

CHASING THE OLYMPIC DREAM

CLOSING THE DREAM DEFICIT IN SPORT

WOMEN
N
SPORT

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#LetHerDream

@WOMENINSPORT_UK



CONTEXT

At Women in Sport, we believe sport has the power to transform girls' and women's lives, building resilience, courage self-belief and a sense of belonging. Yet, we know that gender stereotypes and institutional bias continue to hold girls and women back, not only from fully participating in sport but also from reaching their full potential in life.

This report is the fourth in a series of surveys of young people (ages 13-24) to uncover the impact of the increasing visibility of women's sport on their attitudes and aspirations. This latest survey was conducted shortly after the 2024 Paris Olympics, the first 'gender-equal' Games. This global event is uniquely multicultural and gives visibility to women and men from over 200 countries providing an opportunity to explore its impact on young people from diverse backgrounds.

Sport not only brings joy and fulfilment but can reduce gendered health inequalities, not least in mental health and osteoporosis. Yet societal norms discourage many girls from participating and pursuing their sporting dreams. Stereotyping and social expectations mean many girls feel they don't belong in sport. The barriers girls face start very young and are cumulative, with

attitudes, judgements, and lack of opportunity building up over time and following them into adulthood.

Our girls and young women are in the midst of a mental health crisis and have never been so unhappy. The number of girls aged 17-21 who say they are 'very happy' has fallen from 29% in 2009 to just 8% in 2023.¹ A third of young women (32%) aged 17-19 have a probable mental health disorder and eating disorders are 4 times higher in young women (21%) than young men (6%).² Sport can be a powerful antidote but far too many girls are still missing out.

As our Dream Deficit research showed last year after the Women's Football World Cup, sexism in sport is highly visible on our screens. Wider research shows that nearly 1 in 3 girls and young women worry about not being treated fairly

or respectfully in the future simply for being female, and 62% of girls aged 17-21 have seen or experienced sexism when participating in sports or physical activity.³ These experiences reinforce feelings of exclusion and marginalisation.

The findings of our latest survey are promising: many girls felt inspired by the Olympics and aspirations to reach the top of sport have risen. There is gathering momentum but there is much work still to do to dismantle the stereotypes and obstacles that are holding girls back in sport, and in life. In our 40th year, the charity Women in Sport is more committed than ever to inspire a culture where it is normal for girls and young women to take part in sport and aspire to reach the top.

¹ Girlguiding (2023) Girls Attitudes Survey 2023

² NHS Digital (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023

³ Girlguiding (2024) Girls Attitudes Survey 2024

SUMMARY

The 2024 Paris Olympic Games had a positive impact on girls and boys, with 8 in 10 saying the sports were exciting and it showed women's sport was just as thrilling as men's.

This equal visibility and celebration of women's achievements may have contributed to the significant rise in girls dreaming reaching the top in sport this year. Despite the increase in the number of girls dreaming to 38%, this compares to 59% of boys. A substantial dream deficit remains.

Ethnicity is also a major factor in the dream rates of girls and boys, with a higher proportion of Black boys and girls dreaming of reaching the top. The largest gender dream gap is between Asian girls (43%) and boys (69%). More Black and Asian girls also felt inspired by the Olympics but were also more likely to agree that people think sport is 'for boys and doesn't matter for girls'.

Encouragingly, the number of girls who now 'love' sport has risen by 13%, with those saying they love it 'and take part lots' increasing from 19% in 2023 to 26%. But there are still

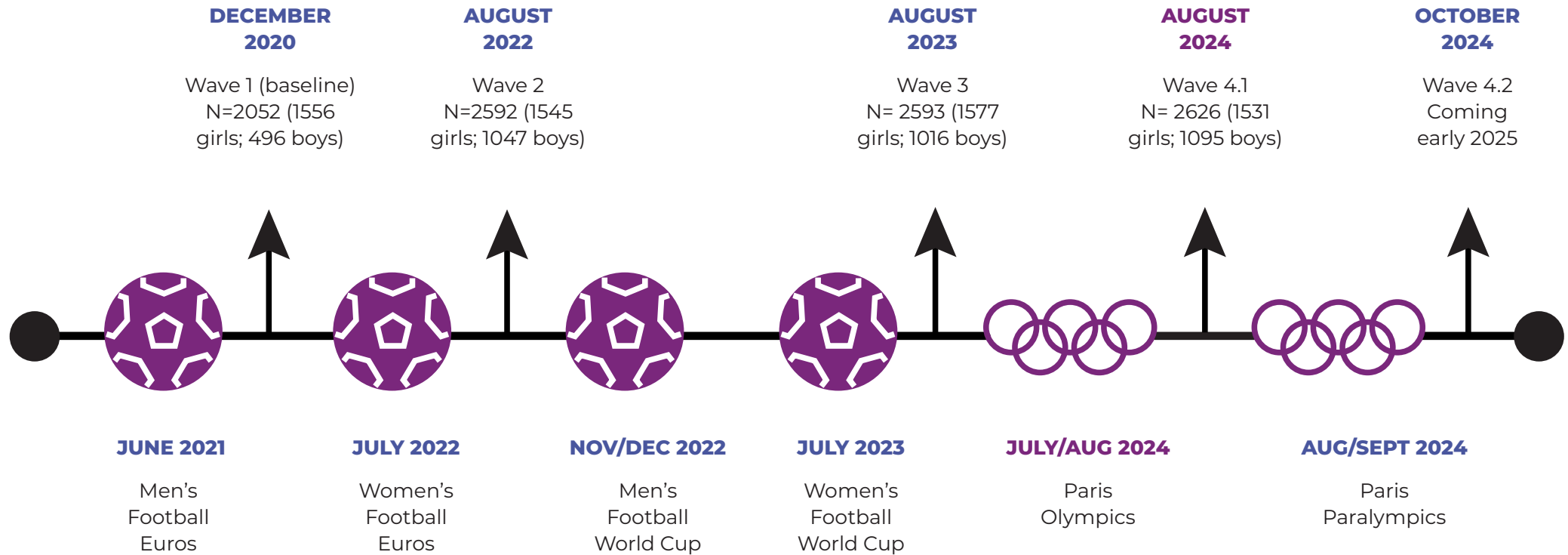
far fewer girls who love sport than boys and a much larger proportion of girls (40%) say they do not take part regularly than boys (23%). For these girls, the rising visibility and success of female athletes has little impact on their dreams or participation.

While the Olympics fostered pride and excitement, many girls still feel that they are overlooked, and have less opportunities, respect, recognition, and support than boys. Girls are sending a clear message that they want to feel more valued in sport. This is not widely perceived by boys, who are more likely to think that sport is more equal for girls than it is.

KEY FINDINGS

- Girls' dream rates have risen significantly this year, climbing from around 30% in the last 3 surveys to 38% this year, but there remains a wide 21% gender gap in aspirations.
- Black girls (60%) are almost twice as likely to dream of reaching the top in sport than White British girls (33%).
- Girls cited stereotyping, lack of encouragement, lack of value placed on sport for girls vs boys, less funding and fewer opportunities as barriers to reaching the top of sport. Some of these barriers are amplified for girls from ethnic minority communities.
- The Paris Olympics inspired around 7 in 10 girls to be more active, and 63% to try a new sport. Key barriers preventing girls from doing so include fears of not being good enough, being judged and a lack of opportunities in their local area.
- The majority of girls and boys believe that gender equality will make sport better for everyone; but over a third of boys (36%) have concerns about the potential negative impact on men's sports.
- There is a disconnect in girls' and boys' perceptions of gender equality in sport. Compared to girls, boys are around twice as likely to say that girls receive the same level of respect, recognition, support, encouragement and opportunities in sport.

OUR DREAM DEFICIT WORK TO DATE



METHODOLOGICAL NOTE:

- Women in Sport commissioned Savanta to carry out nationally representative surveys of young people aged 13-24.
- Some survey questions were not asked in every wave and were specific to particular events or points in time.
- Where relevant, significant differences between the sexes, engagement levels with sport and ethnicity have been highlighted.
- Arrows in graphs and green/red figures indicate statistically significant differences.
- Total figures may not always add up to exactly 100% due to rounding adjustments.

MORE GIRLS NOW 'LOVE' SPORT BUT THE GENDER PARTICIPATION GAP PERSISTS

| ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION ↑ | Q. How would you describe yourself in relation to sport and physical activity?* | Girls | | | | Boys | | | |
|--|---|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | | 2020 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2020 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
| | | I love sport and take part lots already | 20% | 21% | 19% | 26% | 32% | 39% | 36% |
| I love sport but want to do more | 28% | 30% | 28% | 34% | 31% | 29% | 29% | 37% | |
| I don't take part much but want to do more | 37% | 37% | 36% | 28% | 26% | 21% | 23% | 15% | |
| I don't take part much and don't want to | 15% | 13% | 17% | 12% | 11% | 10% | 12% | 8% | |

THE DREAM DEFICIT

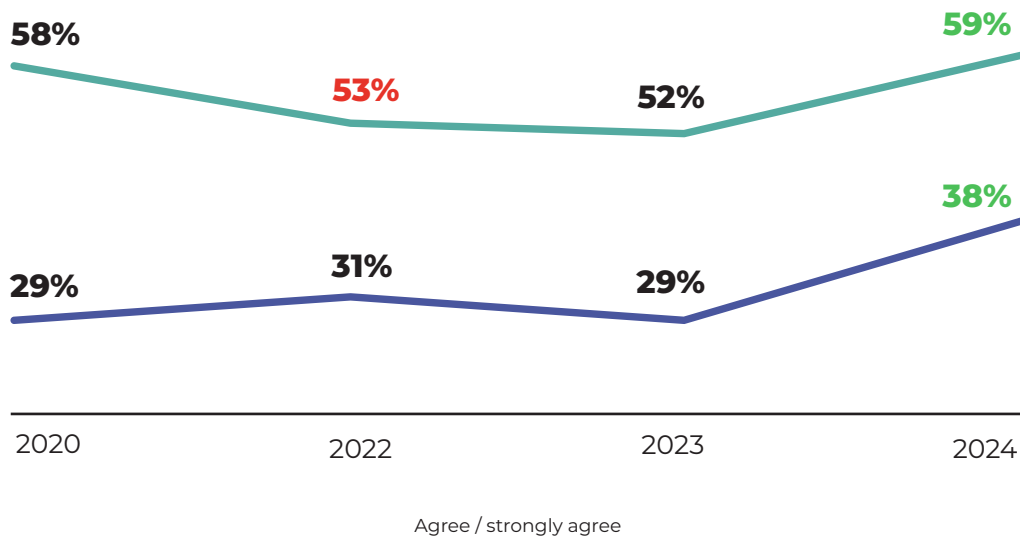
A SURGE IN SPORTING ASPIRATIONS

WOMEN
SPORT



GIRLS & BOYS ARE DREAMING MORE BUT THE GENDER DREAM GAP PERSISTS

Girls and boys who dream about becoming a top athlete or sportsperson



The gender dream deficit widens with age:

- Ages 13-18: 37% of girls dream compared to 53% of boys
- Ages 19-24: 39% of girls dream compared to 68% of boys

Whilst the dream rate has increased significantly for girls and boys, girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to disagree that they dream in sport

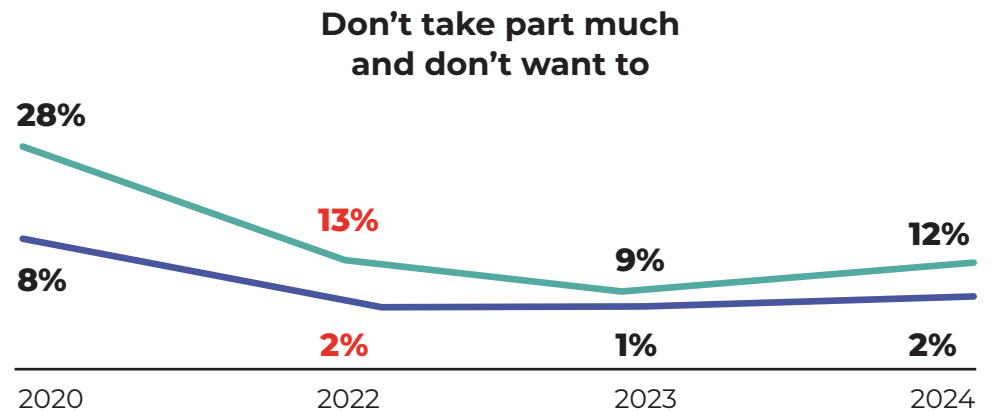
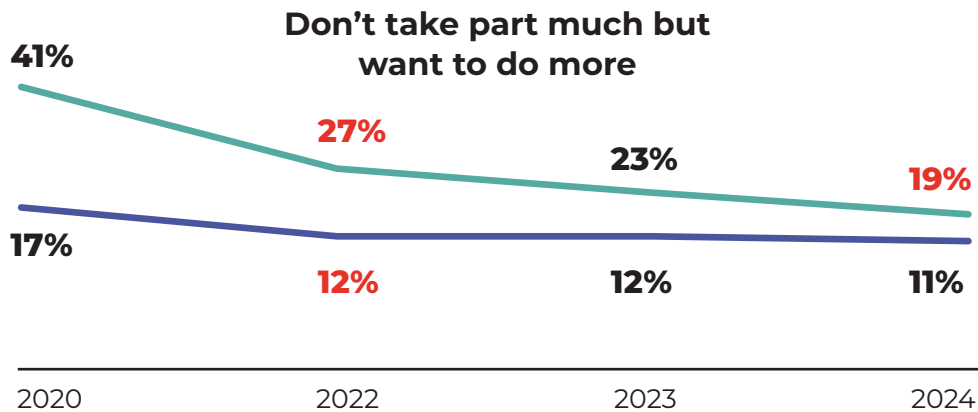
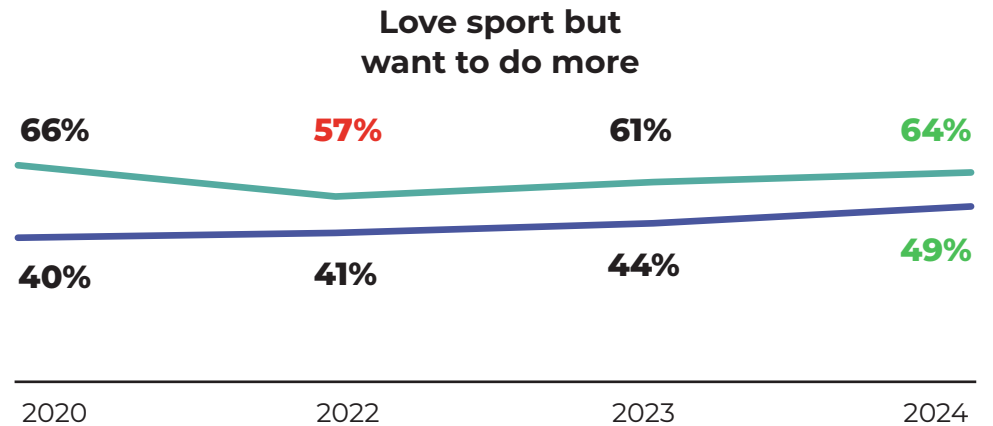
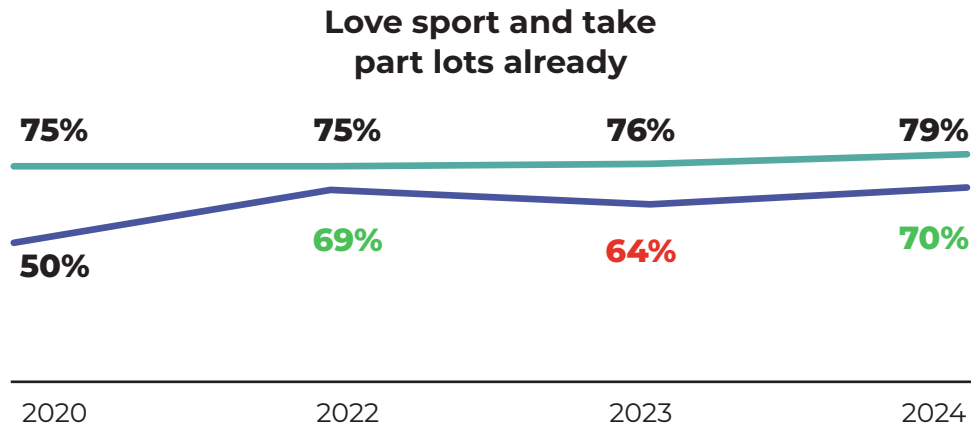
| Gender | Agree (%) | Neutral (%) | Disagree (%) |
|--------|-----------|-------------|--------------|
| Girls | 38% | 21% | 41% |
| Boys | 59% | 18% | 24% |

“I believe women in sports, especially the young ones, are not very encouraged to pursue a career in sports because of the present nature of things.”
(Girl, aged 20)

DREAMING HAS INCREASED FOR GIRLS & BOYS WHO 'LOVE' SPORT BUT IS VERY LOW FOR THE LEAST ENGAGED

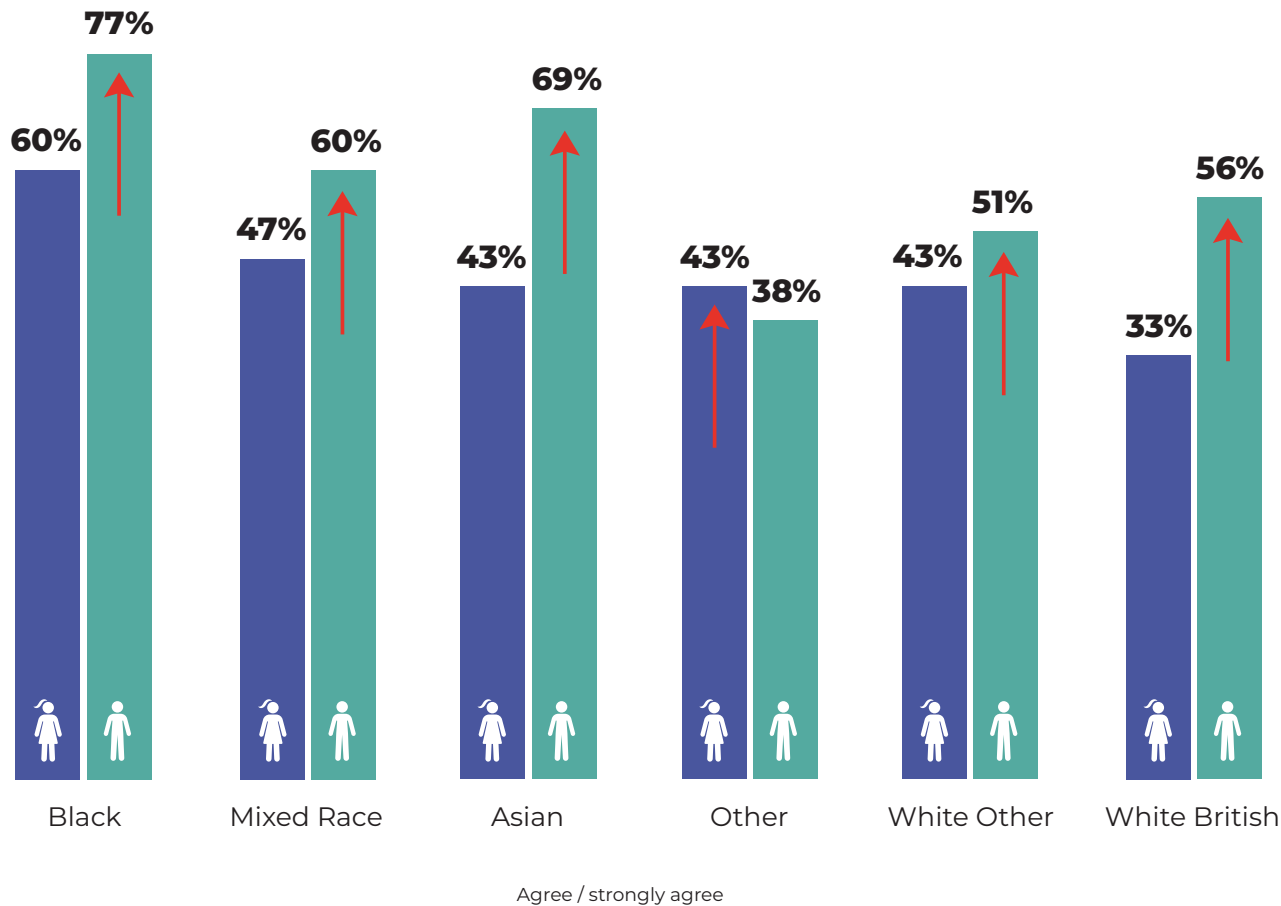
Girls and boys who dream about becoming a top athlete or sportsperson by engagement

Girls Boys
Agree / strongly agree



BLACK GIRLS DREAM THE MOST, WHILE WHITE BRITISH GIRLS DREAM THE LEAST

Girls and boys who dream about becoming a top athlete or sportsperson by ethnicity



“Sports for women is always overlooked in society when growing up hence some young girls do not recognise their talent and overlook it for a ‘practical career’ forced by family.”

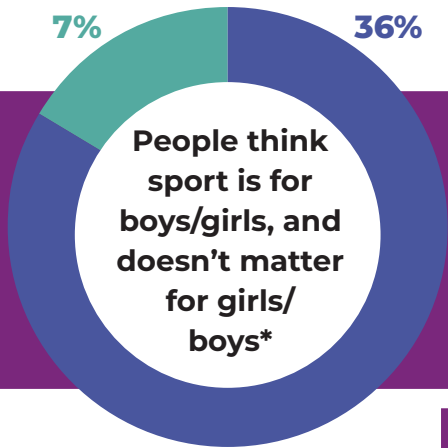
(Girl, aged 19)

ETHNICITY

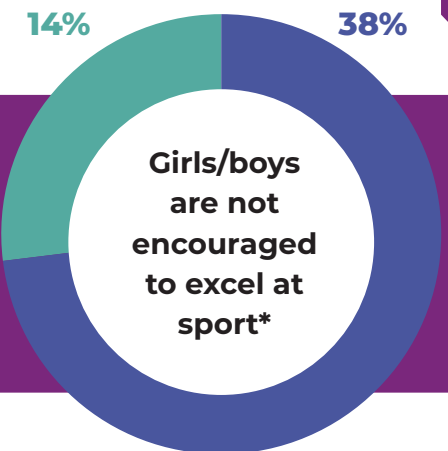
- Despite being one of the the least physically active groups of younger girls (ages 5-16)¹, Black girls lead in their desire to become top athletes, significantly more than girls from all other ethnicities.
- Mixed Race and Asian girls show higher aspirations than White British girls, who are most likely to report not dreaming.
- Amongst boys, Black boys are the most likely to dream of becoming top athletes. Boys have higher aspirations than girls in almost every ethnic group, with the greatest gender gap evident between Asian boys and girls (26%).

GENDER STEREOTYPES & LACK OF ENCOURAGEMENT STIFLE GIRLS' DREAMS IN SPORT

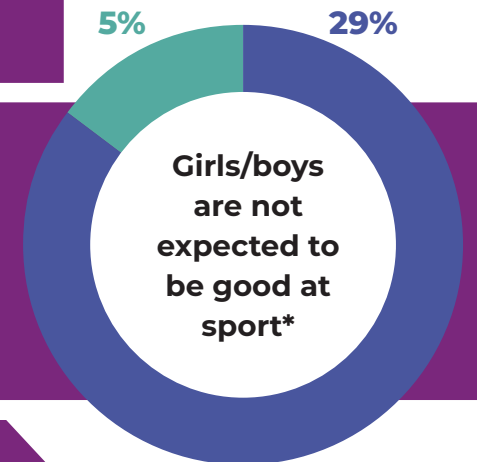
Barriers to girls/boys becoming a top athlete or professional sportsperson



- The perception that 'people think sport is for boys and doesn't matter for girls' decreased amongst girls from 49% in 2020 to 32% in 2023 but is starting to rise again, signaling a need for us to show girls they are valued in sport.
- Black (49%) and Asian girls (43%) are significantly more likely to agree with this statement than White British girls (32%), who agree the least.



- The perception that 'girls are not encouraged to excel at sport' has reduced slightly over the last 4 years amongst girls, from 45% in 2020 to 39% in 2023, with little change this year (38%).
- Asian girls (43%) are significantly more likely to agree with this statement compared to Mixed Race girls (31%), who agree the least.

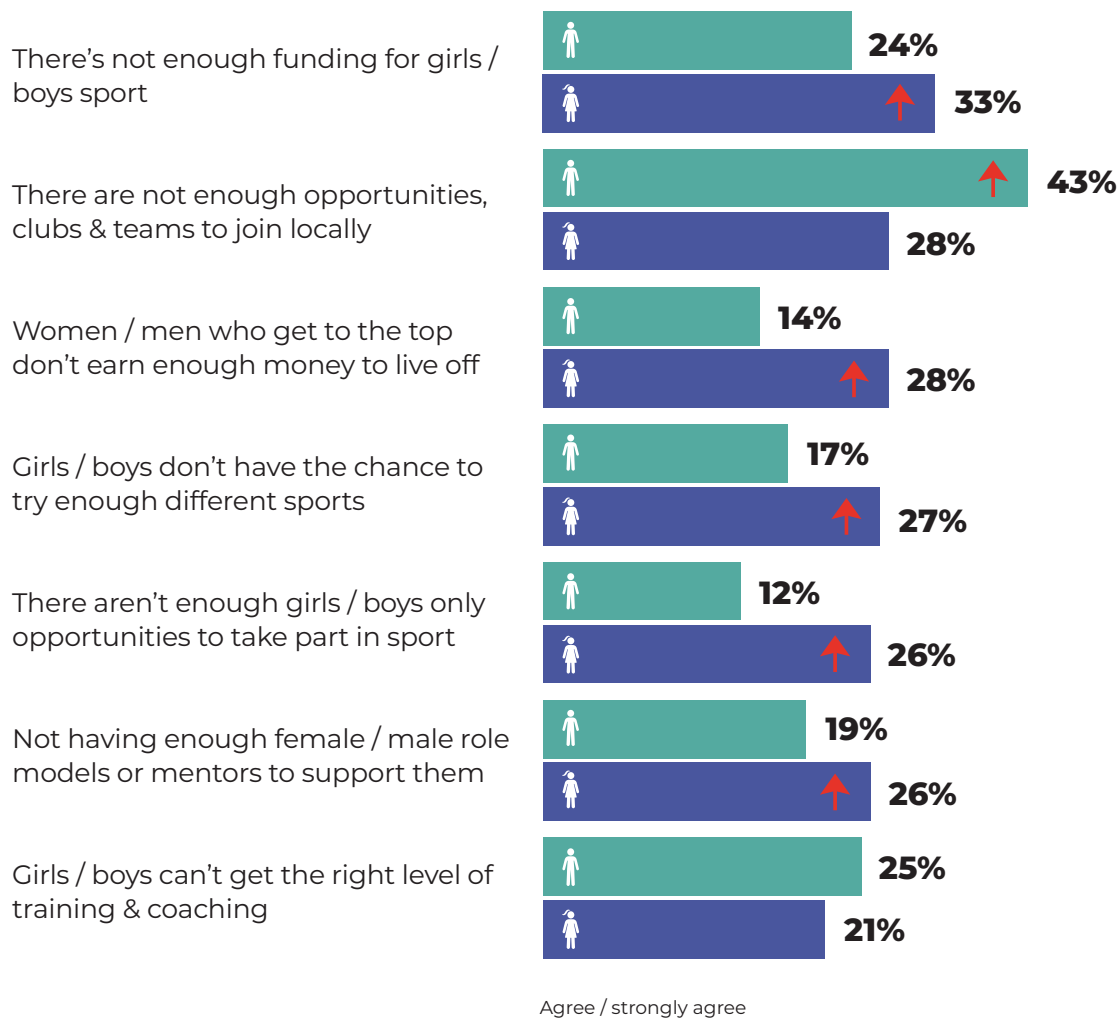


- The belief that 'girls are not expected to be good at sport' has decreased over time amongst girls, dropping from 40% in 2020 to 29% in 2024, but girls are still 5 times more likely to feel this than boys.
- Black (38%) and Asian girls (34%) agree with this statement significantly more than White British girls (25%), who agree the least.



LACK OF FUNDING & OPPORTUNITIES REMAIN KEY CONCERNS FOR GIRLS

Barriers to girls/boys becoming a top athlete or professional sportsperson*



ETHNICITY

- Barriers can be amplified for girls from different ethnic backgrounds. White British girls (29%) are more likely than White Other girls (16%) to feel there aren't enough local opportunities, clubs, or teams to join.
- Black (37%) and Mixed Race (33%) girls are significantly more likely than White British girls (24%) to see the lack of female role models to support them as a barrier to achieving their sporting dreams.

GIRLS OVER TIME

- The perception that there's not enough funding for girls sport has dropped from 52% in 2022 to 48% in 2023, and now stands at 33%.
- Similarly, the view that girls don't have the chance to try enough different sports has decreased from 40% in 2022 to 36% in 2023, and now 27%.
- Concerns about a lack of opportunities, clubs and teams to join locally have also fallen steadily, from 39% in 2022 to 33% in 2023, and now 28%.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE 2024 PARIS OLYMPICS

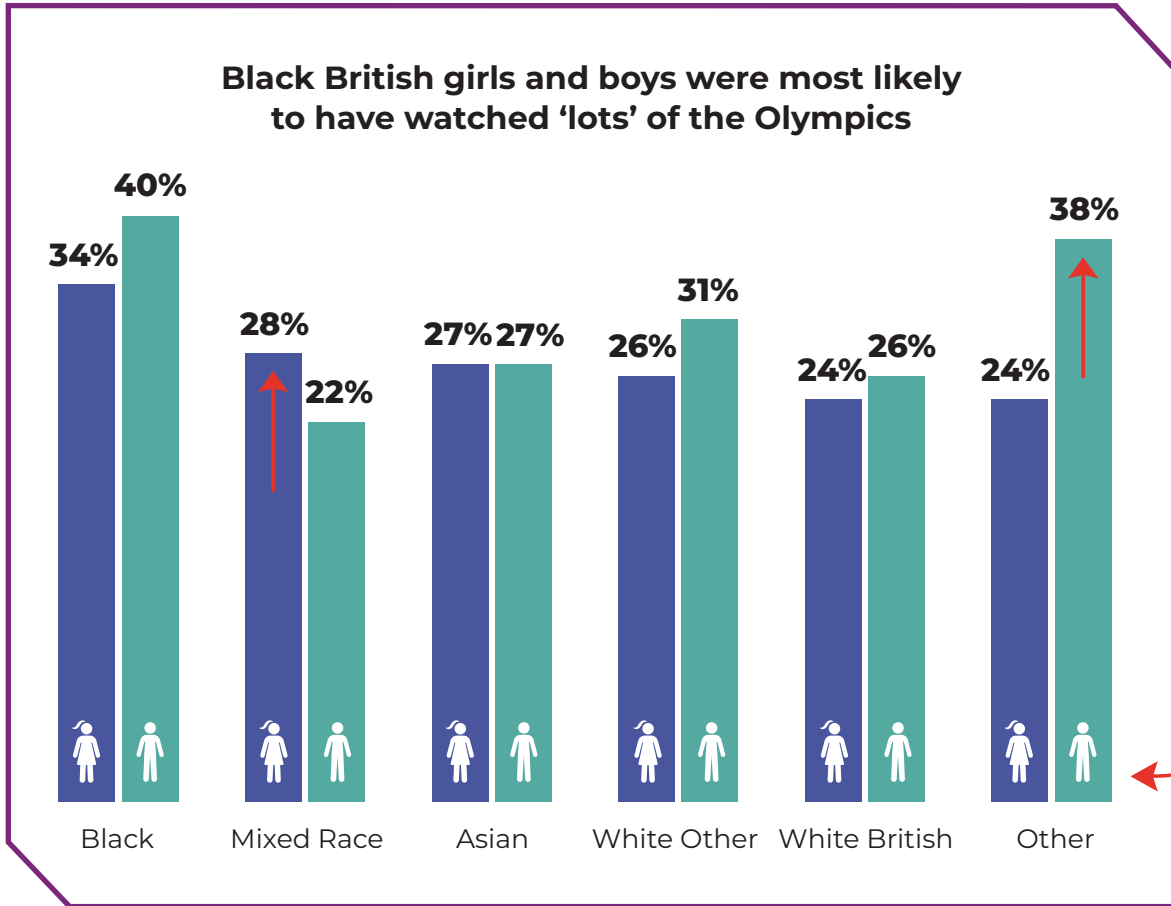
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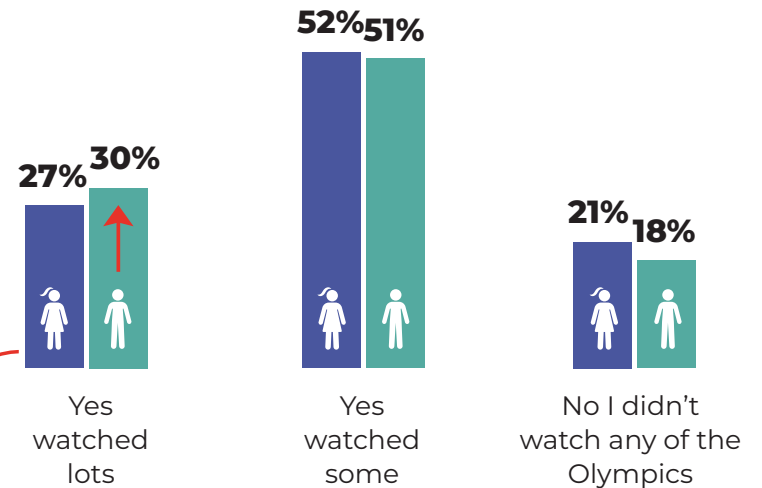
*“One thing I’d like to share is the **profound impact that sports and the Olympics have on people**, not just as a form of entertainment, but as a **source of inspiration and unity**. Watching the Olympics, I’m always struck by the incredible stories of athletes overcoming adversity, breaking records, and representing their countries with pride. It’s a reminder of the **resilience of the human spirit and the power of dedication, discipline, and perseverance.**”*

(Girl, aged 24)

SIMILAR NUMBERS OF GIRLS & BOYS WATCHED THE OLYMPICS BUT THIS DIFFERS BY ETHNICITY



% Who watched the Olympics on TV/online



“This Olympic Games was my first ever experience of properly watching an international event. It has given me another reason to engage more in sports.”

(Girl, aged 15)

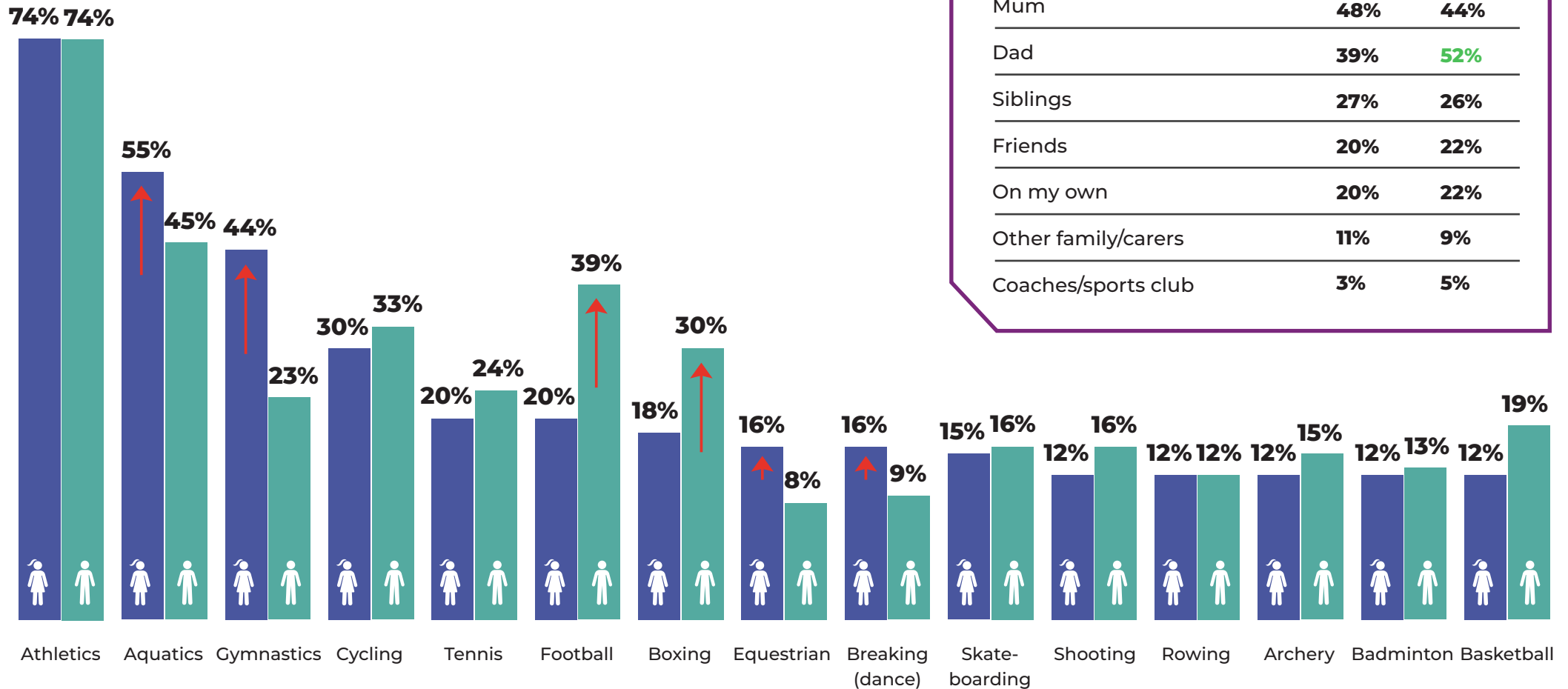
“Paris 2024 dazzled with iconic venues, record-breaking performances, gender equality, sustainability, and exciting new sports like skateboarding and surfing.”

(Boy, aged 14)

The top reasons overall for girls' and boys' lack of engagement in the Olympics were a lack of interest in sport or the Games, limited awareness or access to watch, and time constraints or other commitments.

ATHLETICS & AQUATICS WERE THE MOST POPULAR EVENTS AMONGST BOTH GIRLS & BOYS

% Top 15 most watched Olympic sports*



People girls and boys watched the Olympics with most

| | Girls (%) | Boys (%) |
|---------------------|-----------|----------|
| Mum | 48% | 44% |
| Dad | 39% | 52% |
| Siblings | 27% | 26% |
| Friends | 20% | 22% |
| On my own | 20% | 22% |
| Other family/carers | 11% | 9% |
| Coaches/sports club | 3% | 5% |

HOW DID THE OLYMPICS RESONATE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

The 2024 Olympics generated a mix of excitement, pride, and inspiration across girls and boys, though there was also a subset who expressed disinterest or criticism. While girls were more focused on empowerment and diversity, boys tended to emphasise competition and winning. The inclusion of new sports like breakdancing introduced a novel dynamic that received mixed reactions.

Most memorable moments of the Olympics

Key Themes

EXCITEMENT & ENGAGEMENT

GLOBAL UNITY & DIVERSITY

SPECIFIC EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

NATIONAL PRIDE & ACHIEVEMENT

INCLUSION OF NEW SPORTS

GENDER & REPRESENTATION

CRITICISM & DISINTEREST



Every time team GB won a gold medal.

(Boy, aged 16)

The opening ceremony due to how controversial it is and how much of a talking point it remains.

(Boy, aged 20)

It's memorable not in a good way... that Muslim women couldn't wear hijabs.

(Girl, aged 24)

When GB can show what we are made of.

(Girl, aged 16)

Introducing new sports like breaking.

(Girl, aged 24)

The shooting final when the English guy broke the record.

(Boy, aged 14)

A young athlete from a small, lesser-known country overcame all odds, broke a longstanding world record in the long-distance running event, and inspired millions around the globe with their resilience, passion, and unwavering determination.

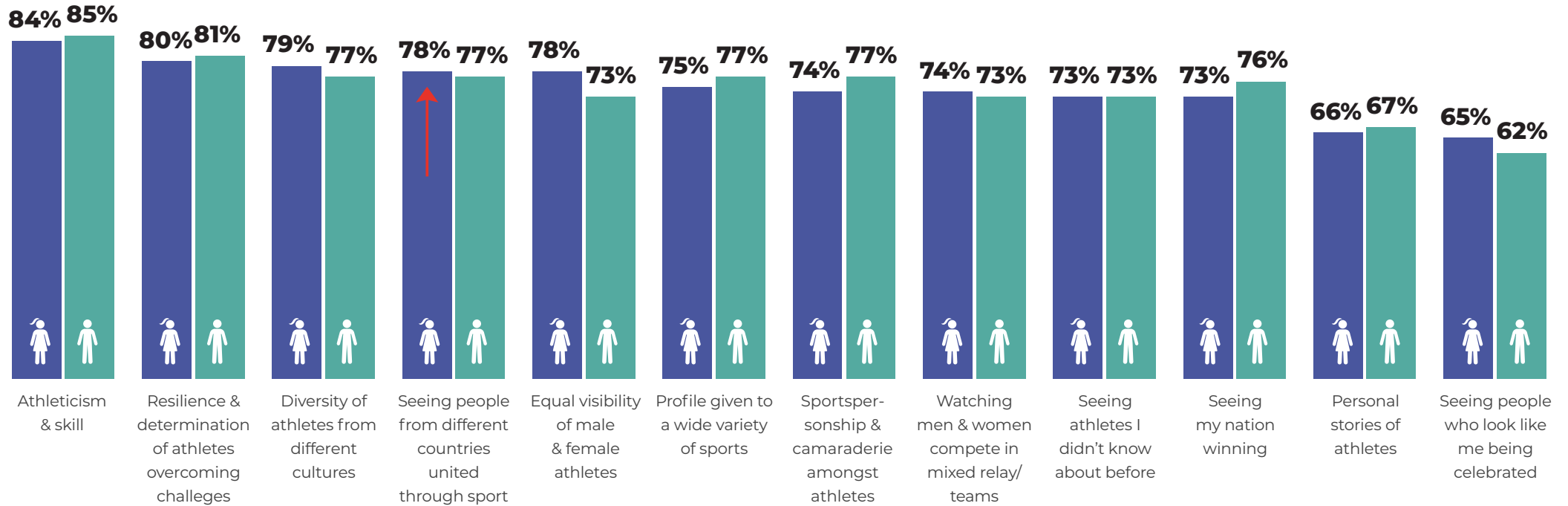
(Girl, aged 17)

Climbing was most expected because people who climbed were brave.

(Girl, aged 13)



WHAT INSPIRED GIRLS & BOYS ABOUT THE OLYMPICS?



Agree / strongly agree

ETHNICITY

- Black girls (86%) were more inspired by seeing people from different countries united through sport, compared to White British girls (77%). White British girls (86%) were more inspired by the athleticism and skill of athletes than White Other girls (76%).
- Representation played a key role, with Black (79%), Mixed Race (72%), and Asian girls (71%) more inspired by 'seeing people who look like me' celebrated compared to White British (60%) and White Other girls (55%).
- National pride also resonated, with Black (77%) and White British girls (75%) more inspired by their nation's victories than Asian girls (66%). Additionally, Black (81%) and White British girls (79%) were more inspired by the equal visibility of male and female athletes than Asian girls (70%).

RESILIENCE & OVERCOMING ADVERSITY IS A STRONG SOURCE OF INSPIRATION TO GIRLS & BOYS

We asked girls and boys which Olympians, past and present, inspire them and why. Their responses highlighted a wide range of reasons and a diverse mix of athletes, with Simone Biles, Usain Bolt, Tom Daley, Keely Hodgkinson, Mo Farah, Andy Murray, and Michael Phelps being among the most frequently mentioned.

Reasons girls and boys feel inspired by Olympic athletes



[Katrina Johnson Thompson] She's faced so many injuries and been to 4 Olympics and has finally won a medal despite being world champion twice.

(Girl, aged 20)

[Adam Peaty] Overcoming addiction and many other hardships to get the silver in swimming. Also, his incredibly positive attitude in front of the TV cameras.

(Boy, aged 24)

[Dina Asha-Smith] I've followed her for years and she's a hard working always improving athlete and she's always smiling and happy as well.

(Girl, aged 15)

[Simone Biles] Her dominance in gymnastics is unparalleled, but what truly sets her apart is her courage to speak openly about mental health, even at the height of her career during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

(Boy, aged 17)

[Simone Biles] She is unstoppable, she is incredible at the sport she does and shows it doesn't matter if you're young or older you can do whatever you put your mind to.

(Girl, aged 13)

[Tom Daley] Doesn't care what people think of him, he's quite a bit older but very experienced.

(Boy, aged 14)

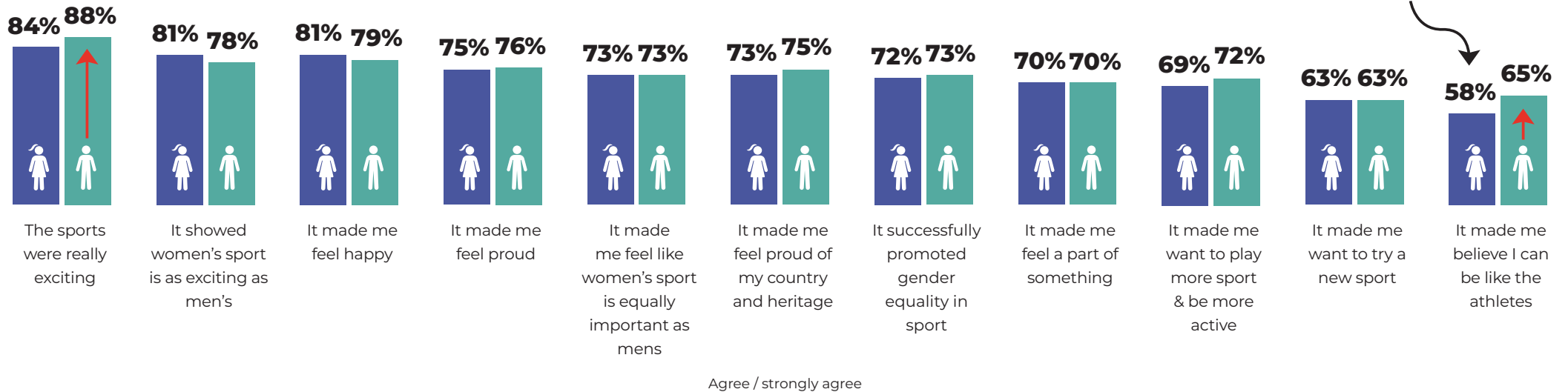


[Serena Williams] She's black and an icon who's worked hard for her position.

(Girl, aged 21)

NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF GIRLS FEEL INSPIRED TO TRY A NEW SPORT BUT FEWER BELIEVE THEY CAN BE LIKE THE OLYMPIC ATHLETES

How girls and boys feel about the Olympics



ETHNICITY

Black and Asian girls felt more inspired by the Olympics than White British girls:

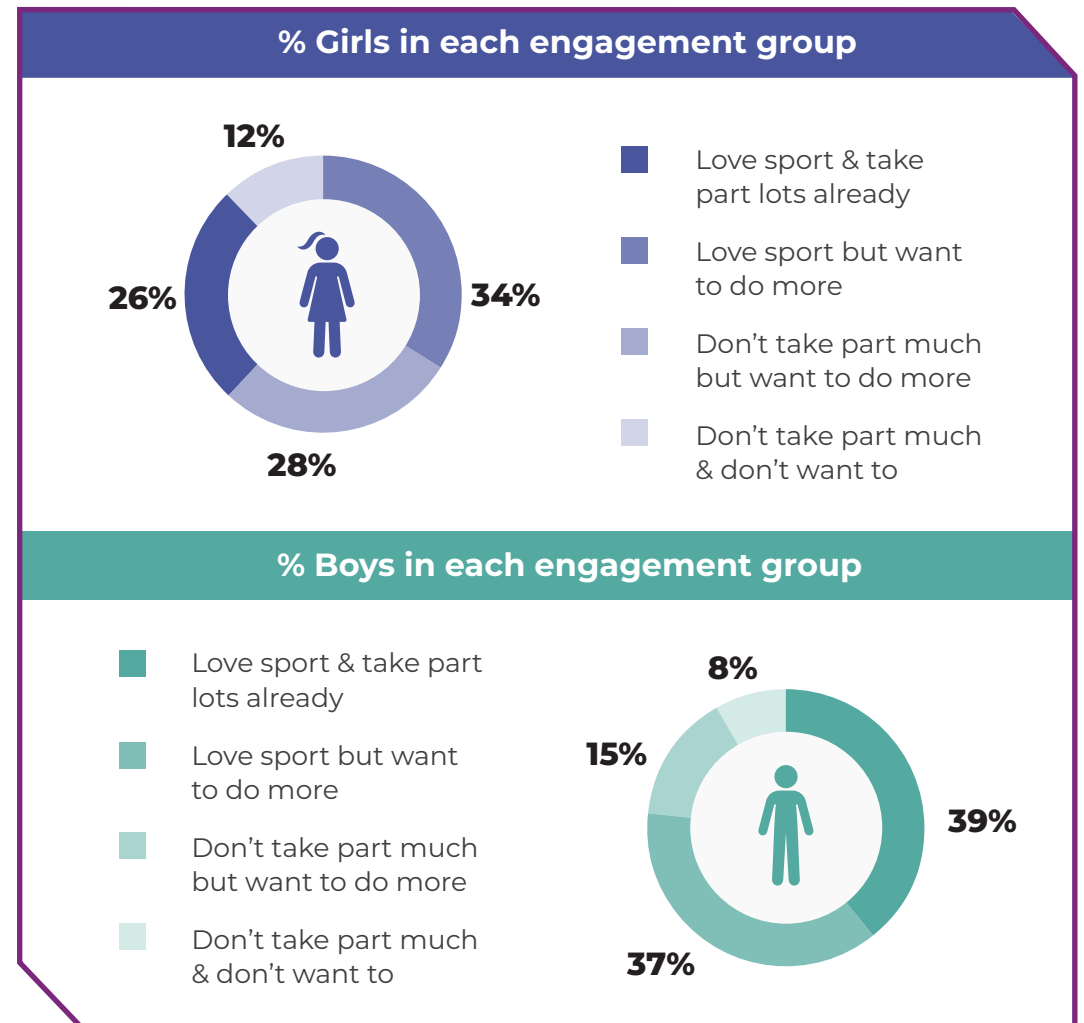
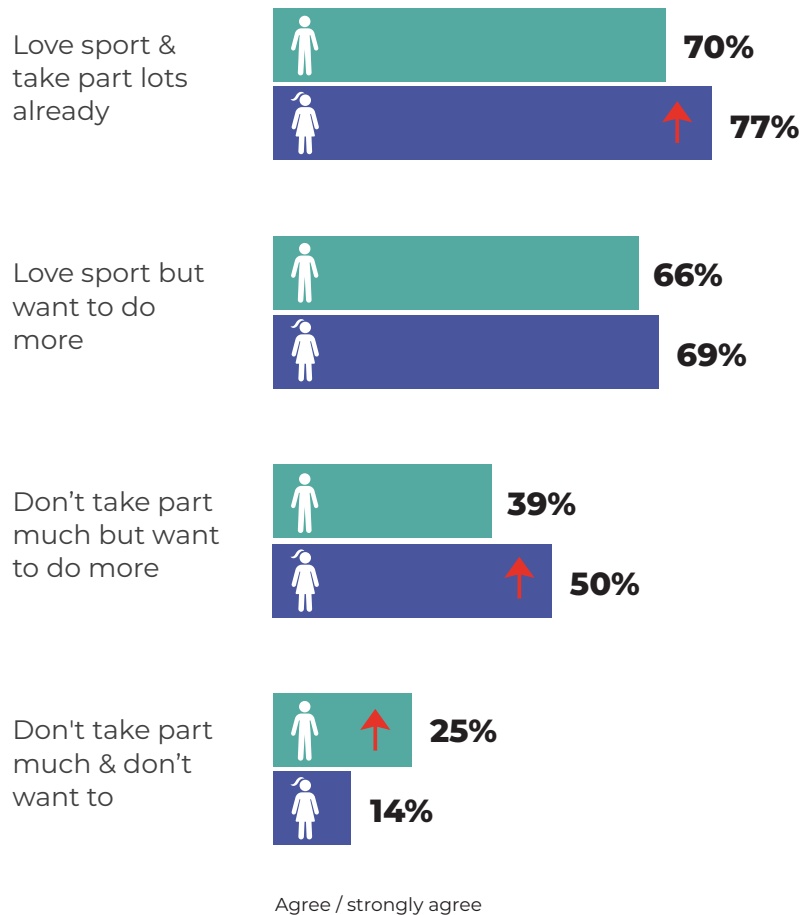
- 84% of Black girls (vs. 66% White British) said it made them want to play more sport and be more active.
- 76% of Black and 67% of Asian girls (vs. 54% White British) said it made them believe they could be like the athletes.
- 77% of Black and 69% of Asian girls (vs. 60% White British) said it inspired them to try a new sport.

“Honestly, the recent Olympic Games reignited my love for sports. Watching all those incredible athletes push their limits made me want to stay more active and try new things.

It reminded me that sports aren't just about competition—they're about passion, resilience, and bringing people together. I'm definitely looking forward to finding new ways to stay fit and maybe even picking up a new hobby or two.”
(Girl, aged 15)

MANY GIRLS FEEL INSPIRED TO TRY NEW SPORTS... MORE SO THAN BOYS

Girls and boys who felt inspired to try a new sport or activity due to the Olympics by engagement



GIRLS WERE INSPIRED & MOTIVATED BY THE DIVERSITY OF OLYMPIC SPORTS



Sports girls have been inspired to try



Sports boys have been inspired to try



Gymnastics as I'm trying to be more flexible and running because the athletes looked very happy to do the sports they do.

(Girl, aged 16)

The 2024 Paris Olympics has inspired me to take up **fencing**, as the **finesse, strategic thinking, and lightning-fast reflexes displayed by the athletes** sparked a newfound appreciation and excitement for the sport.

(Girl, aged 17)

Handball because I attended the events in France and it was truly fun. I didn't know this sport very well before.

(Girl, aged 16)

Swimming as its local to us so something that **won't cost too much to do**.

(Girl, aged 16)

The 2024 Paris Olympics inspired me to try my hand at **Skyball** a futuristic sport that **combines elements of volleyball, trampolining, and parkour**.

(Girl, aged 16)

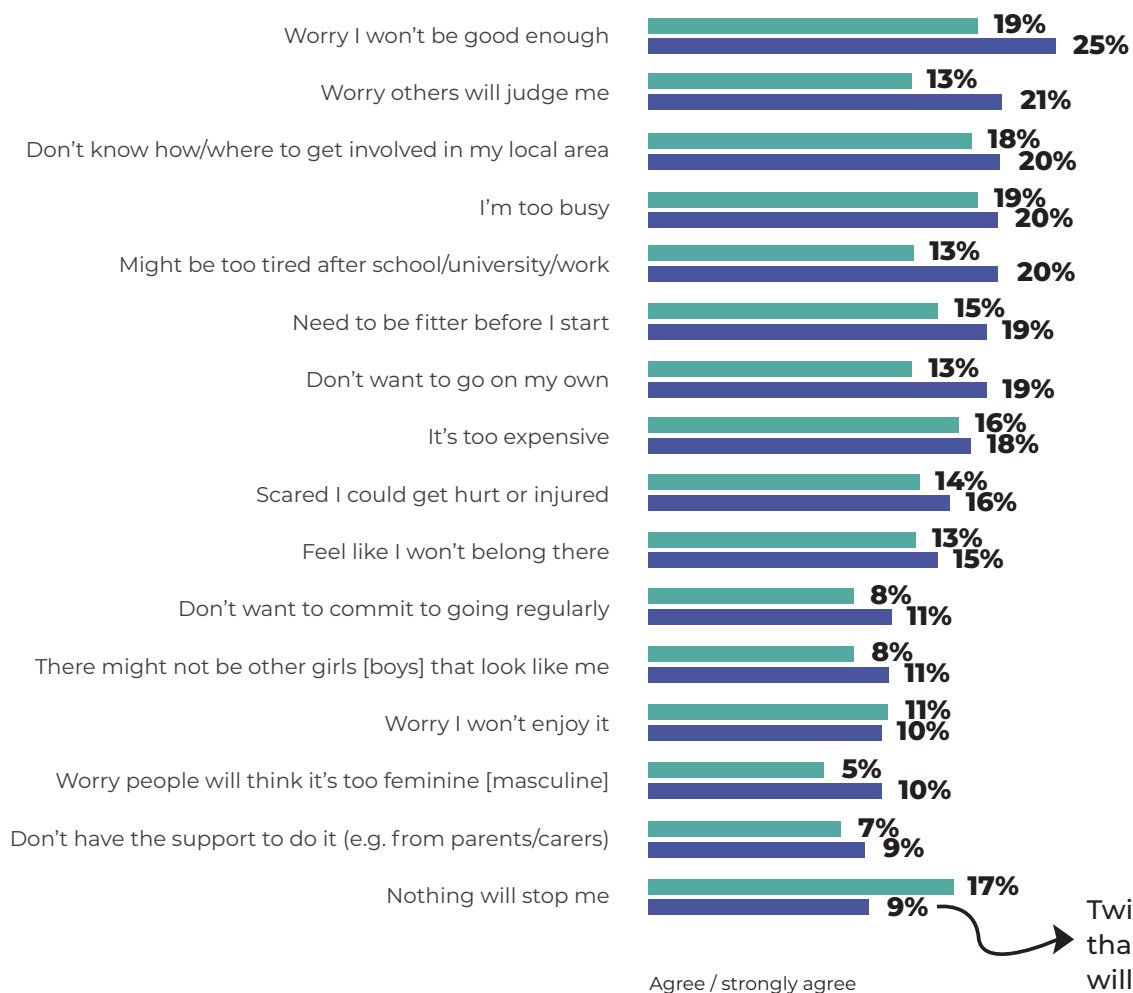
The sport I was inspired to uptake was **badminton**, it is **something I have tried previously and want to give it another try**.

(Girl, aged 24)



WORRY AROUND NOT BEING GOOD ENOUGH, FEELING JUDGED & LACK OF TIME & OPPORTUNITIES DETER SOME GIRLS FROM TRYING NEW SPORTS

Barriers girls and boys feel would prevent them from trying a new sport or activity



“I feel that motherhood is a factor which doesn't affect men in sports the same, often women have to stop participating in sport due to having children. I myself have had to reduce the amount of exercise I can do due to time constraints with having a child.”

(Girl, aged 24)

ETHNICITY

- Asian girls are most likely to cite being too tired (28%), needing to be fitter (25%), and concerns about appearing too masculine (15%).
- White British girls are most likely to avoid going alone (21%), whilst Black girls are most concerned about injury (25%).
- Both Asian and Black girls (14%) are most likely to feel they lack the support from parents/carers.

Twice as many boys than girls say nothing will stop them!

GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT

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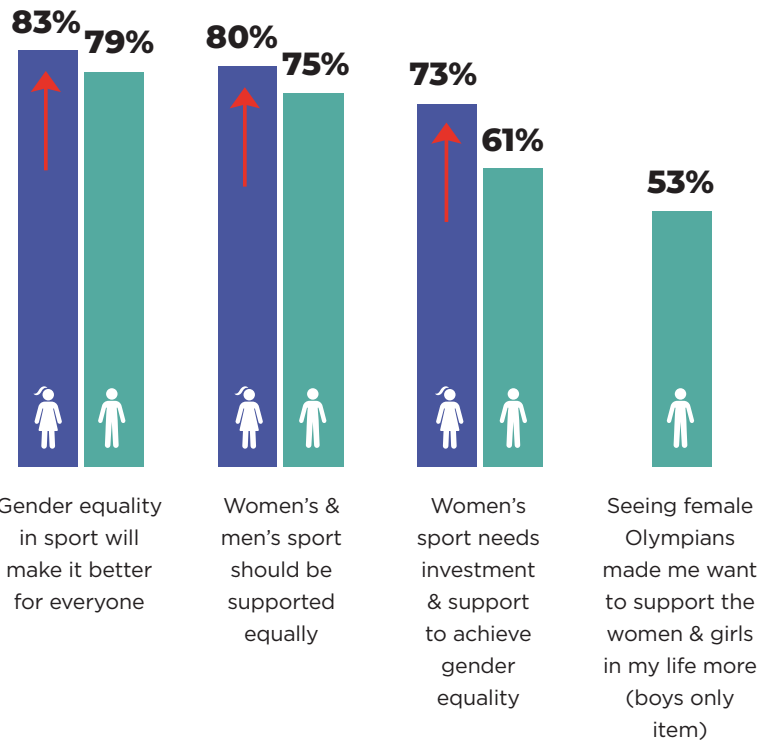
The 2024 Paris Olympics were the first ever games to achieve gender equal participation in the events providing an opportunity to explore young people's perceptions of gender equality in sport.



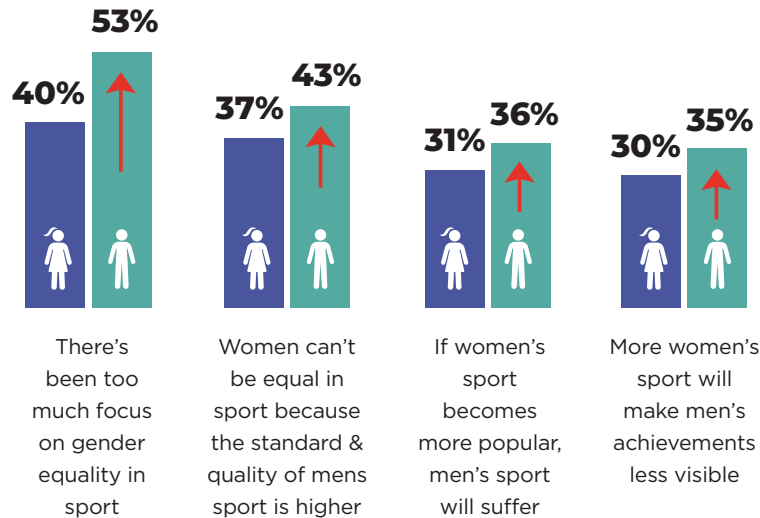
MANY BOYS SUPPORT GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT BUT SOME FEAR ITS GONE TOO FAR & COULD NEGATIVELY IMPACT MEN

Girls' and boys' opinions on gender equality in sport

Positive Perceptions



Negative Perceptions



Agree / strongly agree

"I just hope the gender equality in sports continues and does not just die with the end of the Olympics."

(Boy, aged 15)

"I would love to see more women in sports and I want it to be as popular as the men's sport."

(Girl, aged 24)

"[Gender equality] is not important to me. It has been alright for over 100 years. No need to change it."

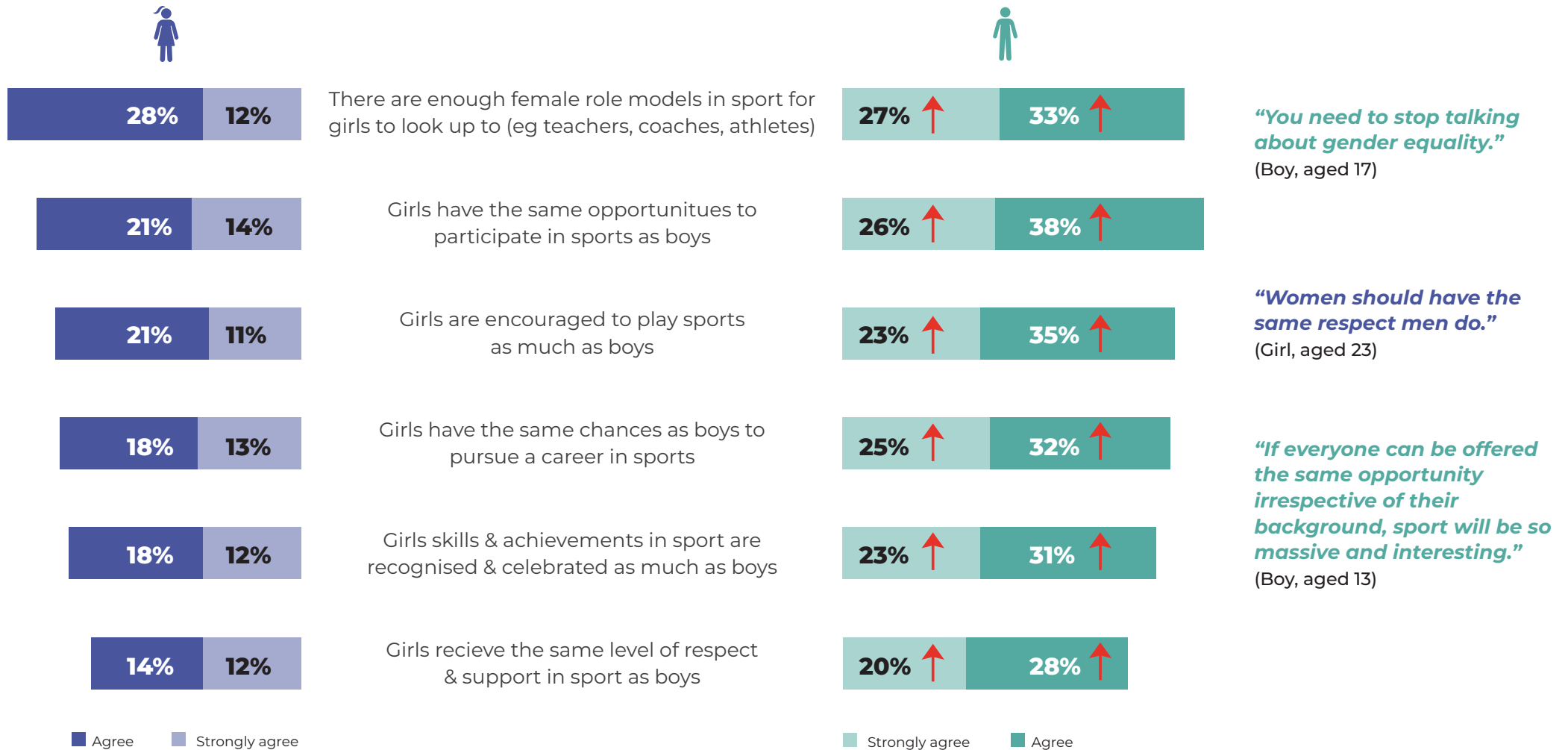
(Boy, aged 15)

"There will never be equality in sport."

(Girl, aged 14)

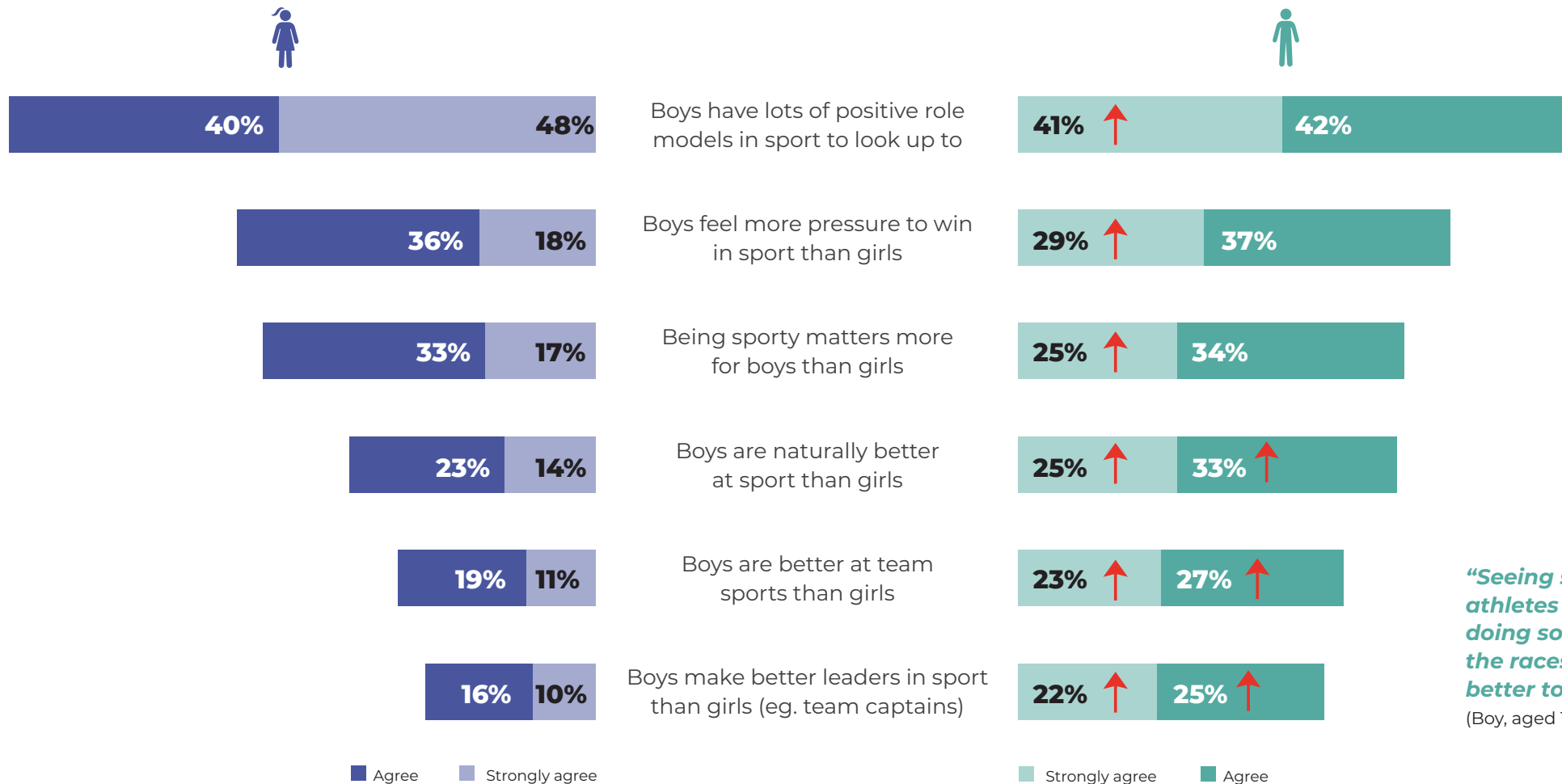
BOYS DO NOT SEE THE REALITY OF GIRLS' EXPERIENCES IN SPORT

Girls' and boys' perceptions of gender equality in sport for girls



INGRAINED GENDER STEREOTYPES PERSIST THAT LARGELY DEVALUE GIRLS' SPORT, PARTICULARLY AMONG BOYS

Girls' and boys' perceptions of boys in sport

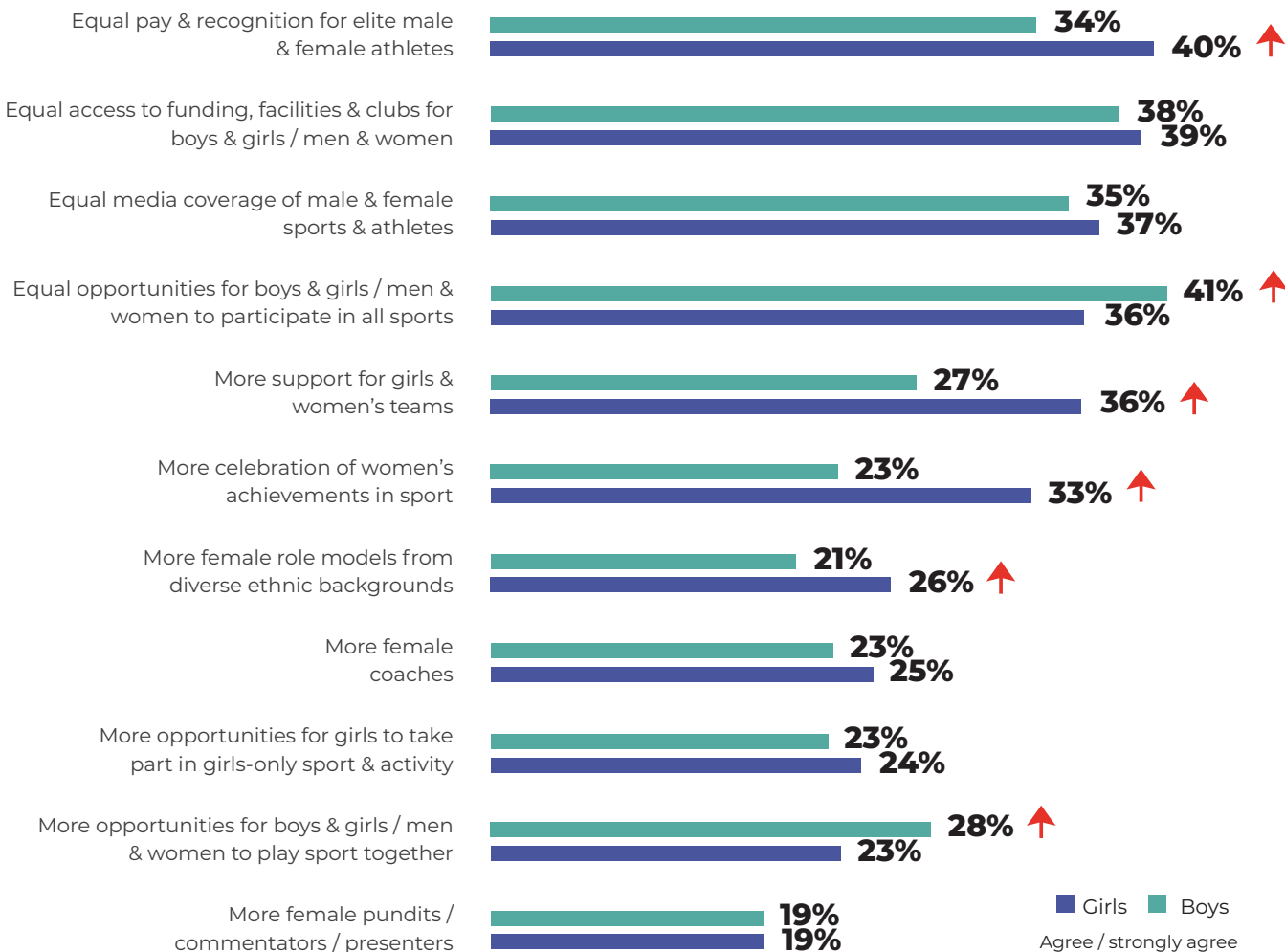


“Seeing so many athletes trying and doing so hard in the races, I must do better too.”

(Boy, aged 16)

FOR GIRLS, MORE OPPORTUNITIES, SUPPORT & RECOGNITION ARE CRITICAL TO GENDER EQUALITY

Most important ways to achieve gender parity in sport



ETHNICITY

- Black (43%) and White British (41%) girls are significantly more likely than White Other girls (30%) to prioritise equal pay and recognition for male and female athletes.
- White British girls (43%) are most likely to emphasise equal access to funding, facilities, and clubs, compared to Asian (34%), White Other (31%), and Black (30%) girls.
- Mixed Race girls (40%) are most likely to highlight celebrating women's achievements in sport, compared to Asian girls (28%).
- Meanwhile, Black (38%) and Asian (35%) girls are significantly more likely than White Other (23%) and White British (22%) girls to prioritise diverse female role models.

KEY ISSUES

Increased visibility of women in sport has a positive impact

As this Dream Deficit report shows girls are increasingly able to dream of reaching the top although the gender dream gap still remains. Visibility recognises and celebrates women's achievements helping to normalise girls and women in sport and can inspire girls to engage in sport to bolster their health and wellbeing.

Stereotyping is still holding girls back

Harmful stereotypes such as 'sport is for boys' are pervasive. They limit our expectations of girls and stifle their relationship with sport, with many feeling they are not treated equally to boys. These barriers are not new but nor are they lessening fast enough. To ensure girls can thrive in sport, we need to recognise their physical, biological and social needs, and improve the understanding and education of parents, teachers and coaches to dismantle stereotypes and foster environments in which girls are just as valued as boys.

Boys believe we've made more progress than girls

There is a significant disconnect between boys' and girls' perceptions of equality in sport, with boys perceiving girls have more opportunities, respect and recognition than girls themselves. We need to open their eyes to the inequalities girls face in sport and in life, so they can be allies and agents of change in fostering gender equality. Over half of boys said seeing female Olympians made them want to support the women and girls in their life more – we need to help them to do so.

Black girls dream big in sport, but the reality is that they often feel pushed out

There is commonality between the female experience both physically and societally, and within this we must also recognise the diversity amongst them. This research shows that Black girls and young women in particular have high aspirations in sport but some barriers to engaging and fulfilling their dreams may be more acute. Women in Sport is carrying out large scale research to understand the wider lives of Black teenage girls and young women and their relationship with sport to drive positive change.

Girls as a whole still lack opportunities in sport

More girls now love sport, want to be more active and have greater aspirations. Though perceptions of equality in sport are improving amongst young people, around 4 in 10 believe equal access to funding, facilities and clubs is still needed. Women in Sport is carrying out research to understand the opportunity gap that exists between girls and boys in sport. Every girl should have accessible opportunities to take part and fulfill her aspirations in sport, whatever form that may take.

“To treat as equals those who are not equal only creates further inequality.”

Baroness Helena Kennedy

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**We would love to hear how
you have used this research.**

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