

Barriers to sports participation for women and girls

Participation rates among women and girls are much lower than men's. The many reasons for this gender gap can be grouped as practical, personal and social and cultural. Our list of barriers also contains ideas for sports deliverers to implement to encourage and enable women and girls to participate.

Practical Barriers

Barrier: lack of time & lack of childcare

Women tend to have less leisure time than men as they take on the greater burden of responsibility for housework, childcare and care of elderly or infirm relatives. Some women therefore tend to be reluctant to sign up for anything over an extended period of time, believing it would be selfish to do so.

Recommendation:

Provide crèche facilities or classes for toddlers and children, so that the adults can bring their children along when they go to exercise.

Be as flexible as possible when considering length of sign-up periods.

Barrier: lack of money

Women tend to earn less than men; women working full time earn on average £559 less per month than men do.

Recommendations:

Consider different payment options and be as flexible as possible. Monthly direct debits rather than annual subscriptions, or pay as you play rather than long contracts.

Free introductions are useful as women are unlikely to sign up for a long period of time if they aren't confident about an activity or sport. Subsidies or other help (for instance free equipment hire) can also make them more affordable.

Barrier: lack of transport

This is a particular problem for women with young children, elderly women, women and girls with disabilities, and women and girls living in rural areas.

Recommendations:

Explore partnerships with transport providers. Provide information about public transport. Develop a system so participants can organise share-a-ride systems.

Promote physical activity, which doesn't require transport, such as walking and running. Walking groups such as *jogscotland* and running groups such as *Running Sisters* – can support women to take part in easily accessible physical activity in a friendly, supportive group.

Barrier: personal safety

Personal safety on the streets, on public transport, and in and around sports and community venues is a particular problem for

women. Some groups are particularly vulnerable e.g. BME girls and women can become the focus of racist behaviour. People with disabilities are often the targets of bullying and abuse. Travelling to and from venues for sports or physical activity can present particular barriers for these groups.

Recommendations:

Do a safety assessment of the venue to take into account the safety of the area, street lighting, transport links etc. Ask participants about their experiences and views of personal safety in those areas. Signpost self-defence lessons and personal alarms.

Ensure activities are offered in locations or facilities that are safe and appropriate for women and girls. Also exercising in groups can make physical activity safer for women and girls.

Barrier: funding

At most levels, women's sport attracts less funding than men's. Women make up 41% of all athletes funded through



various programmes. At community sport level, girls' teams tend to attract less sponsorship from local businesses because they do not have large supporter bases.

These inequalities in funding result in poorer facilities, equipment and kit, as well as less sponsorship for female athletes.

Recommendations:

Review existing practice and allocation and take action to address inequality. Ensure that where possible equal funds, prize money and sponsorship are available to male and female athletes.

Barrier: access to facilities

Women and girls can't play sport if they can't get access to facilities at suitable times. Too often, sports halls prioritise male sport so that men get facilities at their preferred times, while women have to make do with less convenient times.

Access to sporting facilities can particularly be limited for women and girls with disabilities. Access can be limited by physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, reception areas, changing rooms and sports facilities, lack of accessible transport and parking, etc. Lack of information in accessible formats for visually impaired and/or hearing impaired people can also create barriers.

Recommendations:

Review the allocation of facilities and pitch time, and ensure equitable access during peak times for women's sports.

Provide information in a variety of formats so that all groups have equal access. Ensure staff undergo regular equality training.

Personal barriers

Barrier: body image

Research shows that in general, female adolescents report greater body image dissatisfaction than males. For girls and women the relationship between body image and physical activity is a vicious circle; the more self-conscious they feel about their bodies, the less likely they are to take part in sport, and yet, participation in sport has a positive effect on girls' perceptions of their bodies.

Western fashion promotes increasingly revealing clothes for women and girls, whereas social norms in some cultures prohibit exposure of the female body. For

example, Muslim girls and women who practise Islam are only allowed to appear in front of men in their prescribed dress-code.

Girls and women who are obese or have disabilities may be particularly affected by problems around body image. With an increasingly body-obsessed culture, these women are frequently judged negatively. Generally, girls or women might be turned off the prospect of certain sports because of the revealing clothing which may attract unwanted sexual attention.

Recommendations:

Ensure girls and women can have privacy in changing rooms and in facilities.

In the design and layout of venues, prevent exposed areas between changing rooms and facilities such as a swimming pool. Allow women to wear any clothing they feel comfortable in.

Use a variety of images in publicity, not just those which show the idealised female figure.

Provide single-sex activities, staffed by women and make sure that they're not running next to a men's session; there's no point running a women-only aerobics session in one half of a hall, only to have men's football in the other half.

Barrier: clothing and equipment

Clothing and equipment for sports can be expensive. Images of sportspeople can promote the idea that, unless you're dressed in fashionable clothing designed for a particular sport, you'll look out of place. Some sports clothing is also quite revealing, which creates problems for women and girls, linked to the issues about body image (see above).

Strict requirements about clothing can also prevent some BME women from participating. For example, swimming pools which don't allow women to wear T-shirts over their swimming costumes, and clubs which insist members wear tight fitting or revealing uniforms can exclude those who follow the Muslim faith as well as those who are self-conscious of their bodies.

Recommendations:

The Youth Sport Trust/Nike Girls in Sport initiative has found that allowing girls to wear whatever they like to do physical education has helped increase participation.

Coaches, instructors and leisure centre staff could wear casual clothing during activities, rather than formal or expensive sportswear.

Make sure the equipment available for women and girls is suitable (e.g. that there is a variety of sizes) and that it's suitable for women with disabilities.

Barrier: lack of self-confidence

Girls, on average, have less self-confidence than boys and rate their performance or ability more negatively than do boys.

Self-confidence is also linked to competition. Although some women enjoy the competitive element of sport, many girls and women are turned off sport because it's competitive. This is one of the reasons why 'aesthetic activities', such as aerobics, gymnastics, yoga, are increasingly popular amongst girls and young women, and why some traditional team sports are less popular.

Recommendations:

Make sure all women/girls, regardless of skills or experience, get the chance to be an active part of activities and teams.

Where competition is a key component of an activity or sport, ensure women and girls have the chance to play at appropriate levels against teams or individuals of a similar standard.

Research shows that in general, female adolescents report greater body image dissatisfaction than males.

Set up mentoring systems for older or more experienced girls/women to mentor those who are younger or less experienced. Promote beginner and intermediate activities for girls and women as fun, open and non-competitive.

Barrier: parental and adult influence

The influence of parents, coaches and other adults affects girls and boys differently. Adolescent females place greater emphasis on self-comparison and comments from adults than do adolescent males, who rely more on competitive outcomes as their basis for personal judgement of physical competence.

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Recommendations:

Parents and sports staff should act as positive role models for their children, be involved in their child's sporting activities and have positive, realistic beliefs about their child's competency.

Organise mother and daughter and/or father and daughter sessions to help create a familial culture of support for sport.

Ensure there are female role models in your facility, club or leisure centre, in terms of women staff, coaches, organisers and managers.

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Social and cultural barriers

Barrier: the male-dominated culture of sport

The culture of sport itself presents a problem. Some women/girls are turned off 'sport' altogether because they see it as a male-dominated activity. It is just not seen as feminine or 'girly' to be interested in sport and, for many girls, being sporty is felt to be at odds with being feminine.

Recommendations

Challenge sexist assumptions and behaviour inside your organisation and among participants.

Women and girls can respond better to the social, health and well-being characteristics than competition. Perhaps combine physical activity with social activities or guest speakers on active lifestyles, nutrition, body image, smoking etc.

Combine physical activity with expressive arts; there's scope for developing physical activities in conjunction with drama, dance and other expressive arts.

Barrier: attitudes and prejudices about sexuality

Sadly sport is still rife with homophobia, many boys are called gay for playing "unmanly" sports and girls are often labelled as lesbians if they play almost any sport (apart from a few which are seen as particularly "feminine").

There are several consequences: some girls avoid certain sports for fear of being perceived as unfeminine or lesbian; some parents discourage their daughters from taking up sport; some lesbian athletes avoid going public about their sexuality in case they experience prejudice from other athletes and coaches, or lose public support/sponsorship. Ultimately, homophobia does increase drop out rates amongst teenage girls and women from participating or excelling in sport.

Recommendations:

Confront discrimination. Be aware that homophobia can be subtle as well as open.

There is a fine line with the use of imagery, Be aware of the tendency to depict sportswomen as overly feminine in a bid to "prove they are straight".

Be aware that girls and women who use your services and facilities will include straight, bisexual and lesbian people, who might all like to see different kinds of images and publicity.

Positive role models can help people who feel isolated because of prejudice about sexuality. There's a need for more open discussion in this area, as well as educational projects to raise awareness and stimulate debate..

Barrier: Attitudes and prejudices about disability

Girls and women with disabilities are less likely than women without disabilities to participate in sport at all levels.

People with disabilities have lower participation rates for a variety of reasons:

- physically inaccessible facilities, venues and equipment
- coaching staff who don't know how to adapt their teaching to help individuals take part in enjoyable, fulfilling activities
- unwelcoming attitudes amongst other sports participants and staff
- a lack of role models to inspire, motivate and encourage

Recommendations:

It's important to have more girls/women with disabilities as role models. Think about the publicity material and information in your sporting venue; does your organisation work with and promote coaches and staff who have disabilities?

Consult with local disability groups to get their advice about what more you could do.

Barrier: Attitudes and prejudices about ethnicity

Although many people believe that different ethnic groups share similar experiences, differences between black and minority ethnic groups are

significant. For example, rates of participation in sport amongst different ethnic minorities vary from considerably lower to somewhat higher than the national average rates.

Similarly, the gap between men and women's participation in sport is greater amongst some minority ethnic groups than it is in the population as a whole.

Assumptions about BME people – for example, that Asian people don't play football, that all Asian girls aren't allowed to wear swimsuits, that Afro-Caribbean people are good at athletics and basketball - can limit their opportunities to take up sport or to participate in the full range of sports.

Low participation rates lead to low rates of volunteering, coaching, employment and leadership in sport.

Recommendations:

Have positive role models of BME women and girls taking part in a range of sports and a range of roles in sport is important and can make a difference to individuals and groups of BME women and girls.

Ensure that your sport is open supportive and welcoming. Conduct outreach projects (they don't have to be expensive or time-consuming) to make links with the local community.

Be aware of religious and cultural festivals such as Eid and Ramadan when arranging events. Ensure all your staff are trained in issues about ethnicity and diversity and are inclusive in their practice.

Barrier: sexual harassment and abuse

Sport-based research on this topic is lacking but recent studies indicate that sexual harassment and abuse is a problem in sport.

Evidence shows that some women and girls drop out of sport rather than continue being subjected to the undermining effects of constant harassment and abuse: others endure the sexual attention of their male coaches or peers because of fear,

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desire for athletic reward, low self-esteem or ignorance of who to turn to for help. Typically, abused athletes keep quiet because they fear that they will either be accused of consenting or of inventing the whole thing.

Risk of sexual harassment or abuse arises from a combination of factors such as weak organisational controls within sport clubs, dominating and controlling behaviour by coaches, and vulnerability, low self esteem and high ambition amongst athletes.

Recommendations:

Adopt rigorous screening procedures and establish codes of ethics and conduct for all staff and volunteers, whether they work with adults or children. Staff and volunteers should be required to sign, to show that they agree to abide by the code.

Ensure all your staff and volunteers who work with children are trained in Child Protection and are CRB-checked.

Distribute information about sexual abuse/child protection for all parents, athletes, coaches and volunteers. Foster a climate of open discussion about issues of sexual harassment and abuse so that athletes feel confident enough to speak out if they experience them.

Get involved in coach education programmes, which inform and advise about the ethical and interpersonal issues of sexual harassment and abuse and about the technical aspects of physical touch in coaching the sport.

Be constantly vigilant and avoid complacency; expect and demand the highest standards of accountability at all levels of the sport.

Barrier: female invisibility – media representations and lack of role models in sport

At all levels, and in all roles women, are under-represented in the sports sector. Working in a sector where they are in the minority can give women the sense that they don't belong in the world of sport.

In addition there is an imbalance in the media coverage of women's sport as the focus is almost entirely men's sports. On average, only 4% of sports coverage in national and local print media is dedicated to women's sport. This is significant because the media plays a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions and

attitudes about women and sport, which, in turn, influence participation levels. Sportswomen such as Kelly Holmes and Paula Radcliffe, have high media profiles, but in general, a lack of coverage of women's sports leads to a dearth of female role models to inspire sportswomen and create the next generation of healthy, active women.

Recommendations:

Use press releases and good relations with your local journalists to promote girls and women's sports achievements. Seek media coverage of your club or organisation's achievements at all levels and regardless of the gender of the athletes. Include representatives of *all* your local community e.g. people with disabilities, BME women/girls etc in any press coverage.

Think about which local women or girls you could promote as role models – they could be coaches, volunteers or athletes at any level. Work with them to help inspire and motivate other girls and women.

Work towards an equal balance of men and women, boys and girls as coaches, organisers, participants, workshop leaders etc. Around 40% is the suggested minimum for either gender.

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ⁱ <http://www.jogscotland.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Running Sisters clubs are nationwide. One example is in Croydon <http://www.croydon-running-sisters.org.uk/sisnet.shtml>



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