

Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media: Inclusion in Sport inquiry

Evidence from Women in Sport

Introduction

1. Women in Sport is a charity formed in 1984 to further the cause of women in sport. Our vision is that no woman or girl is excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport and exercise.
2. We have a track record of success in securing change, based on our deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of women and girls at each life stage. We are determined to break down stubborn gender inequalities through our work with government, politicians, policymakers, the sports sector and beyond. We work in all four nations of the UK as well as internationally in countries including the Republic of Ireland.
3. Our successful policy and thought leadership work includes improving the gender balance of sports organisation boards through our 30% campaign. Our expert insight drives innovation, our action research provides impactful solutions to tackle gender inequalities, and our campaigning empowers more women and girls to be active.
4. The evidence submitted below will cover inclusion in sport as it affects women and girls, though some of the other areas touched on in the committee's invitation to submit written evidence will also be touched upon.

Misogyny

5. We must recognise that the inclusion or exclusion of women from sport does not exist in a vacuum. Sport is, after all, a reflection of wider society. With this in mind, one significant barrier to women being and feeling included in sport is the prevalence of misogyny and sexism in wider society which must be tackled with greater urgency than is currently the case. This includes ensuring that those in powerful positions in politics, law enforcement and the corporate world are taking sexism and misogyny seriously. Misogyny should be a hate crime. More companies, workplaces and institutions should have anti-sexism and/or anti-misogyny policies. In a society which doesn't treat sexism and misogyny seriously why should we expect sport to be any different?

Gender stereotypes

6. Stubborn gender stereotypes affect the relationship girls and women have with sport at all levels, whether elite or community, and at all stages of their lives. The pernicious stereotypes begin with the words and expectations surrounding very young girls that tell girls and women that sport isn't for them. limit women's inclusion in subtle ways. As a result of stereotypes firstly people make assumptions that women and girls don't want to play sport, they don't encourage them when they do, and they don't value their achievements as highly. Secondly women and girls don't expect to take part in sport, or if they do they often leave because the system isn't designed to make them feel they belong. These stereotypes need to be taken up at the root if we are to fully achieve a society where women and girls genuinely enjoy and feel comfortable in sport. This is not an easy thing to achieve, but nor is it impossible. Ultimately, long term and structural societal change is needed.
7. Harmful stereotypes about girls, women and sport begin at a young age. [Women in Sport's Dream Deficit survey](#) has shown that girls are surrounded by discouraging messages that tell them society doesn't value women's sport. 4 in 10 girls feel women's sport is still viewed as of lower value than men's sport and that girls are not expected to be good at sport. Our [research into primary school aged girls](#) found certain personality traits tend to be associated with girls, based on deep-rooted gendered labels that give society a fixed perception about what a young girl should be and should enjoy. The idea of the 'girly girl' is prime amongst these; and, girls are told, girly girls are not sporty. This is linked to a second stereotype society applied to young girls: that they are delicate, and they must be careful (including when playing sport). This, again, is a deep-rooted idea that limits opportunities for girls early in life, and so impacts their ability to learn fundamental movement skills. It is also part of the messaging that undermines self-belief and tells them that sport isn't for them. Parents and the education system reinforce these stereotypes, due to the stereotyping that they have been subjected to themselves. For example, only 30% of parents in our research said that playing sport and activity is very important for their daughters, compared to 41% of parents for their sons. At the same time, over one third of parents of girls (37%) think that girls are not encouraged to do sport and physical activity as much as boys.

8. As girls get older, the effect of this early stereotyping begins to become clear. [Our research into teenage girls and sport](#) shows teenage girls are falling out of love with sport at an alarming rate. 43% of teenage girls, who enjoyed sport and even considered themselves 'sporty' at primary school, disengaged in their teens. Just 24% of boys had the same experience. Concerns about body image and the changes associated with puberty are the biggest challenges that all girls, even those who are very active, face. Physical activity can highlight insecurities, created by the way society treats and sees girls from an early age, and make girls feel self-conscious and objectified. 65% told us they avoid physical activity because they don't like being watched, 50% don't like getting hot and sweaty and 45% don't feel like they have the right body shape to be involved. Periods are a major barrier, with 78% of girls avoiding exercising during their period (pain and fear of leakage are the top reasons given, along with increased tiredness and self-consciousness). The negative impact of stereotypes to do with girls and sport is also evident. Teenage girls are more likely than their male peers to say they feel judged when they play sport, that they don't feel good enough to get involved, that they don't feel safe outside and that they are too busy with schoolwork. Boys are more likely to say they feel confident being active and that they find sport easy. Girls are also less likely to be encouraged to be involved in sport.
9. For both younger girls and teenagers, school sport has a vital role to play in making them feel that they belong in sport. A bad experience of PE, at any school level, can be the thing that turns someone off sport for good. In school settings, the range of sports and activities offered to girls in PE can be limited and not what the girls themselves actually want. The range and quality of sport offered in schools can vary depending on the affluence of the local area and the type of school. Access to sport-based after school clubs can also be an issue, with provision often a postcode lottery and the clubs that do exist tending to be dominated by boys (a situation which is worse for lower socioeconomic groups in cases where the club is fee paying). It is also often the case for younger girls that the playground is seen as a 'boys' space' too; with football pitches, formal or otherwise, dominating. According to the [Sport England Active Lives report](#), 22% fewer girls than boys in England play team sport; a reflection on both the stereotypes girls face and the options available to them at and after school. The [UK Government's recent announcement on school sport in England](#) is welcome in this regard and a model that other countries could consider. The announcement included more than £600million of funding which will be invested in school sport over the next two years. The funding will support schools to offer equal access to the same range of sports for girls and boys as well as offer two hours of PE every

week. It should be noted that none of this new funding was targeted specifically at girls, however. This announcement will not solve all the issues with school sport overnight, but it is a useful first step.

10. For women in midlife the influence of gender stereotyping is different, but the results are sadly very similar. [Women in Sport research](#) shows that after a lifetime of conditioning and stereotyping, that a woman's role is to put her family's welfare above her own, women in midlife often put themselves at the bottom of the list when it comes to prioritising time. Women in our study felt that they were the family lynchpin, making sure everyone had their needs met, as well as dealing with the physical and mental effects and societal stigma of menopause. For many women, the perception that sport and physical activity is 'not for them' is also reinforced by the sport and activity sector and women's perceptions of it. Women need more support from and role models within the sport and fitness industry itself to feel genuinely included.
11. For women to be truly included in sport we must begin to dismantle these damaging stereotypes. This is not an impossible task, and indeed some organisations within sport are already taking steps towards this in their areas of influence. For example, building on research Women in Sport worked on with them, Sport Ireland has recently unveiled its [Her Moves](#) campaign aimed at making sport and physical activity more inclusive for teenage girls. Women in Sport's own [Big Sister](#) programme also aims tackle the barriers and stereotypes affecting this group.

Leadership and culture

12. Quite simply, the number of women in senior coaching and leadership roles in sport (for example, CEOs or Chair of the Board for National Governing Bodies, performance directors or other senior coaching staff) is unacceptable. Across the biggest sports, nearly all senior posts are men – including for many women's teams. [Sport Ireland's figures](#) show that around 64% of certified coaches are men and, crucially, "as the coaching levels increase, the percentage of female coaches decreases". At the Tokyo Olympics, only [8% of Team Ireland coaches](#) were women (this figure was 13% across all countries at the Games). Whilst initiatives to improve this situation – such as the Olympic Federation of Ireland study into female coaching in the high-performance system and UK Sport's pledge to have 50% female coaching staff by the Paris

Olympics - are welcome, they are not addressing the structural inequalities that have made them necessary in the first place.

13. If we want to ensure that women are truly included in sport, it's vital that we start to see more women moving into coaching and leadership roles, particularly the roles of CEO, Chair of the Board and Performance Director which are so important in setting the culture of a sport. Initiatives that aim to do this must start to focus on the attitudes and understanding of those currently in power (it is not the fault of aspiring female leaders that they are not being appointed) and be based on the principle of changing the structures and culture to make it possible for women to feel like they belong in sports coaching and leadership at all levels. The 'top down' approach of fast-tracking existing leaders and elite coaches into high profile positions may deliver some 'quick' and notable wins but won't address the systemic problem that is the lack of women in these sorts of roles throughout sport. We need wholesale, 'bottom up' change too. The federal structures of many sports actively discourage and prevent women from getting involved, in any capacity, at the grassroots level. Changing this is as important to delivering a more inclusive sporting culture as high profile women leaders and coaches being promoted.
14. Our work shows that a 50:50 team at the top of an organisation creates the most inclusive culture overall, not just for women but for non-dominant communities.

Investment and status

15. For too long women have been denied the basic tools to succeed in sport that men have ready access to. Resources, including money, are at the heart of this. Budgets and resources in the sports sector are not allocated efficiently or equitably and this leads women to be and to feel excluded from sport. To take some examples from English football, a part of the global sporting environment where the women's game is being recognised in a way it never has before, central investment in academies for the men's game is still over 17x greater than for the women's. Despite the success of the Lionesses at international level, we continue to see Super League matches taking place that are billed as 'sold out' but where only a quarter of the stadium is available for the match or matches taking place in much smaller grounds that are not necessarily even in the same place as the 'main' ground. It is completely unacceptable that we still see top flight women's matches being cancelled [due to frozen pitches](#) and other circumstances that

non-league men's clubs might face. It is equally unacceptable that the prize money for the men's and women's FA Cups (and indeed World Cups) are still unequal.

16. Implementing a gender budgeting approach to sports funding (underpinned by gender impact reporting, as described in recommendations below) will ultimately ensure that the allocation and reach of resources is fair, meeting the distinct needs of girls and women as well as boys and men. Not only will this empower more girls and women, it will ensure resources are allocated more efficiently and ultimately drive systemic change. And in sports where men's and women's teams exist under a single club structure, clubs should be mandated to allocate both time and investment for the women's game.

Visibility and media

17. The media is a vital factor in growing audiences and revenues for women's sport. Currently, the media landscape is dominated by men, especially those with decision making roles. We need to increase the number of women in these positions. Public service broadcasters should have targets to make 50% of their sports coverage women's sport with associated timescales and action plans. Having targets in place was the only way that the FTSE100 companies succeeded in increasing the number of women on their boards. In 2020 the percentage of women on FTSE 100 boards was 34.5%, in 1999 this figure was just 7%.
18. Both broadcast and print media need to proactively increase coverage of women's sport; providing women and girls with role-models and normalising sport and exercise in their lives. Coverage needs to be more consistently visible: while the big international events are getting coverage on mainstream channels, in-between times, it is more hit and miss. While pay TV has successfully covered several women's sporting events, free to air channels have a vital role to play in bringing women's sport to a wider audience.
19. The media narrative about women and sport also needs to change. Elite male athletes are still talked about very differently in the media compared to elite female athletes. Whilst male athletes are celebrated for their strength, prowess, leadership and masculinity, female athletes are often discussed in terms of their appearance, their family life and their relationships. Increasing the number of women in the sports media landscape specifically, particularly in leadership roles, would go some way to correcting this narrative. As noted elsewhere, a more

inclusive culture, with women in decision making roles, is a key part of making sport as a whole a better place to be a woman.

20. We must also think about how sport should talk to women when so many women feel excluded from sport by gendered societal stereotypes. Alongside that, we need to ensure that we talk to men about the value of women's sport. We know that girls are more likely to enjoy sport if their dads encourage them and that dads have an influence on how their daughters view sport.

Safe and fair sport

21. It should go without saying that, in addition to a welcoming culture as mentioned above, sport must be safe and fair it to be inclusive of women. This means at the very least introducing a zero-tolerance approach to abuse and harassment. Studies suggest that harassment and abuse occur in all sports, at all levels and at all ages.
22. Girls and women are at most risk of sexual and physical abuse due to their relative physical size, biology and widespread misogyny. There are significant barriers to raising concerns, not least gender stereotyping that encourages compliance and the male-dominated structure of sport. The sporting environment also creates unique risks with its inherent physicality, 'success at all costs' mentality and power imbalances between athletes, coaches and managers. At the same time, National Governing Bodies (NGBs) are expected to act as both the organiser and the regulator of their sport. They are expected to expose misconduct, whilst simultaneously upholding a positive reputation for their sport; a clear conflict of interest that can lead to a widespread distrust of safeguarding mechanisms and reporting systems, and one which NGBs, with their limited resources, should not have to navigate.
23. It is also important that natal women and trans women both have a safe and fair environment to participate in. In September 2021, the four Sports Councils of the UK nations published their extensive study into the issue of trans inclusion in sport. This high-quality report included a comprehensive review of the scientific literature by an expert sports medic. It concluded that the inclusion of trans women in female categories in most sports could not be balanced with fairness and, in some sports, safety.
24. Women in Sport has been working with NGBs in the UK developing and implementing trans policies where we can. It is vital that they and others involved ensure science is at the heart of their decisions, recognise there is a genuine conflict between safety and fairness and trans

inclusion in most women's sport, and listen to the voices of the people actually affected – namely natal and trans women. This issue demands courageous leadership if the integrity of women's sport at both elite and grassroots level is to be safeguarded and women and girls are to have the chance after so many decades of exclusion to take part on a level playing field.

Recommendations

25. Tackle misogyny in society: those in powerful positions in politics, law enforcement and the corporate world taking sexism and misogyny seriously. Misogyny should be a hate crime. More companies, workplaces and institutions should have anti-sexism and/or anti-misogyny policies.
26. Dismantle the stereotypes: everyone involved in sport should work towards dismantling the damaging, gendered stereotypes that tell women and girls at all stages of their lives that they don't belong in sport. This must include the active involvement of men in sport, especially those in leadership positions. Women in Sport's [Daughters and Dads](#) programme is one example of this in practice.
27. More women in leadership roles: NGBs and other sporting bodies should set robust, measurable targets for the proportion of women in leadership roles, on boards and in senior coaching positions. Initiatives designed to achieve this must be based on the principle of changing the structures and culture to make it possible for women to feel like they belong in sports coaching and leadership at all levels. As a minimum, all NGBs should seek to move towards 50-50 gender representation on their boards and in their senior leadership teams.
28. More money and more respect for the women's game: governments should take the first step towards addressing the imbalance of resources in the sports sector by introducing a requirement for all organisations involved in the delivery of sport and physical activity and in receipt of government funding to implement gender impact reporting as the foundation of moving towards gender budgeting in sport. In sports where men's and women's teams exist under a single club structure, clubs should be mandated to allocate both time and investment for the women's game.
29. Greater visibility and media coverage: all broadcasters and media should work proactively to increase coverage of women's sport, the proportion of women involved in their sport coverage and the proportion of women in decision making roles in their organisations. Public service

broadcasters should have targets to make 50% of their sports coverage women's sport with associated timescales and action plans

30. An independent regulator to tackle abuse: Women in Sport is calling for the creation of an independent body committed to tackling misconduct and abuse in sport. By introducing an independent body with expertise in the areas of safeguarding, welfare, and duty of care, with no conflicting interests, women would be able to have full faith that its findings would be fair and beyond reproach.
31. Transgender inclusion: NGBs developing policies on transgender athletes in their sport should ensure science is at the heart of their decisions, recognise there is a genuine conflict between safety and fairness and trans inclusion in most women's sport, and listen to the voices of the people actually affected – namely natal and trans women. This applies to all levels of sport, not just elite and high-performance athletes.

Summary

32. We must recognise that the inclusion or exclusion of women from sport does not exist in a vacuum. Sport is, after all, a reflection of wider society. With this in mind, one significant barrier to women being and feeling included in sport is the prevalence of misogyny and sexism in wider society which must be tackled with greater urgency. Stubborn gender stereotypes affect the relationship girls and women have with sport at all levels, whether elite or community, and at all stages of their lives. These stereotypes need to be taken up at the root if we are to fully achieve a society where women and girls genuinely enjoy and feel comfortable in sport. This is not an easy thing to achieve, but nor is it impossible.
33. It is this context which underpins the many more practical challenges facing the inclusion of women and girls in sport. We must see more action to increase the number of women in leadership roles in sport, especially the key roles of CEO, Chair of the Board and Performance Director. We must see more equitable investment in women's sport, via a gender budgeting approach, and more sports treating the women's game and female athletes with more respect. We must see greater media coverage of women's sport that presents female athletes as equal to their male counterparts, as we know that are. We must ensure that sport is safe and fair for women by ensuring there is a zero tolerance approach to abuse across sport and ensuring that

both natal and transgender women are able to participate, safely and fairly, at both the elite and grassroots level.