continued shortage of females on the coaching staff as well as in other prominent administrative roles within sport organisations
5. Sport can help build positive body image and girls should be encouraged to take pride in being physically strong and celebrating the capabilities of their own bodies
6. The role of the coach is extremely important for both sexes and those who drop out are more likely to have liked their coach only 'a little' or 'not at all'
7. Some girls live for competition but others enjoy sport for the pure fun of it. Multiple sport options should be available for those who have other motivations for engaging than forging a route to the top in a single sport
8. Maintaining a love of sport amidst competing interests such as social opportunity is key to continuous participation and the support given should ensure that community outreach, positive social experiences, character educational and academic encouragement are built into the sporting offer
9. Transportation, cost and lack of access form barriers to many girls creating social inequality and these issues are often particularly prevalent in low-income and ethnically-diverse communities
10. There is a clear need to educate parents about the academic benefits of participation. Sports involvement has been consistently shown to support all aspects of educational achievement, including positive academic self concepts, a positive attitude towards schoolwork and ultimately higher academic aspiration and attainment.

In January 2015, Sport England launched a nationwide campaign called '*This Girl Can*':

<https://www.sportengland.org/funds-and-campaigns/this-girl-can>

with the aim of celebrating active women and getting all women and girls moving, regardless of shape, size and ability. Local Government has a key responsibility in such initiatives and the national campaign worked through local partners. This project is now under the direct management of Leeds City Council via Active

Leeds. 'Leeds Girls Can' encourages bespoke approaches to stimulate activity (some virtual) and thus increase participation levels:

<https://active.leeds.gov.uk/womenandgirls>

The *#TimeTogether* campaign established by Women in Sport aims to encourage mothers (or other significant women in a girl's life) and their teenage daughters to try new activities together. Women in Sport have documented the issues preventing young women from remaining active after their schooldays are over and have focused on mothers and/or female figures as part of the solution. 71% of women undergoing menopause say that they want to be more active at this time and 48% of teenage girls say that their mothers, aunts and female role models encourage them to be active. It is a solution that can work for both age groups:

<https://womeninsport.org/creating-change/campaigns/timetogether>

For several years, Brent Cross Town has worked with Women in Sport for the charity's annual October *#TimeTogether* campaign. Throughout half-term week, Brent Town stages a variety of activities for women and girls from football to yoga, meditation and wellbeing walks. All activities are suitable for beginners and are led by female instructors. The activities are intended to enable more women and girls to experience the joy and bonding experience that sport can give as well as the many mental and physical benefits:

<https://brentcrosstown.co.uk/stories/free-half-term-events>

'Muslim Girls Fence' is a joint project collaboration between Maslaha and British Fencing aiming to facilitate spaces at a grassroots level for Muslim girls and women to challenge assumptions and narratives relating to their gender, racial, religious and other identities through both physical and creative methods. Fencing has traditionally been seen as an elitist sport, reserved for individuals from privileged white backgrounds but Muslim Girls Fence physically confronts the stereotypes of fencers while also working to skewer society's misconceptions about Muslim women; a group who face complex discrimination on the basis both of faith and gender.

This combined Maslaha/British Fencing initiative uses the sport not only to improve physical fitness and instil self confidence in young Muslim women but also to develop their resilience and challenge society's expectations of them. The project encourages non-Muslim girls and women to participate as both organisations believe that dispelling harmful misconceptions of what it is to be a Muslim is relevant to people of all backgrounds.

Muslim Girls Fence runs in schools and community organisations but has also fed into policy-level discussion at London City Hall and wider sport and inclusion programmes with Sport England. It has allowed a trusted space to be created that

could be used also to explore other local issues focusing on identity, wellbeing and civic engagement; showing the tremendous reach that sport and physical activity can have outside its immediate sphere and demonstrating just how important it is that girls and women should be centrally involved and participating at every level.

CHAPTER FOUR: BARRIERS, BRICKBATS AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Despite the fact that sport has much to offer girls nationally and internationally, there continue to be acute barriers in the UK that must be addressed to increase girls' participation, engagement and enjoyment. A study by Women in Sport cited reasons for the depletion in interest including a fear of being judged (68%) and a lack of confidence (61%):

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/mar/07/uk-girls-lose-interest-in-sport-as-teenagers-women-in-sport-survey>

The report stated: *'Worryingly, girls lose their love of sport and exercise during teenage years, and this presents a significant psychological barrier throughout life'* and CEO Stephanie Hilborne commented:

'Teenage girls are not voluntarily leaving sport, they are being pushed out as a consequence of deep-rooted gender stereotypes. We must all do more to reverse this trend and not continue to accept this as inevitable.'

Gender stereotyping does not suddenly afflict girls once they reach adolescence and their early teenage years and they do not 'catch it' in the manner of an infectious disease once they engage in organised sporting activities at school or other settings designed for the purpose. Clear patterning emerges at a much earlier stage and can be found in the play behaviour of very young children. Girls have less freedom than boys, are discouraged from using external 'wild' areas, engage more in 'functional play' and spend more time playing at home than boys.

A study of girls and boys playing, Brown F, 2014, *'Play and Playwork: 101 Stories of Children Playing'* Maidenhead: Open University Press, found that when girls were playing on equipment in local playgrounds, their athletic prowess was the equivalent of boys of the same age but their tendency was to stop as soon as any boys arrived. They would then stand around watching while the boys showed off acts of physical prowess that were the same as those performed by girls in the previous half hour when they thought they had no audience. The boys were no better at these physical acts than the girls yet the social pressures towards gender stereotypical behaviour were presumably too great for the girls to challenge. On neighbourhood playgrounds, the girls simply walked off when the boys arrived.

By contrast the 'playwork' model employed in adventure playgrounds is rooted in an understanding that children learn and develop while they are playing; is not dependent on fixed equipment and is characterised by environments that are safe, secure and flexible so that children can create (and possibly destroy and re-create) their own play environments according to their particular needs. Playworkers

adopt a non-judgemental acceptance of children as children rather than 'boy' and 'girls' and relate to the children with an attitude of 'unconditional positive regard'. Playwork runs counter to the stereotyping that confronts girls in their daily lives and affects their attitude to physical activity many years before adolescence and puberty.

The gender stereotyping that adversely impacts girls' participation in and enjoyment of sport and physical activity is historically present at every stage of their lives. Very young children are socialised into gender expectations and develop fixed notions of what is and what is not acceptable. Cultural ideals of gender from society become embedded and from these, expectations for men and women develop. Examples include expectations of a slim body shape for women combined with an assumption of caring responsibilities contrasted with physical strength and a role as a provider for men.

When girls do not behave in what is regarded as an acceptable set of 'girl' ways they are labelled 'boys' as indicated by the nickname of 'tomboy' which is positioned as a 'phase' that will pass. The dominant expectations of acceptable 'feminine' behaviour are often exclusionary and reduce the life chances of girls, leading to the inequalities still identified by the World Economic Forum, *'Global Gender Gap Report 2022: Insight Report'* and The House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee Report, 2023, *'Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings'*. Against such a backdrop, the doubts and uncertainties felt by girls deriving from personal lived experience are understandably intensified when they observe the ways in which girls and women who compete in elite sport are treated by media outlets.

The BBC Elite British Sportswomen's Survey conducted by BBC Sport has revealed that almost a third of women engaged in elite sport are regularly subjected to online abuse on social media channels. The survey was sent to 1,068 women from 39 different sports and received 537 responses:

<https://theweek.com/womens-sport/107759/bbc-sport-survey-sportswomen-social-media-trolls>

The nature of the abuse inevitably hones in on appearance and is frequently sexist and racist. One woman reported that after a poor performance, an online troll said that she was *'not really British'*. Darts player, Deta Hedman, said that she had suffered racial abuse and was told *'I hope you die of cancer'* and a female jockey who suffered a fall whilst competing was simply informed by a man that *'I hope the horse was ok and not you'*.

Some of the other findings are below:

- 30% (160) have been trolled on social media – up from 145 in 2015
- 795 are conscious of their body image
- 20% (109) either experienced or witnessed racism in their sport
- 86% (460) earn less than £30,000 per annum from their sport
- 65% (347) experienced sexism in their sport but only 10% reported it
- 36% (191) do not feel supported by their club/governing body when they wish to start a family or add to it and continue to compete.

A collaborative research survey between the Universities of Durham, Stirling, Chester and Bournemouth has exposed alarming trends of gender-based violence and toxic-fan behaviour on mainstream social media platforms. The research team analysed comments in response to posts on the official TikTok accounts of Manchester United and Burnley football clubs. All posts about female players contained sexist content and some were aggressively misogynistic. The researchers studied the responses to 417 videos about the women's teams that were posted on the clubs' accounts. Collectively, over 70 million people viewed the videos and 59,000 chose to comment.

The results reveal a disturbing level of gender-based violence across four key strands:

- A demand for male-only space: a belief that the club should only share posts about their male players
- Misogyny: aggressive comments, showing hatred of and animosity towards women
- Sexism: belittling the female players' skills and mocking the fact that women play football professionally
- Sexualisation of women: lurid comments about their appearance, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire or activity.

The comments were being 'liked' by other users and thus spawning further disparaging remarks. They appeared to be left unchecked by the clubs at the time making it very clear that accounts were not being reviewed regularly for misogynistic or sexualised content. The danger of this lack of monitoring is that such exchanges become part of a 'tone' towards women that is deemed acceptable to clubs and their followers.

The researchers hoped that the study would prompt a 'wake-up' call to football clubs so that they would address the longstanding issues of toxic-fan behaviours and take positive action to bring a more respectful online culture towards women on behalf of the clubs' fans.

Professor Mariann Hardey said that the data collection had raised pronounced issues of online trauma and abuse for the research team and added:

'We were not initially prepared for the vitriol and targeted abuse that we found. As a team, the study allowed us to raise concerns in a safe space, but this reflects a vulnerable space for professional women sports players who are easy to target and attack.'

Dr Emma Kavanagh, Associate Professor in Post Psychology and State Sport at the University of Bournemouth thought that the global rise in profile and popularity of women's football was very welcome but:

'We have found that a toxic culture among so-called fans is still able to thrive, and the fact it can appear on mainstream platforms and official club channels is particularly concerning.'

Misogyny and gender-based hatred is not confined to social media outlets; nor are women and girls who engage in elite sport the sole victims. The number of women sport writers may have risen in recent years but that does not mean that a seat on the sport desk is comfortable for a female journalist, Gabriella Bennett *'Sports journalism is less sexist than it was – but there's still a long way to go'*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2022/may/14/sports-journalism-is-less-sexist-than-it-was-but-theres-still-a-long-way-to-go>

Women in Journalism Scotland (WiJS) campaigns for equality in the sector and set out to examine the barriers faced by women as only 3 out of 95 staff writers in print Scottish sports media were women. Journalist Gabriella Bennett found herself to be one of a handful of guests who walked out of the Scottish Football Writers' Association annual awards dinner in protest at the offensive and sexist comments made by after-dinner guest speaker, Bill Copeland. At the same time, other female journalists told researchers that they had suffered vile misogynistic abuse courtesy of football fans, were paid less than their male counterparts, subject to sexist remarks in the newsroom and felt overlooked for promotion.

On a more encouraging note, Bennett was supported in her boycott by a number of male journalists who also left the dinner in solidarity and this was followed by several male sport reporters offering work experience opportunities to women which was one of the WiJS recommendations for helping more female journalists onto print sports desks. Bennett who Co-Chairs WiJS said:

'Supportive gestures are crucial if we are to stop future generations of women from being frozen out of print sports media. I believe the ice is already beginning to thaw.'

Bennett (and some other women who have encountered these and other barriers to participation in female sporting activity) says that she chooses to focus on the positive experiences, believing that the best way to attack examples of prejudice, gender stereotyping and misogyny is to *'use (them) as a catalyst for change'*.

It is however, sad but understandable that although sport today is a more welcoming place for women and girls than even a decade ago, we will never know just how many young girls are lost by the wayside because the negatives they live with outweigh the possibilities of their dreams.

In the same way, many will never experience the fact that those dreams might just become their reality. The price they must pay is simply too high and the journey too difficult to be worth breaking free of the stereotype and *'taking a risk on sport.'*

CHAPTER FIVE: POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE DEVOLVED NATIONS

The International Working Group (IWG) on Women & Sport is the world's largest network devoted to advancing gender equity and equality in sport, physical education and physical activity:

<https://iwgwomenandsport.org>

The UK won the bid for London and Birmingham to host the IWG Secretariat World Conference quadrennial period 2022-2026 and UK Co-Chair, Annamarie Phelps described her determination to focus on:

'Inclusivity, learning and sustainability in the post pandemic world...where women and girls play a full and equitable part at every level.'

The devolved nature of sport policy across the UK is discussed below with the nations' relative achievements to date and ambitions for the future.

Scotland

Sport Scotland has identified five key areas shown by Women in Sport as barriers to girls' participation in sport including:

<https://sportscotland.org.uk>

- Gender stereotyping and traditional gendered perceptions of sport
- Costs including clothing, equipment, membership and travel
- Gendered divisions of caring responsibilities
- Male-dominated environments in sport including sport governance
- Lack of media coverage on women's sport.

They also reported that research from the Young Women's Movement Scotland in 2019 found that body image was a particular factor for those aged between 16-30; highlighting a long-lasting impact from secondary-phase physical activity and sport into adulthood:

<https://www.youngwomenscot.org>

Sport Scotland 2021 data shows that as with the other Home Nations, there is a decline in staying active for girls and women across the life course although the proportion of girls meeting physical activity guidelines begins well with around a 70% achievement rate given between ages 5-10.

The Observatory for Sport in Scotland, 2020, *'Gender Diversity in Sport and its impact on governance infrastructure, practice and participation in Scotland'*:

<https://www.oss.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Gender-Diversity-in-Sport-Paper-Jane-Dennehy-June-2020.pdf>

It maintains that wider participation for girls in sport and physical activity should be examined from the perspective of intersectionality, Crenshaw K, 1991, *'Mapping the Margins; Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour'*, Stanford Law Review, Vol, 43, No. 6.pp.1241-1299, a lens through which to observe other social aspects of identity such as race, sexuality and class in order to expose the additional sources of power that may impact on experiences of sports participation for some girls.

Research Scotland, 2016, *'Equality and Sport Research'* Glasgow: UK, suggested ways in which to increase participation, including consulting girls and women about their needs, tackling stereotyping, discriminatory behaviour and prejudice, offering a range of activities and supporting women to become coaches, volunteers and decision-makers in sport, thereby helping to ensure a positive future for sport in Scotland. Gender-specific events such as the annual 'Active Girls Day' and 'Women and Girls Sport Week' organised by Sport Scotland are dedicated positive spaces designed to help girls and women surmount barriers to participation and raise awareness of opportunities for them nationwide.

'Fit for Girls' is an influential national programme that has been developed in partnership between Sport Scotland and the Youth Sport Trust:

<https://sportscotland.org.uk/schools/active-girls/fit-for-girls/>

The key principles of the scheme are:

- Valuing girls' voices
- Promoting peer role models
- Co-creating projects
- Celebrating 'Unstoppable Girls'.

This programme is delivered via tutors in workshop-style. Fit for Girls aims to celebrate girls' existing skills and self belief and explore how they could take action themselves to create positive change in their school, club and communities so that other girls are enabled to start, maintain or return to sport. For the wider PEPAS community (physical education, physical activity and sport) provision, the programme has improved relationships with young women through ongoing consultation and made delivery more meaningful.

In 2019/20, the Scottish Government increased Sport Scotland's core funding by £2 million and the money was invested in communities, clubs and schools with a particular focus on equality.

The Scottish physical activity delivery plan aligns with the WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The 'More Active

Scotland' physical activity delivery plan, launched in 2018 highlights the establishment of a Women and Girls in Sport Advisory Board to increase female sport participation. Suggested actions included:

- Supporting the Board to provide a culture change for women and girls to have opportunities and feel empowered to become physically active and stay active
- Improving the visibility of role models for women and girls at all stages of life and aspiration
- Addressing barriers to leadership and participation in sport for girls through the Active Girls programme with a focus on body image and confidence.

Northern Ireland

The Female Sport Forum was founded in 2010 with the goal of maximising the opportunities for girls and women to participate in sport and physical activity. It has focused on Active, Fit and Sporty and wanting to embed cultural change within the community and school settings:

<http://www.sportni.net/news/active-fit-sporty-participation-survey-2019-insight-report/>

The Female Sport Forum works to ensure that female success is afforded greater media visibility and that leadership roles are filled by more females supported through mentoring programmes. The aim is to have visible role models and undertake research in order to find out what is needed to give all girls and women an opportunity to engage in sport and physical activity. By exposing and understanding the existing barriers to participation it is hoped to develop preventative measures to reduce them.

The Forum's online space highlights a diverse range of elite global sporting opportunities for Women in Northern Ireland. It records and promotes the latest news items to demonstrate female success, shares role model stories and provides a basis for research around determinants relating to the barriers that impact women and girls' participation in sport and physical activity.

In 2021, the Department for Communities Northern Ireland (DCN) initiative '*Active Living – The Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for Northern Ireland*' identified a variety of female-specific barriers including lack of confidence, being the primary carer, lack of access to facilities, having no exercise buddy, being in poor health and the economic and social costs of taking part:

<http://www.sportni.net/sports-strategy/>

DCN recognised that more needed to be done in Northern Ireland to increase participation by creating welcoming environments, confidence building, adapting existing sporting facilities, greater visibility of role models, increasing choice and

exposure to a wide variety of sports and offering physical activities at an earlier age. It was recognised that there was a need to create culturally sensitive opportunities, tackle different forms of prejudice and discrimination and improve access to participation in coaching, administrative, governance and officiating opportunities.

In 2021, Karen McCallion informed the Northern Ireland Assembly that:

'Children in Northern Ireland are reported as having the lowest rates of physical activity in the UK. According to the 2019/20 Young Person's Behaviour and Attitudes Survey, the proportion of girls who said they enjoyed sport and physical activity dropped from 65% in Year 9 to 43% by Year 12 compared with 65% of Year 12 boys.'

Every Body Active, Sport Northern Ireland 2020 is a four-year lottery-funded programme designed to increase sport and physical activity participation across the life course with local-level work specifically targeted at women and girls aged 14-25:

<http://www.sportni.net/news/every-body-active-2020-report/>

Work on physical activity is linked to each district council area's community plan and for this age/gender group, evidence suggests that social support from key stakeholders such as parents, guardians, friends, coaches and teachers can be instrumental in influencing a young woman's sporting trajectory: Belton et al, 2014, 'Youth-Physical Activity Towards Health: evidence and background to the development of the Y-PATH physical activity intervention for adolescents' BMC Public Health. 14 (1) pp.122 and Sheridan et al, 2014, 'A systematic review of social support in youth sport' International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology. 7(1) pp 198-2280.

Wales

According to the Wales School Sport Survey in 2021/2022 more boys engaged in organised sport outside of school than girls:

<https://www.sport.wales/download/file/2116/>

The children and young people participation in sport section of a report from Sport Wales notes that it still seems to be socially unacceptable for girls to kick a ball around at break time; there is an unwillingness to get 'dishevelled' and this is also given as a reason why some girls at secondary level try to avoid PE:

<https://www.sport.wales/our-vision-for-sport/>

The Bright Purpose research reported by Sport Wales suggest that participation rates could be improved by incorporating the following factors:

- Variety – a range of activities that they enjoy or are good at *'when the fun stops, they drop out'*
- Sociability - *'friends and socialising are vital to young people; combining social aspects with physical activity will make it more appealing'*
- Confidence levels - 28% of girls say that they would do more sport if they were more confident.

Sport Wales has also identified the influence of socioeconomic factors. Across Wales, over 20% of girls in a large number of the poorer unitary authorities are reported as displaying the sedentary behaviour (sitting for up to seven hours) related to reducing the physical competencies needed to maintain a healthy childhood and future adult life, Public Health Wales, 2023, *'School Health Research Network SHRN Data Dashboard'*:

https://publichealthwales.shinyapps.io/SHRN_Dashboard/

Wales' 'Climbing Higher' sports policy was launched in 2005 and updated in 2015. It has set 2025 as a target date to address gender disparity in elite sports. Target 13 is that *'medallists will be broadly comparable across genders'* and in targets 14, 15 and 16, Wales' men's and women's rugby, football and golfing teams are to have achieved positions in the world's top rankings in each sport:

<https://www.gov.wales/sport-and-physical-activity-strategy-climbing-higher>

However, the female-specific talent development process literature is skewed towards male or across joint male and female cohorts, Curran O, 2023, *'Exploring a national female team sport talent development environment'* Doctoral dissertation, Dublin City University. It may therefore prove difficult to draw firm conclusions around successful pathways into sport for prospective champions in women's events.

Across Wales, all secondary schools can access the targeted sport and physical activity programme, the '5x60'. The programme aims to raise physical activity levels to meet the Welsh Government's target of young people engaging in sport and physical activity for one hour (60 minutes) five times a week. Sport Wales' mission is to create an active nation where everyone can be involved in sport regardless of aspiration, age or gender. Yet much work remains to be done to reduce the historic gender gap which continues as a constant in Wales.

The latest survey *'Sport Wales 2021-22'* found that 43% of boys participated in organised sport outside of the curriculum three or more times a week compared with 36% of girls - the lowest participation rate for girls since 2018.

England

In 2021, 'Uniting the Movement' Sport England set out its plans for the reorganisation of England's sporting infrastructure, directly addressing the need to level up investment plans for women and girls.:

<https://www.sportengland.org/about-us/uniting-movement>

The 2023 Active Lives Survey identified a rise to 44% in girls' activity levels from 41% in 2017 but only a quarter of respondents described a positive association with physical activity. Widening 'enjoyment gaps' of up to 10% were identified for infant and teenage girls (Years 1-2, 9-11):

<https://www.sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives>

The visibility of women's sport has increased in recent years; particularly in the media, but in 'Daring to Dream', 2023, (*'Daring to Dream; The Gender Dream Deficit in Sport'*) Women in Sport contend that girls' perception of the gender inequalities in sport are very real and that women's sport just isn't taken seriously. This entrenched perception was immeasurably strengthened by the Rubiales incident at the 2023 Women's Football World Cup which tarnished the joy of girls and women nationwide at the achievements of England's Lioness finalists and Spain as worthy eventual winners.

Despite Sport England promoting and investing in the Youth Sport Trust 'Girls Active' project, away from school, 25% of girls are not involved in sport due to apathy, period symptoms or body-confidence issues. To date, high performance sport has done nothing to address the matter of under-representation in leadership and coaching roles.

Sport England's flagship programme, 'This Girl Can' recently teamed up with UK Active as part of the Safer Spaces to Move project, 2024, by formulating solutions in four key areas: social, suitable, self-affirming and safe. Alongside gender activity and enjoyment gap, 'fear of judgement' and safety concerns are some of the biggest barriers for girls and young women:

<https://www.ukactive.com/blog/safer-spaces-to-move-whats-happening-in-2024>

However, the need to address such concerns must be carefully calibrated to avoid creating an inherent fear or a disliked restriction around physical activity especially in outdoor space, Clark S, 2015, '*Running into trouble: constructions of danger and risk in girls' access to outdoor space and physical activity*' Sport, Education and Society, 20(8). Pp. 1012-1028.

The continuous projection of 'faceless threats' in a now perceived unsafe or limiting sporting context by adults may do little to maintain ongoing empowerment and choice in physical activity for young girls. This is particularly the case as women who may be able to relate to the needs of girls to test their

freedoms in a sporting context continue to be determinedly under represented in sports leadership and coaching roles, Serpeli BG et al, 2023, '*The under-representation of women coaches in high-performance sport*', International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching,' 18(4) pp.1320-1332.

CHAPTER SIX - THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: LESSONS TO LEARN AND AVOID

Sport has the potential to smash through barriers, mobilise the global community and engage people of all ages. The 2021 Tokyo Olympics recorded a landmark 49% female participation rate and UNWOMEN the United Nations body dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women is determined to achieve equal participation by 2030:

www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-sport#stories

17-year-old Egyptian Paralympic swimming champion, Malak Abdelshafi epitomised the spirit and resolve when she said:

'Nothing can stop us because we're girls. We're all human and there's no difference between a girl or a boy.....When you find out that the way to your goal is blocked, don't give up. Try to find another way and you'll reach your goal with your persistence.'

Malak won her first medal at 9-years-old and since then has won 39 national and 6 international medals. Her up-beat attitude is matched by that of Anita Karim, the only woman among more than 300 professional mixed-martial arts fighters in Pakistan. 24-year-old Karim said:

'We get the message from our society that women and girls can't commute on their own or can only work in particular areas. We are taught to fear and there is a perception that girls are weak and vulnerable.....MMA has taught me confidence and also made me strong enough to compete at a global level. It has taught me strategies for protecting myself in any kind of difficult situation.'

Khadija Timera, a boxer who grew up in a working-class district of Paris and was employed by an internationally-renowned law firm following her successful business law scholarship at the University of California Berkeley has a simple message for women:

'You are enough.'

Timera won a gold medal for Senegal at the African Championship in 2019 and believes that:

'People need to become aware that women and men are equal and complementary. I also think that women themselves have to realise that they have a real power that they send out; they have to learn that themselves.'

International research reveals that women who are confident in sport express higher levels of self esteem, demonstrate superior leadership qualities and lead a healthy lifestyle, *International Journal of Health, Physical Education and Computer Science in Sports*, 17; 146-149.

The Women's Sports Foundation was established by Billie Jean King in 1974 and enshrines that ethos:

www.womenssportsfoundation.org

The Foundation is dedicated to enabling girls and women to reach their full potential and its work for equality is supported by over a thousand champion athletes. A 2018 survey highlighted the divide between children of 6-12 years of age with 38.6% of boys and 31.4% of girls playing sport on a regular basis. African-American young people from low-income families were least likely to have participated in sports; the support (or lack of it) from parents was crucial and gender stereotypes were entrenched:

<https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Keeping-Girls-in-the-Game-Executive-Summary-FINAL-web.pdf>

From a constructive perspective, most parents affirmed the idea of sport building a positive body image, and role models were viewed as key to girls' involvement, as were coaches. However, 48% of female athletes cited experience of mental health issues or depression during their physical activity or sports participation and this may derive from much earlier experiences of being mocked or made fun of by boys when they practised sports.

In Canada, social identity has been reported as a key component to keep girls engaged in sports alongside that of enjoyment, Murray RM and Sabiston CM, 2022, '*Understanding Relationships Between Social Identity, Sport, Enjoyment and Dropout in Adolescent Girl Athletes*', *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 44(1) pp. 62-22. doi:10.1123/jsep.2021-0135.

International Inspiration was delivered in partnership with UNICEF, UK Sport, the Youth Sport Trust and the international charity, International Inspiration. It was London's Olympic legacy scheme and ran from 2012–2014. Including the UK, the programme was delivered in 21 countries and during its involvement, 590 UK schools participated in strategies focusing on the use of PE and sports in schools to achieve positive outcomes for pupils and young people in the wider community.:

<https://www.britishcouncil.org/society/sport/current-programmes/international-inspiration>

In Jordan, through International Inspiration, girls are building and designing sports activities through PE and in Nigeria, they have helped girls to increase their

participation in sports at school with a resultant boost to their confidence and self esteem. Working in countries where girls had few opportunities to engage in sport, International Inspiration has encouraged increased participation with girls assuming leadership in sport and in other aspect of life, encouraging others to follow in their footsteps and eradicate the cultural barriers impeding progress and self-expression:

www.businessfightspoverty.org/empowering-girls-international-inspiration-using-sport-to-tackle-gender-issues/

However, although the international green shoots of sporting equality for girls are real, a research project following seven girls from five schools in a Spanish city should serve as a check on complacency, *'I Hate Physical Education; an analysis of girls' experiences throughout their school life'*:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09589236.2021.1937077>

On feeling that being a girl is detrimental when compared to boys, one girl says:

'When you are a child, even if you are not good at PE, you always have a better chance of success, your mistakes are less penalised. I sometimes feel more disadvantaged because I am a girl. Your body sometimes changes and you are not able to control it as you would like to...This is de-motivating since neither the teacher nor your classmates understand it.'

The unmotivated feelings of their daughters provoke critical comments from their families on the subject of physical education:

'Teachers should be more concerned that everyone is integrated into their classes. It's not fair that girls have the experiences that our daughters have had....Female teachers tend to be more concerned about this type of thing.'

When a parent can say:

'Sometimes I am afraid that the frustration my daughter feels is going to have a negative impact on her throughout her life. There are many negative experiences that I do not know if she will be able to forget over time.... Maybe she will be affected forever.'

There is still much more to do.

CHAPTER SEVEN: 'IN HER OWN VOICE' – REAL LIFE EXAMPLES OF GOOD AND BAD PRACTICE FROM GIRLS

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is well-placed via their annual 'Girls Active' (GA) survey, to acquire a wealth of information about what girls really think about their experience of sport and physical activity. Some examples are given below.

A 'Girls Active Lead Teacher' is the teacher in a particular school who has been trained in Girls Active principles and is responsible for implementing and overseeing change in their school's provision for girls. 'Girls Active Leads' are girls selected by their GA teacher to be trained in the principles and who then consult, market and advocate for other girls whilst leading their activities. Girls who participate in the activities are called Girls Active Participants.

Valuing girls' voices and empowering them to lead

While 64% of girls over all key stages want to be more active, by Key Stage 4, only 29% consider that the skills they learn in PE help them inside and outside of school, YST, Girls Active, 2023.

'This is a call to action!...We think no matter what your race, size, shape, religion or ability is, you should have the chance to be fit, active, healthy and happy. We believe that every girl has their own superhero powers that are all unique in different ways and that is what we want to help you find through our Girls Active Programme.'

Primary Girls Active Leaders' message to girls in a school assembly

Importance of relatable role models and peer leadership

Particularly during adolescence, girls are influenced by peer pressure and internalised gender stereotypes suggesting that physical activity is not 'feminine' or 'cool.' However, those they regard as role models can have a positive influence on their outlook.

'In year 7 I hated PE, I didn't do anything, run, nothing, but now I think being a peer leader just helped me. I'm not the best, but if I do it, more girls will follow me.'

Girls Active Leader

'I think I'm more confident, more understanding of others, I try not to get into trouble because I know other girls are looking up to me, so I think it's a lot of responsibility right there.'

Girls Active Leader

Understanding girls' confidence levels and intentionally creating the environment and conditions to develop it

By Key Stages 3 and 4, girls have often become increasingly self-conscious about their appearance and how it is affected by participating in sport and physical activity.

'Throughout year 7, I was very hesitant in getting involved most of the time, because of the boys. They would just come up, try ruining the game, saying we're meant to be housewives and just 'stay at home; people'.'

Girls Active Leader

'A year ago, I wasn't really confident with who I was, I didn't do any sport because I was embarrassed to do what I wanted to do in front of other people, but I've just decided I want to be more active and I've become more confident in myself, like I don't care anymore who I do it in front of.'

Girls Active Leader

'All of the girls are so nice to each other. Even if you do mess up in a game or score into the wrong goal, they support you. Even if you don't get a shot, they'll say 'well done, good job'.'

Primary Girls Active Participant

Recognising the barriers that the onset of puberty brings and opening up the conversation

Having their period is the biggest barrier for girls in being more active at school. The barrier is more prevalent in school than out of school, suggesting that the school environment exacerbates matters as girls move through puberty. Physical pain, discomfort and fear of leaking are the major worries for girls, and teachers observe that their moods can also be negatively affected at this time. However, it is extremely unusual for PE teachers to receive training either around the menstrual cycle or on supporting and educating girls to use physical activity as a tool for managing menstrual symptoms. It is therefore unsurprising that 4 out of 10 girls are not at all comfortable about raising the issue with their teacher.

'I was on the tubby side. My personal self-consciousness was like a devil on my shoulder telling me I couldn't do it. It was the fact that I had to move, be active and sweat....I was worried that people judged me (the school's PE uniform) was a 'skort' – sort of shorts and skirt in one – it was tight and short. All of my friends hated PE as much as I did.'

Girls Active Participant

'We had conversations with girls to make them realise that we all go through that. Everyone goes through that you know, they're not alone in that.'

Girls Active Lead Teacher

Evidence of Gender Stereotypes and allowing girls to combat them

As children grow older, gender stereotypes become more ingrained in the school setting; boys dominate the playground, frequently playing football and being reluctant to let girls join in. The physical differences of puberty further reinforce gender stereotypes in mixed-gender school activities and by adolescence, girls have invariably internalised this stereotyping. Their teachers can also inadvertently confirm it through teaching styles and recognition given.

'I was very scared to get involved most of the time because of the boys, and I wanted to encourage other girls to not go through what I went through and to help them.'

Girls Active Leader

'Boys are better at sport.' The girls have heard that throughout their lives and that's something that they have on their minds. But actually, one thing that you always hear from them now is, 'we are just as good or we are better'.'

Girls Active Lead Teacher

Girls' Voices

The selection of creative non-fiction vignettes below has been provided by Women in Sport based on the lived experiences of girls who have experienced sport in different ways. The vignettes were constructed following open participant interviews.

Annabelle GB tennis player

Annabelle's extremely positive experience represents an ideal. She attends a private school and is appreciative of the many and varied activities on offer and the encouragement she receives to pursue them.

'I began playing tennis at a young age, encouraged by my family who all played tennis. This has enabled me to reach high levels in my sport, being selected to represent Great Britain at a number of World Championships.'

The school I attend is really encouraging of my sport. I am able to be released from the timetable to train competitively...I also have a number of scholars in my school

and other GB players, which means we all support and encourage each other to compete at the elite level.

I still struggle with anxiety over competing at times, but there is plenty of support from my coaches to help me to understand and overcome this.

I feel my experiences of sport have been completely fair and equal in comparison to the boys. When I see boys at training, I don't feel there are any barriers between us. ...I feel like it's a really progressive sport in that sense in that the experience is the same, no matter whether you are a boy or a girl.'

Sophia, recreational tag rugby player

Sophia says that she lives in a very economically-deprived area with few opportunities to participate in sport. This has influenced her choice of activity.

'I'm really lucky with the tag rugby as it's provided as a low-cost activity in my area. I don't need much equipment compared to other sports and we can wear simple clothing. ...If I wanted to play other sports however, this would be more difficult because I wouldn't have the money to travel as my parents don't have a car and there is no way I could afford expensive fees if the sport required them. So it's good that I enjoy rugby as that's all there is on offer locally.

I don't fit the stereotypical 'feminine' female. I've always been stronger and more athletic than other women. That then comes with labels that I'm called a 'tomboy' or a 'lesbian' which is really hurtful. I hear that all the time at school and as much as I try to ignore it, there are some that will continue to verbally abuse me in that way.

Tag rugby is a sport where body image doesn't matter...it's all about just enjoying the game and being active rather than worrying about what I look like....it's a great game that all girls should be allowed to play. I get frustrated that boys are allowed to play contact rugby at school but girls are not even offered tag rugby!'

Emily, gymnast

Emily is proud that she has competed nationally and was inspired as a very young child by the example of her mother and aunt who were both gymnasts. She enjoyed sport and physical activity at primary school, trying out a range of activities before settling on gymnastics and representing her school competitively.

'(At secondary school) the choice of sports was restrictive. I had limited opportunity to try a selection of sports. I can remember that for one school year the only activity

provided for us as girls was badminton. The boys however were taught a range of activities, including rugby, football, hockey and athletics. There was definitely not the same opportunity for us.

Thankfully, I met some really good coaches at my gymnastics club. I also met with lots of other girls who were already really talented at gymnastics and so they encouraged me to pursue the sport and gave me inspiration to want to better my skills and aim high. I found it was completely equal at competitions and it helped to know that this matched the elite sport because there is equal pay and prizes for winners of gymnastic competitions.

My only other issue with the difference between boys' and girls' gymnastics is the clothing. I find it completely unfair that girls can be penalised in some competitions if their leotards are not in the correct place but boys are allowed to wear shorts or trousers that don't inhibit them in this way.'

Poppy, recreational dancer

Poppy who did not enjoy sport at school, lived in an affluent area as a child and her parents could afford to pay for her to go to dance classes. She is now a dancer and coaches younger children; an experience she finds rewarding and also helpful for the maintenance of her own mental health and wellbeing.

'I had a terrible experience of sport at secondary school. There were really limited choices on offer for girls and so I found many of my friends made excuses to drop out of sport and reasons not to go to PE lessons. I don't feel the curriculum was inspiring at all – it was just the same sports all the time, like netball and badminton.There were plenty of boys' teams who had the opportunity to represent the school, but the girls only had restricted activities on offer like netball. There is no wonder there are statistics in terms of drop out of girls at secondary schools, I am not surprised at all.

It's my passion to dance. I train for approximately 10 hours a week. I love the way that I can escape into dance and run away with the music. It helps me manage my mental health and keep my stress away.....Dance is a great way to express yourself and to be free, which is a great outlet from the stress of school.'

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF GOVERNMENT IN MAKING SPORT CENTRAL TO EVERY GIRL'S BEST LIFE

Gender stereotyping undermines girls' sporting lives from a very young age and those born today still bear the brunt of the Victorian 'frailty' legacy. 'Real girls' are supposedly 'delicate', happiest when caring for infants and other dependents and programmed never to get dirty. Held back by historical narrative and limited expectations, girls are exposed to less physical activity from an early age and suffer a consequent disadvantage in skills development.

Add to this, the harassment and unwanted attention that teenage girls are subjected to when exercising and it is unsurprising that gender stereotyping becomes a seemingly insurmountable barrier to their participation in sport.

Like many of the barriers holding girls back, gendered stereotyping is built upon a foundation of misogyny (prejudice, malice and/or contempt for women with attitudes and behaviour that relegate them to a subordinate position). Anti-misogyny policies and training should be mandatory for all organisations in receipt of public money and, as recommended by Baroness Helena Kennedy, there should be discrete legislation in each UK nation to criminalise misogyny.

English, Maths and Science are designated 'core' subjects; the heart of the National Curriculum. The other subjects are foundation subjects and PE is compulsory at all key stages. However, the Education Act 2002 prohibits the Secretary of State for Education from prescribing the amount of time spent on any curriculum subject although the School Sport Action Plan, July 2023, Department of Education, *'School Sport and Activity Plan'* encourages *'all schools to deliver a minimum of 2 hours' PE time during the school day every week alongside equal access to sport for girls and boy'*:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-sport-and-activity-action-plan>

However, this is just a recommendation and each school can dictate how PE is timetabled. For 34 years, this prescribed time for PE has been recommended but has not been adhered to, while the core subjects have been seen as a priority within the curriculum.

Making PE a core subject within the curriculum as well as within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) for all teachers would make it more likely that the Government's requirement (March 2023) for girls to have the same opportunities, choice and staff qualified to deliver them during PE would be realised. An inclusive PE curriculum would consist of a diverse range of activities for both sexes and a revision of training for teachers would include ways in which to create supportive

and inclusive environments that encourage girls to participate in sport and physical activity.

This could include training on gender-sensitive teaching methods, promoting body positivity and addressing barriers to participation such as outdated, restrictive sports kit for girls that makes them potential targets for body-shaming. Teachers should be enabled to feel confident in raising issues such as the necessity of finding the right bra to wear when playing sport so that girls are not put off from taking part but instead, empowered and ready for action.

Women and girls continue to face health inequalities at all stages of their lives that could be alleviated by sport and physical activity, especially during the girls' crucial developmental years.

- Over 50% of women over the age of 50 will break a bone as a result of osteoporosis compared to 20% of men
- Girls and young women aged between 16-24 are almost three times more likely to experience a mental health issue as boys and men of the same age. Five times as many girls self-harm and nine times as many are hospitalised for eating disorders.

In both cases, sport could have a vital preventative role and save the NHS money. Weight-bearing exercise for example, increases bone mineral density; 90% of which is laid down by the time a girl reaches age 18.

Sport and particularly outdoor team sport can be pivotal in reducing anxiety and improving mental health and wellbeing. There are many other gendered health inequalities that might be addressed through sport and yet this is rarely recognised in government strategy around girls' and women's health. Recognising the health benefits of sport will help girls to live their best lives and government health strategies should be updated to recognise the vital role that sport and physical activity have to play in girls' and women's health.

For many girls, school will be their first environment for accessing regular physical activity and government can direct change with a national plan for active and well schools, partnering with local clubs and providers and aligned to an ambition to increase the use of existing facilities to place movement at the heart of education before, during and after the school day and in school holidays. This should include a commitment to delivering equal access to all facilities for girls, ensuring that progress in PE is matched by increased participation in community settings. Far too many girls are deterred from working on their own movement and physicality through play because opportunities for them either do not exist or act as a barrier to engagement.

The Government should involve schools in highlighting successful female athletes as role models to inspire and motivate girls to participate in sports. This could also involve encouraging local councils to showcase local female athletes and connecting them to schools to help communities to engage with and inspire young girls.

Government should introduce legislation to guarantee play sufficiency across England. By creating a duty for local authorities to provide sufficient play and recreation opportunities in every community and ensuring that they are resourced to do so, access can be increased for all children and young people. Development and planning should enable girls to have their voices heard and be influential in the design and nature of provision in each locality.

Girls (and boys) have been deeply inspired by the elite women's sport that they have seen in the past year and research by Women in Sport found that 91% of girls and 82% of boys felt proud of the performance of the Lionesses in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup. 6 in 10 girls who watched determined to play more sport and to be active themselves. However, only 29% of girls aspire to scale the heights in elite sport compared to 52% of boys. Over 8 in 10 girls still believe that women's sport is not taken as seriously as men's and 60% would like to see equal media coverage of men's and women's sport.

The media therefore is instrumental in helping girls to live their best lives and it is incumbent upon both broadcast and print media to be proactive and equalise coverage of women's sport on a consistent basis. The Government should require public service broadcasters to move towards 50% of their sports coverage being women's sport.

The media narrative about women and sport must change. Elite male athletes are celebrated for strength and skill; by contrast, their female counterparts are still often discussed in terms of appearance and personal relationships. In the upcoming Paris Olympic Games, 50% of the competitors will be female and this should be reflected in the presence of more female media commentators and greater care with language used in interview questions.

Similarly, it is important that more women are seen in leadership positions within sport in order to make it a more welcoming environment for girls and to give them a range of role models off the pitch as well as on it. Across the biggest sports in the UK, almost all senior posts are occupied by men. A recent count of leaders in the top twenty sports by participation in England showed that just 17% of the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Chairs and Performance Directors are women. Government could and should do more to work with sports and in particular,

sports in receipt of public money, to make sure that there are more visible female role models for girls.

Not every girl wants to play for England but if she wants to run the FA one day this should be seen as a perfectly realistic ambition. She should proceed with confidence; secure in the knowledge that there is a level playing field for any and every application she might choose to make.

The Fair Play Charter

1. Anti-misogyny policies and training should be mandatory for all organisations in receipt of public money combined with discrete legislation in each UK nation to criminalise misogyny
2. PE to be made a core subject within the National Curriculum as well as within Initial Teacher Training (ITT)
3. Government health strategies updated to recognise the vital role of sport and physical activity in girls' and women's health and wellbeing
4. Government to legislate to guarantee play sufficiency across England: a duty for local authorities to provide such opportunities in every community supported by the resources to do so
5. A National Plan for active and well schools
6. Government to require public service broadcasters to move towards 50% of their sports coverage being women's sport
7. Government to do more to work with sports; in particular, sports in receipt of public money to ensure that there are more visible female role models for girls.