



CLOSING THE GENDER PLAY GAP

Cost-neutral proposals for a new Government

womeninsport.org

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INTRODUCTION

Sport matters to women and girls. We've seen that reflected in the success of our inspirational elite sportswomen and the increased profile that women's sport is enjoying. However, it is still the case that too many ordinary women and girls are missing out disproportionately on the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport at every stage of their lives.

The result of this can be seen in the staggering physical and mental health inequalities that women face. 90% of those hospitalised with eating disorders are female. Self-harm is five times more likely in women. Two million women in England and Wales have osteoporosis. Half of women over 50 will break a bone because of this disease, compared to 20% of men.

The word 'sport' comes from an old French word that means 'to divert, amuse, please, play'. It's about freedom from responsibility. For too long, society has systematically taken this freedom away from women and girls. It's time we united to right this wrong.

Where we are now

Women and girls are less active at every stage of their lives. The gender play gap is wider than it has been since reporting began, with 39% of women in England not meeting the recommended 150+ minutes of activity a week. When we break down activity levels for women by ethnicity the picture is stark. Just 51% of Black women are 'active' compared with 62% of Black men. Asian women are also far less active than Asian men and compared with White British women.

Female participation in sport has been slower to recover since the pandemic. Inactivity levels among women have increased, with 27% of women doing less than 30 minutes of activity a week. There is a particular gap around team sport, with just 3% of women taking part. When it comes to children, a staggering 22% fewer girls than boys take part in team sport. This equates to 860,000 girls who are missing out.

We know that simply encouraging women and girls to play sport isn't enough. The value of sport to women and girls is still not fully recognised. Deep rooted gender stereotypes tell women and girls that sport is not for them from a frighteningly young age and society reinforces these messages throughout their lives. We must smash these stereotypes and the misogyny that goes with them. We must empower teachers, coaches and others who work with girls to recognise the impact of stereotyping, as well as the unique physiology and biology of being a girl.

We must fund women's sport properly, give it the media coverage it deserves and make the systemic change needed to ensure that women, as half the population, are half the decision makers in sport.

At Women in Sport, our purpose is to create lasting change for women and girls in sport and society. We want to close the gender play gap between boys and girls, men and women. We stand ready to make this a reality, working with the next Westminster Government and the governments across the UK, alongside our partners in the home nations.



THE POLICY CHANGES

Where we could be

Greater government investment in women's sport will be necessary, in the longer term, if we are going to achieve meaningful change. Some important measures such as setting up an independent regulator for sport, to tackle the harassment and abuse that disproportionately affects women and girls, will require financial commitment. This should not be used as an excuse to continue to fail to take action on this crucial issue and continue to fail to protect women and girls from harm.

However, there are cost neutral steps that a new UK Government and governments in the devolved nations should prioritise to close the gender pay gap.

1. Gender budgeting

Make gender impact assessments mandatory for all sports organisations in receipt of public money and use this data to make resources in sport more equal, including equal pay.

It is an ongoing injustice that more public resources are allocated to men's sport than to women's. Denying the existence of this inequality only serves to further it. This is why gender impact reporting – an honest assessment of how much of the resources of a sport are benefitting women and girls – is the first step. Like environmental impact assessments and gender pay gap reporting, gender impact reporting will shine a light on the effects that budgeting decisions have on girls and women. Gender impact reporting is about considering all aspects of a sport that are affected by financial decisions.

Gender budgeting – analysing the results of a gender impact report and adjusting resources accordingly – can then be implemented. This would include things like equal prize money, equal pay for athletes and staff, equal access to facilities and equal investment in sports research. For some sports this will take many years to achieve, given the history of inequality that has existed.



2. 50-50 representation

Make it mandatory for all sports organisations in receipt of public money to have 50-50 representation of the sexes on their boards. Work with public service broadcasters to achieve parity in their sports coverage.

Across the biggest sports in the UK, nearly all senior posts are held by men. A recent count of leaders in the top twenty sports by participation in England¹ showed that just 17% of the CEOs, Chairs and Performance Directors were women. Whilst existing initiatives within the sector to improve this situation are welcome, they are not enough on their own. We need to see political leadership too.

The media is a vital factor in growing audiences and revenues for women's sport. Both broadcast and print media need to take proactive action to equalise coverage of women's sport on a consistent basis: while the big international events are getting coverage on mainstream channels, in-between times, it is more hit and miss. Governments should require public service broadcasters to move towards 50% of their sports coverage being women's sport.

The media narrative about women and sport also needs to change. Elite male athletes are celebrated for their strength and skill, female athletes are still often discussed in terms of their appearance and their relationships. If the media truly valued women's sport, it would understand the female category and avoid using undermining and inflammatory language in relation to it. Increasing the number of women in the sports media landscape, particularly in leadership roles, would go some way to achieving this.

Women hold just 17% of the top sport sector positions in the UK*

*Based on a recent count of leaders in the top twenty sports by participation in England

3. Stamp out misogyny

Make anti-misogyny policies and training mandatory for any organisation in receipt of public money, including governments themselves and their agencies.

Misogyny is a belief system with a long history. It is "prejudice, malice and/or contempt for women... attitudes and behaviours that relegate women to a subordinate position"². It is the foundation on which many of the barriers that prevent women and girls being active are built. We can't close the gender play gap if we don't stamp out misogyny in sport and in wider society.

Anti-misogyny policies and training would ensure that every organisation is playing their part. They help employees and employers to understand what misogyny means and looks like within the context of their organisation and outline the environment in which women deserve to work and participate. And, crucially, they set out how penalties for breaches of the policy will be enforced. They create safe spaces for women and girls to truly thrive; important in sport and in wider society.

An anti-misogyny policy is not a cure all solution for misogyny. But it is a crucial first step; one which governments should be taking the lead on. Promoting misogyny is still legal in the UK and in a wider context, there should be discrete legislation in each nation to criminalise misogyny (as recommended by Baroness Helena Kennedy in her report to the Scottish Government).

4. Tackle gendered health inequalities

Embed sport and physical activity into women's health strategies to ameliorate the most pronounced gendered health inequalities.

Women and girls continue to face health inequalities at all stages of their lives that could be alleviated by sport, particularly during the crucial development years. To take just two examples:

- Over 50% of women over 50 will break a bone as a result of osteoporosis compared to 20% of men.
- Young women between the ages of 16 and 24 are almost three times as likely to experience a common mental health issue as men of the same age³. Five times as many girls as boys self-harm and nine times as many are hospitalised for eating disorders.

In both cases sport could be playing a vital preventative role and saving the NHS money. For example, weight bearing exercise increases bone mineral density, 90% of which is laid down by the age of 18 in girls (British Nutrition Foundation). Sport, and particularly outdoor team sport, can play a fundamental role in reducing anxiety and improving mental health. There are many other gendered health inequalities that could be addressed through sport and yet this is rarely recognised in government strategies and initiatives around women's health. These strategies should be updated to recognise the vital role sport has to play.

Over 50%

of women will break a bone as a result of osteoporosis compared to 20% of men

*Royal Osteoporosis Society

Five times

as many girls as boys self-harm and nine times as many are hospitalised for eating disorders

*NICE



5. Recognise the reality for girls

Improve the training offered to teachers and coaches on the physical, biological and sociological realities of being a girl, especially the impacts of female puberty and gender stereotyping.

Our research shows that gender stereotyping undermines girls' sporting lives from a very young age. Girls are told that they are delicate and should be kind and careful not to get dirty, rather than brave or daring. These limiting expectations mean that girls are exposed to less physical activity from an early age, which leads to a disadvantage in skills development. As girls get older, they continue to hear the same underlying narrative about their relationship with sport, but they hear it louder and from more voices. Add to that the harassment and unwanted attention teenage girls are subject to when exercising and quite simply, taking part becomes a burden, instead of bringing freedom and joy. This can be exacerbated by gender stereotyping being reinforced, often subconsciously, by teachers, coaches and peers.

On top of this comes puberty. Female puberty can be a shocking experience. The physical changes of female puberty are substantial and can create barriers without the right support. 71% of girls avoid exercising during their period. 56% of girls experience breast pain when exercising (only 14% of girls say a sports bra is included on their school PE kit list).

Only 14%

of girls say a sports bra is included on their school PE kit list

*Women in Sport

71% of girls

avoid exercising during their period

*Women in Sport

We need to transform the understanding of all those who surround girls in their sporting lives. It is not acceptable to continue to make assumptions based on false premises. Girls are not born under confident, they do like competition, but unsurprisingly they don't like oppression. It does matter to girls that their sporting achievements are meaningful and recognised. It is vital that teachers and coaches are both aware of and confident to support girls with the physical and emotional changes female puberty brings, layered on top of the existing impact of gender stereotyping. This should include a focus on creating female-only opportunities, which should be the norm for teenage girls.

We are already seeing what is possible within the sport sector, such as the female health education from The Well HQ and Women in Sport's Big Sister project. Governments should take every step to improve the education, understanding and training of all those it influences who affect the everyday experience of sport girls have.



THANK YOU

The next Westminster election will take place on July 4th 2024, in our charity's 40th anniversary year and mid-way through the UK's hosting of the International Working Group on Women and Sport.

There has never been a better opportunity for government to show it is serious about women in sport.

Useful links

[Explore our research](#)

[What is gender budgeting?](#)

[Independent regulator in sport](#)

