

National Advisory Council on Women and Girls: Monthly Spotlight

WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SPORT

Summary

Women have distinct experiences of sport and of physical activity more generally in Scotland. They participate less than men on average across all age groups, and often choose different activities. Women also cite different motivations for exercising; they are more likely to be motivated by a desire to lose weight, for example, but less likely to be motivated by the social or competitive aspects of sport.

Particularly stark inequalities are seen around women's sport in the media and the allocation of sports funding.

The evidence base around how gender intersects with other inequalities when it comes to sport is limited. We know that having a disability, being from an ethnic minority background, being a member of the LGBT community, being pregnant or being a mother and experiencing socio-economic disadvantage all impact women's experiences of physical activity and sport, in many cases making it harder for them to participate. More research is required in all of these areas, however.

Recreational walking is an important leveller of physical activity inequalities not only between men and women, but across many other groups of people. Inequalities in physical activity participation are generally much wider when walking is excluded.

Key Figures

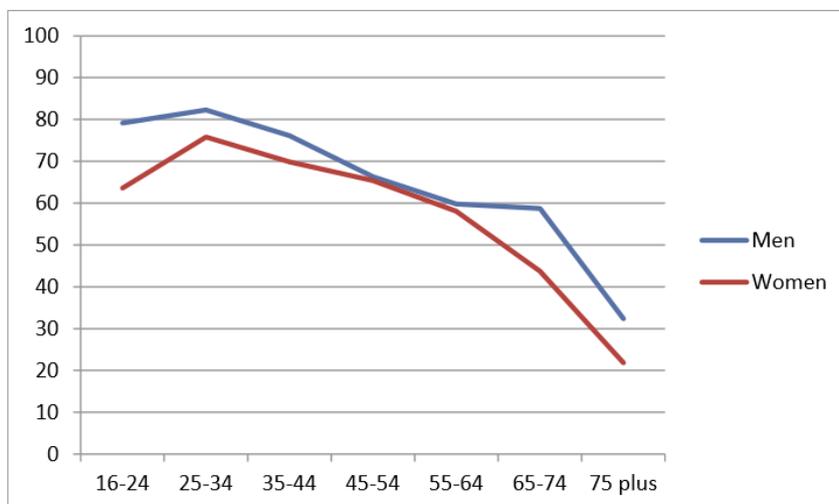
- 59% of women in Scotland meet recommendations for physical activity, compared to 69% of men
- Just 24% of women aged 75 and over meet the guidelines compared with 39% of 75+ men
- 81% of girls aged 5–7 meet physical activity guidelines, but only 49% of girls aged 13–15
- 67% of girls regularly participate in sport (and 70% of boys)
- Less than 5% of media sports coverage is dedicated to women's sport and just 1.8% of sports stories are written by women
- Women's sport is estimated to receive less than 0.5% of the total value of UK sports sponsorship
- Around 40% of sports coaches in Scotland are women

Current Position: Women in Sport and Physical Activity

In Scotland, women are significantly less likely than men to meet physical activity guidelines: just 59% of women accumulate the recommended 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week, compared to 69% of men.¹ This is marginally higher than equivalent percentages in England (58% and 66% respectively).² 20% of women in Scotland do not participate in any form of physical activity, compared to 17% of men.³ When walking is excluded, this difference rises: 51% of women do not regularly do any other form of physical activity, compared to 42% of men.⁴

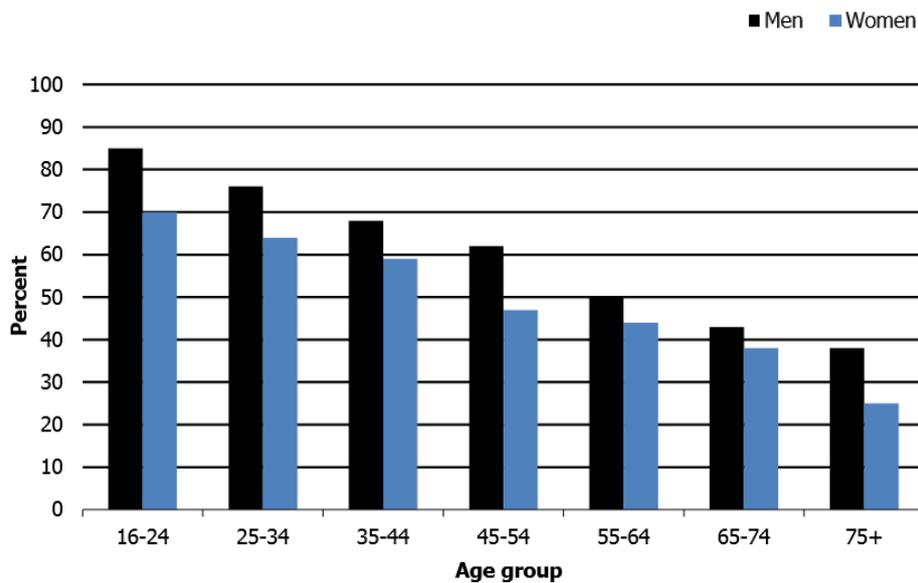
Physical activity levels among adult women are lower across all age groups, diverging furthest from those of men amongst the youngest and oldest women, as the graph below shows.

Meeting physical activity regulations by age & sex (%)



Source: Cruickshank, Geyer & O'Connor 2015.

Just 24% of women aged 75 and over met the guidelines in 2016 compared with 39% of men of the same age.⁵ Physical fitness is important for helping older people to maintain independent living.⁶ There is less evidence on participation in physical activity among older women than there is on younger age groups.⁷ The amount of people participating declines with age for both sexes.



Adults who participated in sports or exercise in the last 4 weeks, by sex

Source: McLean, Christie & Gray 2017

Women are more likely to go swimming or do yoga, Pilates, aerobics, gymnastics or dance than men, but are less likely to go running or cycling, or to play football, rugby or golf.⁸ In 2017, swimming and aerobics were the most popular forms of exercise for women (after walking), with 19% of women engaging in both.⁹ 12% went running or to the gym, with 10% participating in dance. Just 1% of women played football and 2% played golf, compared to 14% and 10% respectively for men.

Men and women have slightly different **motivations** for participating (and not participating) in sport or physical activity. Although similar numbers cite keeping fit or in shape as a key motivation, women are more likely to be motivated by a desire to lose weight (40% compared to 27% of men) or because they are accompanying children (17% vs 11%).¹⁰ They are less likely than men to be motivated by the social aspect of sport (27% vs 37%), by the competition involved (8% vs 31%) or by a desire to improve their performance (8% vs 20%).¹¹ Enjoyment is a primary motivation for 67% of women and 78% of men.¹² Women are more likely to cite family responsibilities as a reason for not exercising (33% compared to 22% of men) but less likely to think that they have become ‘too old’ to exercise (22% vs 34%).¹³

The **media** has an important role to play in informing our knowledge and attitudes towards women in sport, and it is therefore significant that less than 5% of media sports coverage is dedicated to women’s sport, both in Scotland and the UK more widely.¹⁴ These inequalities are reflected in those involved in the UK media: across national newspapers, just 1.8% of sports stories are written by women and little

significant change is being seen over time.¹⁵ Just 4% of Football Writers' Association members are women and only 18% of sports journalism students.¹⁶

Women in Scotland are more likely to be involved in individual and non-competitive sports activities and less likely than men to be involved in clubs, therefore also being less likely to access **sports funding**.¹⁷ Women's sport is estimated to receive less than 0.5% of the total value of UK sports sponsorship, with a further 14% going to mixed sports.¹⁸ In 2017, it was found that 83% of sports worldwide offer the same prize money for men and women, with football, golf and cricket retaining some of largest gendered disparities.¹⁹ The men's Scottish Professional Football League awarded more than £23.7 million in prize money during the 2017–18 season, while the Scottish Women's Premier League only began offering prize money in 2017 and the amount remains undisclosed.²⁰ There is less evidence on women's sports participation at elite level than for more general physical activity.²¹

Around 40% of **sports coaches** in Scotland were female in 2017, up from 32% in 2015.²² Half as many women **volunteer** for sports or exercise organisations as men (3% and 6% respectively of all adults, or 11% and 23% of those who volunteer).²³ In contrast, women volunteer more than men overall (30% compared to 26%).²⁴

With regards to **sports governing bodies** in Scotland, 31% of board members were women in 2017–18, up from 29% the year before.²⁵ Within sportscotland, the Scottish national agency for sport, 46% of employees were women in 2017.²⁶ Breakdown by job grade shows that they are more likely to be in lower-paid positions than their male colleagues.

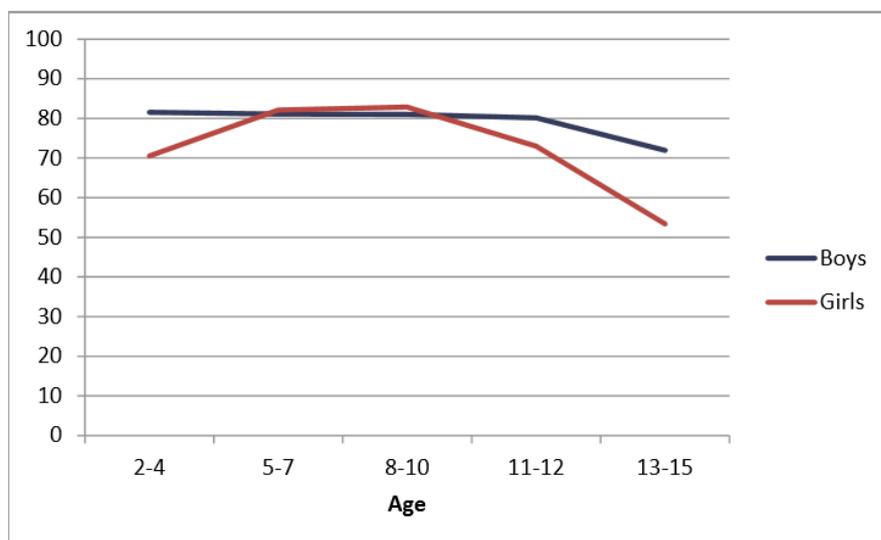
People working within Scottish **sports organisations** have better awareness of inequalities in sport faced by women and in particular by teenage girls, as well as by those with disabilities and at socio-economic disadvantage.²⁷ Faith, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, and marriage and civil partnership inequalities were understood the least.

Current Position: Girls in Sport and Physical Activity

In 2016, 72% of girls in Scotland aged 2–15 met the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day.²⁸ This has increased by 8% over 8 years, up from 64% in 2008.²⁹ The percentage of 2–15 year-old boys meeting this recommended activity level fluctuated between 73% and 79% during the same period.³⁰

Girls are most active at ages 5–7, with 81% doing at least an hour of activity per day, and least active at ages 13–15, when this figure falls to 49%.³¹ In comparison, 72% of 13–15 year-old boys are active for at least an hour a day.³² Boys are most active at ages 11–12 (86% meet the recommendations).³³ As the below graph shows, the reduction in girls' physical activity begins at ages 11–12, and continues to fall even more sharply as they reach their teenage years.

Meeting physical activity regulations by age & sex (%)



Source:
Cruickshank, Geyer
& O'Connor 2015.

This pattern is also seen when the physical activity girls do at school is excluded. The percentages meeting the recommended hour per day fall from 73% for ages 8–10, to 53% for 11–12 year olds, and then further to just 36% for girls aged 13–15.³⁴ In comparison, 58% of boys aged 13–15 do an hour of exercise per day with school activity excluded.³⁵ Research shows that around 10% fewer journeys to schools are by active travel once children start secondary school (44% vs 55%), which may account for some of the reduction in physical activity at this age.³⁶

Looking specifically at **sports**, overall participation levels are similar for girls and boys: 67% of girls regularly participate in sport compared to 70% of boys.³⁷ This has remained relatively steady, with the percentage of girls participating in sports ranging from 63% to 70% since 2009.³⁸ However, age once again has a significant impact: participation rates diverge more notably by gender after ages 11–12, with 56% of girls aged 13–15 participating in sports, and 71% of boys of the same age.³⁹ In 2016,

fewer girls than boys participated in the activities of Active Schools, sportscotland's national sports and physical activity programme for children and young people (42% of girls on the school roll vs 44% of boys).⁴⁰ However, more young women were involved in leadership roles in sportscotland-supported activities in 2016–17, including making up 58% of both Young Ambassadors and competition organiser training participations, as well as two thirds of the Young People's Sport Panel.⁴¹

Dance, cycling, swimming and football were the most popular activities for girls aged 8–15 in 2008, with cycling, swimming and football the most popular for boys.⁴² The biggest gendered differences were seen with dance (32% of girls participate at least once a month compared to 2% of boys) and football (26% and 75% respectively).⁴³ Karate, dodgeball, cross country, tennis and rugby are currently the fastest-growing sports for girls.⁴⁴

The Impact of other Characteristics

Beyond age, which is discussed in the above sections, there are a number of other characteristics which impact on women and girls' participation in sports and physical activity. These include disabilities, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, and socio-economic disadvantage. Those with disabilities, those from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds and Asian minorities are all less likely to participate in sports.⁴⁵ These same groups, as well as other ethnic and religious minorities, are also less likely to use leisure facilities.⁴⁶

The evidence base on how these characteristics affect sports participation varies widely. There is limited research on the impact of sexual orientation and gender reassignment, and the research on ethnicity and religion is largely focused on Muslim women, whose physical activity levels have been found to be significantly lower than other groups.⁴⁷ There is a notable lack of data on the impact of pregnancy and maternity or marriage and civil partnership.⁴⁸ Although we have some evidence relating to disabilities, this tends to offer a more general overview and not to be broken down to give an understanding of the varied experiences across different disabilities.⁴⁹

Walking has been found to be a leveller across different groups of people, with inequalities in physical activity participation generally much wider when walking is excluded.⁵⁰

Disabilities

33% of women have a limiting long-term condition or disability (and 30% of men).⁵¹ This significantly reduces women's likelihood of being physically active; around 25% less adults with limiting long-term conditions do the recommended amount of physical activity than those without.⁵² Disabled adults are also more than twice as likely to be inactive, and make up 62% of the overall inactive population.⁵³

As noted above, much current data groups together all different types of disability and often does not differentiate between limiting and non-limiting conditions, which obscures a more detailed understanding of the impact of different disabilities on women's participation in physical activity.⁵⁴

Ethnicity and religion

Pakistani adults are the only ethnic group which diverge significantly from the national Scottish average in meeting physical activity recommendations. Overall, they are around a third less likely to do so.⁵⁵ UK-wide research has shown that women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicity have particularly low levels of physical

activity (around half as many meet recommended levels of physical activity compared to both the national average for women and the average for Pakistani and Bangladeshi men).⁵⁶ For sports specifically, Muslims and Roman Catholics participate in sport less than the national average in Scotland (39% and 46% respectively compared to an average of 49%), while those of other Christian groups do more sport on average (52%).⁵⁷ There is significant overlap between race and ethnicity inequalities; 91% and 81% of those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin respectively are Muslim, for example.⁵⁸

Research indicates that there is no difference between white and Asian adults in Scotland with regards to walking, and that many South Asian women find this activity easier to incorporate into their lives than other physical activities.⁵⁹

Children from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to meet physical activity recommendations or to participate in sport than the national average (57% vs 73% for physical activity and 62% vs 72% for sport).⁶⁰

LGBT women and girls

There is evidence that bisexual, lesbian and gay people overall in Scotland participate in physical activity and sport at similar levels to heterosexual people, but that those who define their sexual orientation as 'other' tend to participate less.⁶¹ It should be noted, though, that quantitative data on sexual orientation and sports participation in Scotland is very limited, and that underreporting and lack of distinction between LGB people who are 'out' or not is likely to affect some data.⁶²

In contrast to men's sports teams, there are many openly lesbian and bisexual female rugby and football players in Scotland, but the numbers for Scottish sport in general are still small.⁶³ There is little research available on LGB people working, volunteering or coaching within sport.⁶⁴

Transgender women and girls

22% of trans people in Scotland say that they never engage in sport or physical activity, and 30% are never spectators.⁶⁵ 68% would be more likely to participate in sports if they were more LGBT-friendly.⁶⁶ The relatively high number of trans people who are disabled (25% in this study) are also likely to impact these figures.⁶⁷

At school, 29% of trans people are bullied during sport UK-wide, and 64% are unable to play for the sports team they would feel comfortable in.⁶⁸ Many trans women report negative experiences of sport at school, particularly with team games where strong masculine behaviour stereotypes often dominate.

There is an evidence gap around transgender women's employment in sport, their involvement in coaching or leadership roles, or how other inequalities also affect transgender women's experiences of sport.⁶⁹

Pregnancy and maternity

There is very little quantitative evidence on pregnant women's participation in physical activity and sport, especially in a UK or Scottish context.⁷⁰ There is some qualitative data on the barriers faced by pregnant women and mothers, as discussed below.

Socio-economically underprivileged women and girls

Research shows that girls from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are as likely to be physically active as those from advantaged backgrounds when they are children.⁷¹ However, they are less likely to participate in sports.⁷² Adults from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly less likely to participate in physical activity or sports than the average.⁷³ The effect of socio-economic disadvantage on likelihood of meeting recommended levels of physical activity is greater for women than men; the difference between those from the least and most deprived areas is 16% for men and 23% for women.⁷⁴ Overall, children from the most deprived areas of Scotland are likely to have 20 fewer years of good health during their lifetime.⁷⁵

Barriers to Participating

There is strong evidence that being physically active has a wide range of positive health benefits. These include improved heart, muscle, bone, blood, immune and nervous system health, as well as improved self-perception, self-esteem, mood and sleep quality.⁷⁶ Physical activity also reduces the risk of chronic health conditions such as coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer and type 2 diabetes.⁷⁷ Being physically inactive reduces life expectancy; it is estimated to contribute to the death of around 2,500 people in Scotland every year.⁷⁸ In addition, sports participation is linked with wider social benefits for women and girls such as improved self-esteem, social inclusion, better academic performance and development of leadership skills.⁷⁹ It is therefore important that we understand the reasons that prevent many women and girls from participating, and work to address them.

Experiences of **physical education**, lack of **self-esteem** and **body confidence**, poor **changing facilities** and influence of **family and peers** have all be found to be barriers to sports participation for women and girls.⁸⁰ Achieving greater equality in **coaching** is important since research has shown that some women prefer to be coached by female coaches.⁸¹ Research has also shown that offering **single-sex sports activities** for young women can increase participation rates, as can facilitating a **non-competitive** atmosphere for those who are less enthusiastic about sports.⁸² Involving girls in the development of new sports activities or programmes and offering sports **leadership** opportunities have been successful in increasing young women's engagement in physical activity.⁸³

A lack of **media coverage** of sporting achievements of those with protected characteristics, a more general lack of **role models** in sport (particularly of deaf, LGBT and female Muslim sportspeople), negative school PE experiences and **costs** (especially for ethnic minority, disabled and LGBT people) have all be found to be barriers to sports participation.⁸⁴

Research with **staff** within sportscotland and other local school- and club-based activities has shown that while equality is generally considered to be increasingly prioritised, some consider the focus on increasing the number of people participating in sport overall to be a barrier to prioritising equality.⁸⁵ It was also suggested that some increased attention on equality was driven by sportscotland requirements or those of their boards rather than internal motivation. A lack of equalities awareness and resistance to change was reported particularly in club environments. Many of those working with sports organisations felt that high-performance environments responded well to many equalities issues, particularly regarding opportunities for disabled athletes. However, there were also concerns that the support required to reach elite level, both social and financial, may represent particular barriers for women and those at experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Equalities-focused

training for those working in and facilitating sports has been recommended as a priority for reducing inequalities in sport.⁸⁶

Women and girls with disabilities

People with disabilities often find the cost of accessible equipment required to allow them to participate in sports to be prohibitive.⁸⁷ Those with mental health conditions report feelings of intimidation as a barrier to participation; this can include being intimidated by those facilitating or participating in the sport, by attending alone, or by the environment more widely.⁸⁸ Self-consciousness and low levels of confidence with regards to sport have also been found to be significant barriers for those with other disabilities.⁸⁹ Lack of information, support, appropriate facilities and transportation have also been found to prevent many of those with disabilities from doing sport.

Ethnic and religious minority backgrounds

Research has shown those of South Asian origin in Scotland tend to enjoy the same physical activities as the wider population and have similar motivations for wanting to engage in them, but that many, particularly women, have been discouraged by their cultural background and attitudes of older members of their families or community.⁹⁰ For some ethnic minority women, the appropriateness of sports clothing, self-image, concerns about body shape norms and lack of single-sex sessions for sports such as swimming have been found to be barriers.⁹¹ Data from elsewhere in the UK suggests that home, family and work responsibilities prevent a significant proportion of ethnic minority women (over 40%) from participating in physical activity.⁹² The cost of sports (particularly in relation to children's sports) has also been cited as a barrier to participation by those of ethnic minorities.⁹³

UK research suggests insensitivity to cultural beliefs in the way school sports lessons are delivered can be a significant barrier to many Muslim girls' participation and leads to some skipping classes.⁹⁴ Current PE uniforms and communal showering, for example, both require exposing more of the body than some Muslim girls are comfortable with.⁹⁵ Finally, some Muslim children are also reluctant to participate in PE during Ramadan since fasting results in lower energy levels.⁹⁶

LGBT women and girls

Evidence suggests that homophobia and transphobia in sport results both in many LGBT people experiencing discrimination and intimidation when participating, and in many choosing to conceal their sexual orientation and thus having their rights to freedom of expression infringed.⁹⁷ 79% of LGBT people think that there is a problem

with homophobia in sport.⁹⁸ Adult lesbian and bisexual women have been found less likely to experience discrimination while participating in sports than gay and bisexual adult men, although they still experience homophobic abuse.⁹⁹ The widespread stereotype of women involved in sport being labelled as lesbian also leads to many heterosexual women experiencing related bullying.¹⁰⁰ This has been noted as a barrier to heterosexual women's participation in rugby, especially, which is seen as a stereotypically masculine sport.¹⁰¹

A UK survey in 2012 found that lesbian and bisexual girls are also half as likely as gay and bisexual boys to experience homophobic bullying during sport at school (14% and 32% respectively).¹⁰² Overall, 75% of LGB pupils who had been bullied at school disliked team sports, compared to 59% who had not.¹⁰³ Research has found that for many LGB people, gendered division of sport at school has a negative impact on their experience.¹⁰⁴

Transgender women and girls

A Scottish survey found that discrimination is a barrier to participation in sport for 79% of trans people, and that 80% had personally experienced or witnessed abuse.¹⁰⁵ Many trans people say that they would find it easier to participate in sports with clubs if the clubs promoted themselves as inclusive and open to all, therefore meaning that it would not be necessary for trans people to compromise their confidentiality by asking about this.¹⁰⁶

Lack of appropriate changing and leisure facilities is a particular barrier to trans women's participation in sport and physical activity.¹⁰⁷ Research shows that trans people generally prefer to have cubicles available, although using these in team sport environments can still result in bullying.¹⁰⁸ Another barrier is the prevalent gender segregation in sport and the normative gendered expectations of behaviour around sport and physical activity, which trans people may not conform to or feel comfortable with.¹⁰⁹ In competitive sport, trans women often have to face other people's concerns that they are at an unfair physical advantage, or that they pose greater risks to other female players.¹¹⁰ Finally, lower income levels and the costs of transitioning also make it harder for some trans women to participate in sport.¹¹¹

Pregnancy and maternity

Qualitative research in Scotland has shown that pregnant and postnatal women report a lack of appropriate physical activities run by people with relevant training, especially cardio exercise.¹¹² There is also a demand for activities that young babies can attend along with their mothers.¹¹³

Although general advice is for pregnant women to keep active and continue with the physical activities they participated in before pregnancy, some pregnant women are discouraged from participating by sports organisations who are concerned about being held liable for any injuries.¹¹⁴

A lack of available childcare is one of the most important barriers preventing women in general from participating in physical activity.¹¹⁵ This may also affect some girls, who are more likely than boys to have caring responsibilities.¹¹⁶ Cost and confidence have been identified as further key barriers to UK mothers' participation in physical activity.¹¹⁷

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