

What Works for Women - Explanations about the barriers to activity

Activity stereotyping

Some sports, particularly physical contact sports (for example boxing and rugby), are traditionally seen as male sports, and some people believe that women and girls should not do them. There is no reason why this should be. But, because of the negative stereotypes some girls and woman can be put off participating in these sports for fear of being considered unfeminine. There can also be a lack of opportunity to participate in these sports for a woman or girl.

Age

Many women once they reach a certain age may not feel comfortable or confident participating in certain activities that they may have done when they were younger. Often exercise classes can be full of young women or pitched at a certain activity level that is off putting as a person gets older. Research has shown that for some older women, they are not interested in the same activities as younger women and often find it hard to find activities that meet their needs or interests.

Attitudes and prejudices about disability

One third of young people with disabilities feel excluded from local sports opportunities. Access can be limited by physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, reception areas, changing rooms and sports facilities, lack of accessible transport and parking, poor lighting etc. Lack of information in accessible formats for visually impaired and/or hearing impaired people can also create barriers. Access can also be limited by unwelcoming attitudes and ignorance amongst staff and participants. Other barriers include: coaching staff who don't know how to adapt their teaching to help individuals take part in enjoyable, fulfilling activities and a lack of role models to inspire and motivate.

Young women with disabilities are less likely than disabled young men to participate in sport out of school hours or in organised sports activities. 16 per cent less women with disabilities take part in activity that men with disabilities.

Attitudes and assumptions about people with disabilities can make sport seem even more inaccessible. For example, the assumption that all disabled people are wheelchair users (when only about 5% are) ignores the diversity within and between different impairment groups and their needs. The assumption that removing physical barriers will automatically increase participation is also damaging; more significant barriers are those of discriminatory attitudes, lack of training and awareness.

Most of the women with disability currently participating in sport and physical activity have an acquired disability, not a congenital disability, so have had more meaningful prior experiences with sport.

Attitudes and prejudices about ethnicity

Although many people mistakenly believe that different ethnic groups share similar experiences, differences between BME groups are significant. For example, rates of participation in sport amongst different ethnic minorities vary: on average, Black Caribbean (39%), Indian (39%), Pakistani (31%) and Bangladeshi (30%) populations have rates of participation in sport below the national average (46%). Only the 'Black Other' group (60%) has participation rates higher than that found in the population as a whole. And 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 - eg 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.

Attitudes to women and girls' bodies differ in different cultures and religions. For example, some Muslim girls and women practice Islamic law which prevents them appearing in front of men dressed in inappropriate attire. This is just one of the factors which results in lower than average participation rates for BME girls and women. Swimming pools which don't allow women to wear T-shirts over their swimming costumes, and clubs which insist members wear tight-fitting and/or revealing uniforms can exclude those who follow the Muslim faith as well as those who are self-conscious of their bodies.

Body consciousness

Recent research has found that about a third of girls don't like others to see how they look when taking part in sport and physical activity. Girls whose main motivation was enjoyment, rather than changing their weight, were far less likely to feel self-conscious about taking part. Girls were less self-conscious when their friends took part.

This issue affects all aspects of society - but is particularly relevant to sport - research also shows that women are far more self-conscious than men when taking part in sport and physical activity. 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. This is particularly significant for overweight girls and women who are least likely to want to be physically active and who are frequently excluded from activities based on their own and society's perceptions of their interests and abilities.

Girls and women with disabilities may be particularly affected by problems around body image. With an increasingly body-obsessed culture, especially for women and adolescent girls, people with disabilities.

For these reasons, being watched while doing sport can be excruciatingly painful for some girls and women. Some may prefer to participate in female-only activities and/or to perform in venues where they cannot be observed. These factors also make some girls and women very reluctant to wear tight-fitting and/or revealing sportswear; some would rather not do sports at all than face the embarrassment.

Female invisibility - media representations and lack of role models in sport

Women and girls have been less involved in sport than men and boys through the centuries. At all levels and in all roles - community participation, elite athletics, coaching, managing and leading sports organisations - women, especially those from marginalised groups, have been under-represented. This situation is gradually changing in some areas because of the concerted efforts of individuals and groups (such as the Women's Sports Foundation, the International Working Group on Women and Sport, the International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women, and the International Olympic Committee's Women and Sport Commission). But change is slow. In 2004, fewer than ¼ of all representatives on strategic sports boards and committees were women and there are no women sports editors of national papers.

Women are still so under-represented in decision-making positions in sports organisations that, at times, it can seem that the sports sector is run by men for men.

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. Women need additional confidence, commitment and perseverance when they feel excluded.

One result of this historic imbalance is that the media coverage of sport focuses almost entirely on the activities of men. On average, only 5% of sports coverage in national and local print media is dedicated to women's sport, and sportswomen suffer from a media focus on their personal lives and appearances rather than their performances and achievements.

This is significant because TV, radio and the newspapers play a central role in informing our knowledge, opinions and attitudes about women and sport, which, in turn, influence participation levels. The media provide us with our role models. Although a handful of stars, such as Kelly Holmes and Paula Radcliffe, have high media profiles, 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.

Homophobia

Homophobia is the hatred or fear of homosexuals (ie. lesbians, bisexuals and gay men). It includes another factor which is particularly relevant to the world of sport - 'homo-negativism' - which is a fear among heterosexuals that they may be perceived as homosexual. Women's sport (especially male-dominated sport such as football and rugby) is still regarded by some as fundamentally unfeminine. Lesbians are also regarded by some as fundamentally unfeminine. The resulting, erroneous, conclusion is that all sportswomen must be lesbians.

There are several consequences: some women/girls refrain from certain sports for fear of being perceived as unfeminine and/or lesbian; some parents discourage their daughter from taking up sport; some girls/women limit their training to avoid developing a muscley body; some lesbian athletes avoid going public about their

sexual orientation in case they experience prejudice from other athletes and coaches, or lose public support and sponsorship; other sportswomen dress and behave in a traditionally feminine way to avoid attention to their sexual orientation. Ultimately, homophobia and homo-negativism can stop girls/women from participating or excelling in sport.

Lack of childcare

Women cite lack of childcare facilities as a major factor discouraging them from taking part in sport and physical activity; in a recent Sport England study, four times as many women as men identified this as a barrier. Mothers from poorer families are unlikely to afford childcare to give them the time to take part in sport.

Lack of money

More women than men say that lack of money prevents them from taking part in sport and physical activity. Women tend to have less income than men; women working full time earn on average £559 less per month than men do. Poor families may not be able to afford to invest in club membership, or pay for sporting clothing and equipment, and mothers from poorer families are unlikely to afford childcare to give them the time to take part in sport.

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.

Lack of self-confidence

Plenty of research shows that girls, on average, have less self-confidence than boys and rate their performance or ability more negatively than do boys. Indeed, a boy bursting with self-confidence will be admired and encouraged while a girl similarly full of confidence can be put down as 'a little madam.'

Self-confidence is also linked to competition. Although most sportswomen 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. Girls find competitiveness is more of a problem in mixed groups, where boys raise the level of competitiveness through making negative and sexist comments and bullying.

Lack of time

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. Almost 3.5 hours of a woman's day is taken up with domestic work, compared to less than 2 hours for men. This is one of the key reasons for not taking part in activity. Girls are also likely to be affected by this, as they're more likely than their brothers to be expected to take care of siblings and to take on housework and cooking.

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. These groups are more reliant on public transport, which is too often unreliable, inconvenient and expensive.

Parental and adult influence

The influence of parents, coaches and other adults affects girls and boys differently. For example, adolescent females place greater emphasis on self-comparison and comments from adults than do adolescent males, who rely more on competitive outcomes and ease of learning as their basis for personal judgement of physical competence. Adverse comments from coaches and teachers provide one of the main reasons for girls becoming discouraged from playing sport.

Given that girls rely on adults' comments, parents, coaches and teachers play a particularly important role in motivating them to participate in sport and physical activity. Girls are more likely to enjoy their sport if they think that relevant adults have realistic expectations, provide support and encouragement for their efforts and refrain from making negative evaluations of their performance.

Personal safety/sexual harassment

Personal safety on the streets, on public transport, and in and around sports and community venues is a particular problem for women and girls who may fear not only physical and sexual attack, but also unwanted attention and harassment. These fears may make parents of girls reluctant to allow their daughters to go out after dark. In fact, research shows this to be a major reason why women and girls don't make use of some leisure and sports facilities.

Many females 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, 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 sexual 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.

The male-dominated culture of sport

It might seem strange to suggest that a barrier to participation in sport is sport itself, but this idea is worth considering. Some people argue that sport has traditionally been defined, organised, promoted and constructed as a male activity. For example, 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. Women and girls are often reminded of this male-domination by others who are surprised to see them working, participating or competing in sport. Working in a sector where you are a minority can make you feel that you don't belong.

Many women/girls are turned off the competitive nature of most sport, (as are some men and boys). They tend to prefer the social aspects of physical activity - having fun, making friends.

Venue based issues

Women and girls can't play sport if they can't get access to the necessary facilities. Too often, sports halls prioritise male sport when it comes to pitch time so that men/boys get facilities at their preferred times, while women/girls have to make do with less convenient times. Given that women have less leisure time than men, this is a double whammy of inequality.

Women and girls' access is sometimes restricted by sexist practices and, even, legislation. For example, private members clubs (which are not covered by all current equality laws) have denied women full membership, prevented them having voting power, restricted their access to club facilities, given them much less playing time than men and barred them from weekend play and local tournaments. This results in ridiculous situations whereby women who take their sons to play have not themselves been allowed to enter the club house!

Access to sporting opportunities is particularly limited for women and girls with disabilities. For example, one third of disabled young people feel excluded from local sports opportunities. Access can be limited by physical barriers such as inaccessible entrances, reception areas, changing rooms and sports facilities, lack of accessible transport and parking, poor lighting etc. Lack of information in accessible formats for visually impaired and/or hearing impaired people can also create barriers. Access can also be limited by unwelcoming attitudes and ignorance amongst staff and participants. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) covers many of these issues and requires public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.