

# **SPOTLIGHT ON GENDER**

Active Lives Adult Survey  
November 2015-16

# WELCOME

The relationship we have with sport and physical activity differs significantly depending on our gender. Our Active Lives Adult report shows there are still more men than women getting active – though that gap has been closing.

The gender gap differs depending on the type of activity, and is widest for activities such as team sports, water sports and racquet sports.

To understand more about the difference between male and female patterns of behaviour in those aged 16 and over, this report delves deeper into the statistics and the underlying reasons behind them. There are also talking points at the end of each section.

AN **ACTIVE PERSON** IS SOMEONE WHO DOES AT LEAST **150 MINUTES** OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY A WEEK, WHILE AN **INACTIVE PERSON** DOES LESS THAN **30 MINUTES**

MEASURING THIS CONSISTS OF THREE ASPECTS:



NUMBER OF SESSIONS DONE



INTENSITY

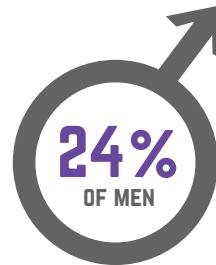


DURATION

## THE HEADLINES



ARE INACTIVE  
COMPARED TO



ARE ACTIVE  
COMPARED TO



TAKE PART IN  
TEAM SPORTS  
THAN WOMEN



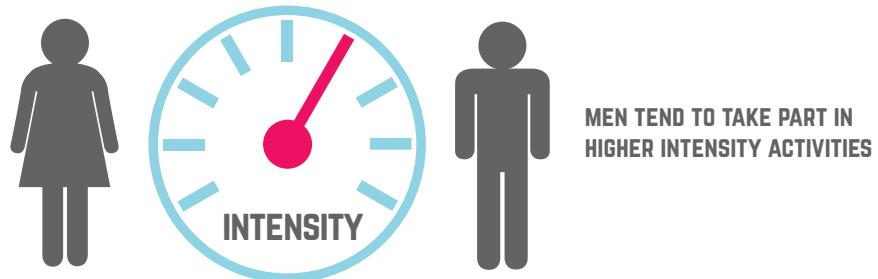
DO FITNESS  
ACTIVITIES  
COMPARED  
TO MEN

# THE GENDER GAP: THE EVIDENCE

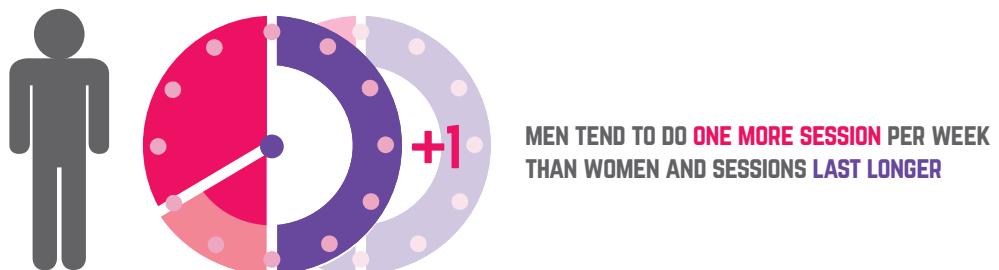
We need to delve into specific audiences at particular life stages to understand what lies behind the gender gap, unpicking the opportunities and challenges for men and women.

But before doing that, our data shows some patterns of engagement that are important to understand:

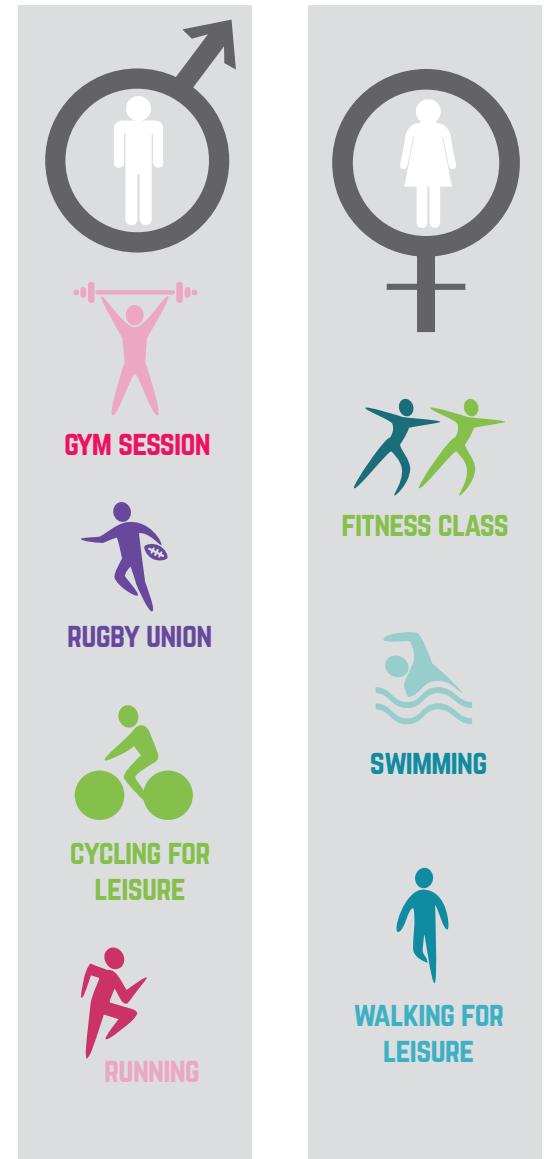
- > Men are more likely to take part in higher intensity activities, while women tend to do lower intensity activities.



- > For example, more men choose to take part in gym sessions and are more likely to do activities like rugby, cycling and running, while women are more likely to choose a fitness class, swimming or walking for leisure, as the chart on the right shows. Walking becomes even more important to women who are pregnant or have young children.
- > On average, men do one more session of physical activity a week and the sessions they do last around 11 minutes longer. This is because the activities women choose to do tend to last for shorter periods of time.



## TYPICAL ACTIVITY CHOICES



## INSIGHT-LED CHANGE

Talking to women and girls about activity has helped us understand what influences some of their choices. For example:

- > Adverts for quick workouts and other short-term challenges are very visible on social media channels. Although some women are sceptical about the benefits, they are appealing to women looking for ways to fit activity into their life. For many mums, short bursts of activity can be more manageable where the day can often feel disjointed or unfixed.
- > Certain sports and the environments where they take place can feel intimidating for some women. For women who have not been active for a while, memories of unpleasant past experiences of sport can be strong (*Sport England, Go where women are*). In response, our insight-led This Girl Can campaign has opened many women's eyes to the sheer breadth of activities out there and challenged those who deliver sport to make the experience more attractive and welcoming.

## TALKING POINTS

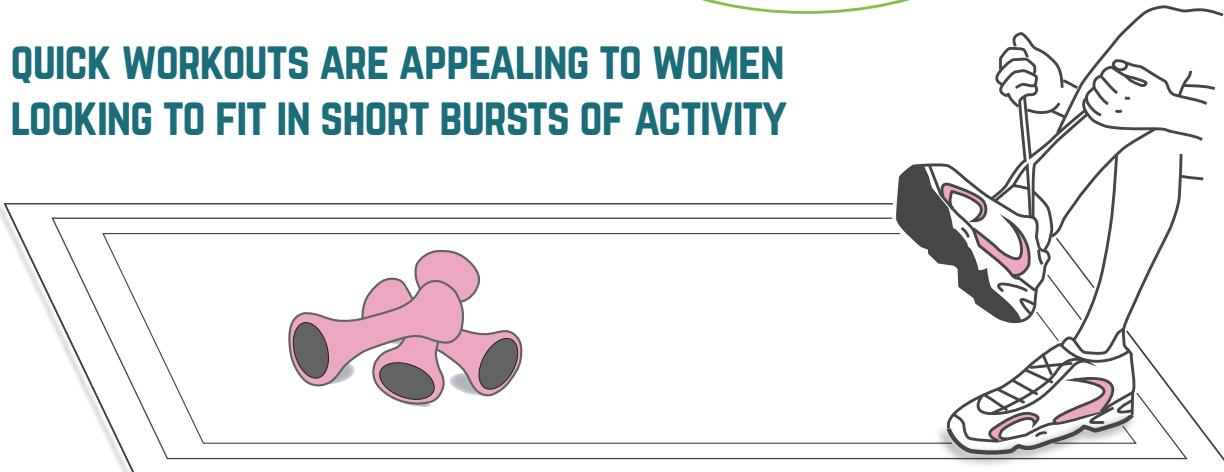
Men are active more often and for longer sessions. If women were to do 10 additional minutes of activity a week, the gender gap could be reduced to 1%.

However, asking women to do an extra 10 minutes would be too simplistic. The experience needs to be better so women want to come back more often and stay longer. This is partly about how well the activity is delivered, but also how we talk about sport.

This Girl Can talks about how it's normal to take a break from exercise: "Don't worry if you try one thing and it's not right or that you're in and out – as long as it doesn't stop you for good." That's not a message people often hear, but it's honest and it reduces the sense of failure.

This is how we can really influence women's feelings about activity and work towards closing the gender gap.

## QUICK WORKOUTS ARE APPEALING TO WOMEN LOOKING TO FIT IN SHORT BURSTS OF ACTIVITY



# THE GENDER GAP: ETHNICITY

The proportion of women who are active varies hugely between different ethnic backgrounds. The gender gap is widest between men and women who are black or South Asian, while women from these backgrounds also have the lowest activity levels overall. Our chart below shows the gender gap for each group.

## THE GENDER GAP BY ETHNIC BACKGROUND, AGED 16+

PROPORTION WHO ARE ACTIVE (DO 150+ MODERATE EQUIVALENT MINUTES A WEEK)

MALE      FEMALE



## FURTHER INSIGHT

There are a number of factors at play that deter women from some backgrounds taking part, including:

**PERCEPTION.** Sport is often perceived as a male orientated activity.

**FAMILY LIFE.** Responsibilities to the family is the most common reason for mums not taking part in sport.

**RELIGION.** Some women are influenced by expectations about what they should wear or how they should behave.

Source: [Engaging Women and Girls in Sport Toolkit, Sporting Equals 2011](#)

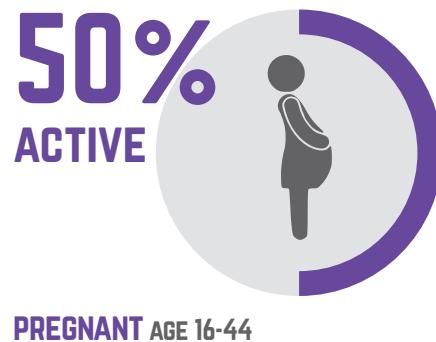
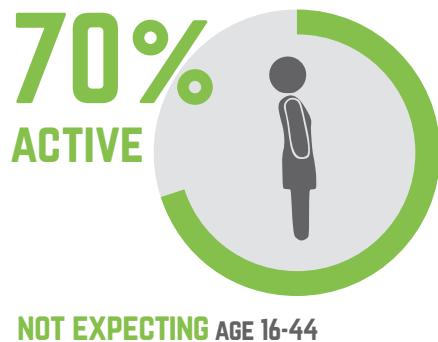
## TALKING POINTS

There are a number of factors that could hold women back from taking part in sport and physical activity. It's important to understand the role ethnic and cultural backgrounds can play, and to consider how women from different ethnic groups may have different deterrents to getting active.

# LIFE STAGES: PREGNANCY

Changes in circumstances and life stages present opportunities and threats to activity habits. Our data shows that the gender gap is widest after some of these points. The impact of pregnancy, children and families, and retirement, are all explored in this report.

Our Active Lives data shows that pregnant women are 20% less likely to do physical activity than women of the same age who aren't expecting.



## COMMON CONCERN FOR PREGNANT WOMEN ABOUT EXERCISING:

- TOO TIRED TO TAKE PART **55%**
- FEELING GENERALLY UNCOMFORTABLE **51%**
- BEING UNSURE OF WHAT THEY'RE ALLOWED TO DO AND WHAT INTENSITY **29%**
- BEING UNCLEAR IF IT'S SAFE TO DO ACTIVITY DURING PREGNANCY **25%**

RESEARCH BY SPORT ENGLAND, FEBRUARY 2017

**"OUR RESEARCH SHOWS THAT 84% OF PREGNANT WOMEN AND NEW MUMS SAID THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE MORE ACTIVE. AND ONE IN THREE SAID THEY HAD RECEIVED POSITIVE COMMENTS FOR EXERCISING WHILE PREGNANT"**

*ONLINE SURVEY CARRIED OUT BY THE FAMILY PANEL FOR SPORT ENGLAND, FEBRUARY 2017*

## FURTHER INSIGHT

Research has shown recreational exercise such as swimming and brisk walking while pregnant is beneficial for both mother and baby.

The Royal College of Midwives states that moderate exercise has **no detrimental health effects**. And their advice is that it's important to keep active during pregnancy if that is part of your usual routine.

## TALKING POINTS

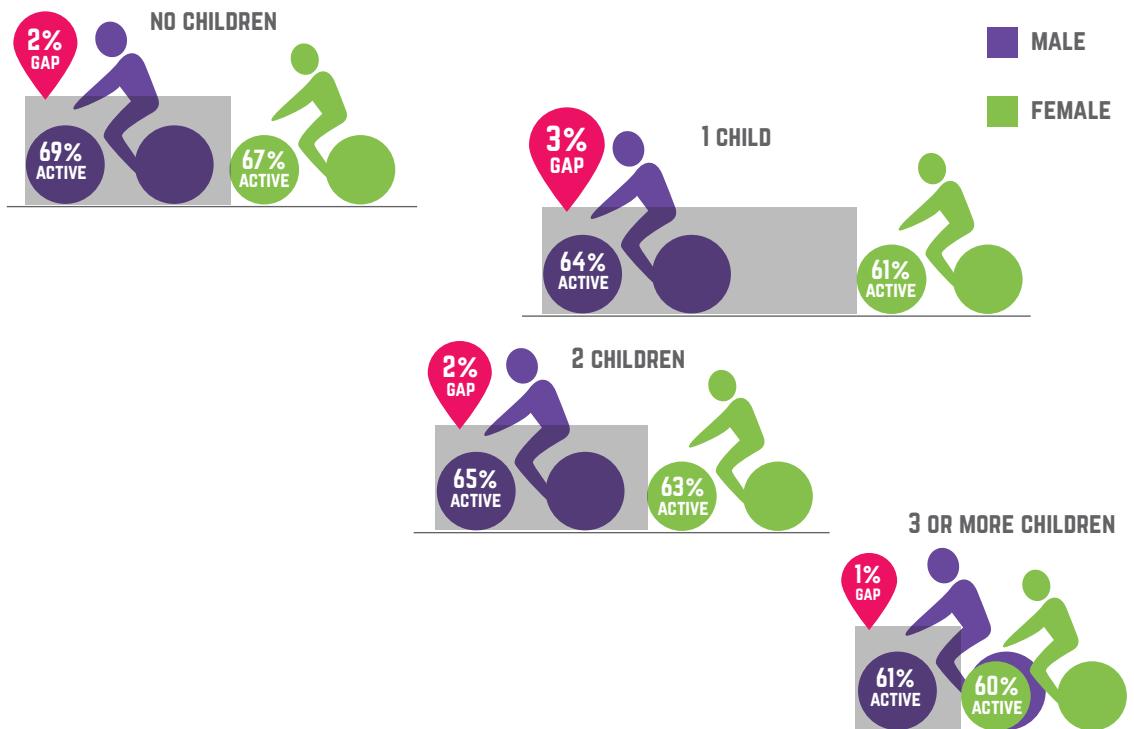
This Girl Can has prompted new conversations about exercising when pregnant and talks about how many new mums find it difficult to restart exercise after a period of inactivity. Active expectant mums need to be made more visible and women reassured that it doesn't matter how they look, how well they do it, or how sweaty they get – the point is they're doing something.

# LIFE STAGES: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The gender gap is also wider than average amongst parents living with young children, with parenthood appearing to have a bigger impact on women than men when it comes to how active they are. And research shows that the activity levels of mums have a greater influence on their children's activity levels than dads (*Taking Part Survey Year 8, Apr 12-Mar 13*).

Our research shows that fewer women do sport or activity in these circumstances. The chart below shows how parenthood (and the number of children) is linked to activity levels. As shown below, the gender gap is widest when there is just one child in the household – but the difference narrows as the number of children increase.

## HOW PARENTHOOD AFFECTS ACTIVITY LEVELS (AGE 25-54)



## FURTHER INSIGHT

It's clear that parents have a crucial role in helping their children lead active lives, however, research indicates that a key reason for not participating as a family is that parents fear they cannot keep up with their children. Developing parents' skills and confidence would help address this (*The Behavioural Architects on behalf of Sport England, 2017*).

## TALKING POINTS

By being active themselves, parents, particularly mums, influence their children's activity levels. Thought should be given to ways in which we can encourage parents to:

- Teach their child to swim – or simply boost their confidence and enjoyment by getting in the water with them
- Choose activities where they can take part together, such as a family bike ride
- Stay active themselves and act as a role model of 'normal behaviour'. Mums can often feel guilty about being active rather than spending time with their children. However, it's positive for girls in particular to see mum keeping fit, even if they're not going along.

# LIFE STAGES: RETIREMENT

Retirement is a key point in someone's life where old habits can be broken – and new habits formed. Our data shows that the gender gap is wider for those who are retired, compared to those who are employed, unemployed or not working for other reasons.

Within this, there is a wider gender gap amongst retired people aged 55-64. This is driven by the fact that while retired men aged 55-64 are more active than working men of the same age, women aged 55-64 are equally as active regardless of whether they're retired or still working.

## ACTIVE IN RETIREMENT



### TALKING POINTS

Another opportunity to narrow the gender gap is by focussing our attention on women at the point of retirement. We know from our data that the activity levels of women who have retired can be increased, but we need to understand what they're looking for at this age, what stops them and tailor what's offered around other responsibilities they may have too.

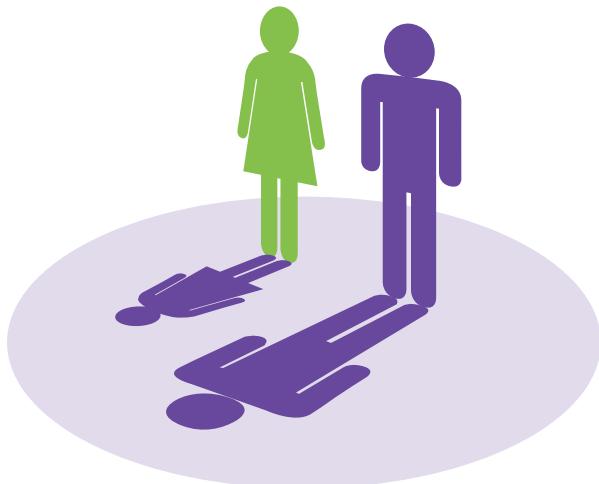
Understanding what drives the behaviours of men of this age may help unlock some of the barriers for women. We'll delve deeper into the specific issues on retirement in our *Spotlight on Older People* report.

# CONCLUSION

The information in this report shows there is work to do to further close the gender gap and help more women do sport and physical activity.

As well as reflecting on the talking points at the end of each section, we would also encourage you to read these two key insight documents on women: [Go where women are](#), and [Helping women and girls to get active: a practical guide](#).

Sport England will be publishing more reports in this Spotlight series, including fresh insights on people in lower socio-economic groups.



Sport England  
21 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3HF

[sportengland.org](http://sportengland.org)

October 2017

## NOTES

TO READ ALL OUR ACTIVE LIVES ADULT REPORTS,  
VISIT: [SPORTENGLAND.ORG/ACTIVELIVES](http://SPORTENGLAND.ORG/ACTIVELIVES).