

National Advisory Council on Women and Girls - Spotlight on Sport Response by Forwomen.Scot, 24 September 2019

We are a group of ordinary women from all over Scotland who have come together to fight for women's and children's rights. We are concerned that in sports, an area where women and girls are underrepresented and disadvantaged, the situation in Scotland is worsening when it should rightly be improving. Following much discussion, this contribution was written by our most experienced sportswoman on behalf of Forwomen.Scot.

I am a former gymnast, competing at national and international level throughout my teenage years. I also competed internationally with my rowing team at University and represented Scotland.

I currently run with a local group of people (men and women). I did gymnastics and rowing at school, this was girls-only; then rowing at University which was men-only (I was the coxswain for the men's rowing team, so a single-sex sport, where I was allowed to be part of the crew because my role was not a physical one, I just had to carry extra weights to make it "fair"). Having done all 3 combinations, I understand there is a different dynamic when sports are mixed-sex compared to single-sex.

Girls' changing bodies and vulnerability

It's well known that many teenage girls hate PE at school. The physical and emotional changes that girls are going through at this stage means many girls lose confidence and feel too embarrassed to engage in sport and exercise. Dealing with periods is an additional complication for teenage girls. Getting showered, changed and hair and makeup done again afterwards is difficult. And while we don't like to think this about teenagers, sexism, harassment and assault are also far too common in schools, universities, and sports generally. And often, if girls have a negative experience, they won't report it or speak up and make a fuss, they will try to avoid being in that situation and just stop going.

Male-dominated environments

I recall, when at university, the weights room in Glasgow University's gym felt like a no-go area for women and girls; you could feel the testosterone when you walked through the door: men grunting, staring at any girl who went in, watching you change the weights down to lighter ones, staring at you while you did your routine (the walls were mirrors so you could see), acting impatiently at you because you were taking up time. Girls just really weren't meant to be there. And if I felt that, as an athletic female who was used to training alongside men in the rowing team, I cannot imagine how it would have felt for other young women. No wonder girls didn't dare go in.

Fewer options for girls

While boys play football as a group activity, girls tend not to be offered that option (or any other group activities in sports either), although this is improving. Personally, I think more girls should be encouraged to play football (perhaps mixed with boys in younger primary

years, and girls' football from aged 10 onwards). It is excellent cardio, it is a larger team sport, and girls not being as physical as older boys means that the female game could develop its own identity based on agility, skill and technique. It also doesn't have to cost much to take part – there are plenty of parks and pitches about.

Designed for males

Sport and facilities seem to be primarily geared towards men and boys, with women and girls expected to slot in around them, accept whatever is left and use equipment which doesn't quite fit or suit females because it's too big or too heavy. Male is the standard (and able-bodied male, unencumbered by small children or elderly parents, at that), female is considered to be a 'special-interest' nice-to-have, rather than the default. Nothing ever seems to have been designed with women in mind. There is also little thought given to the different stages in the lives of females and the additional challenges they face because of their changing bodies and responsibilities. And this is despite our knowledge of the opportunities and benefits getting females involved in sports brings. Improvements in this area could include exercise classes for pregnant or post-natal or menopausal women taking their specific needs into account or provisions for childcare or elderly care for those with caring responsibilities.

How this looks in practice

Today I went swimming at my local council pool at Eastwood Leisure Centre. The swimming pool changing facilities are all mixed-sex (even though the risk of sexual harassment and assault for women and girls in mixed-sex changing rooms is [900%](#) higher than in single-sex facilities). The individual cubicles are tiny, and I definitely wouldn't have been able to comfortably change in them when I was heavily pregnant.

Women are also often disadvantaged in very simple and "small" things, such as being charged for the provided hair dryers which are typically unlocked for only a limited time. This impacts girls and women disproportionately as we are much more likely to have longer hair. Is it any wonder then if we consider swimming and gym classes to be even less accessible?

In situations like this, women and girls have a choice between a) paying extra, b) leaving with wet hair, often soaking through your clothes until you can get home, which of course means you have to go straight home after, which is more restrictive, or c) not have a shower afterwards, meaning that you are sweaty/smelly and have to go straight home for one which is, again, more restrictive.

There is no need to add this extra barrier to women and girls who want to go swimming, to an exercise class or the gym. This is a typical example of changing facilities being designed for men; men don't tend to need hairdryers, so they are considered a luxury and optional extra, without considering that they are really needed by women. It would not impact council budgets in any meaningful way to make their hairdryers free for those who need them, and to have a space in mixed-sex changing rooms that is well lit and out of the way of passing (male) traffic where women and girls can do their makeup and dry their hair, so that more females would then feel able to fit sport and exercise into their lives. More people using the facilities more frequently also increases revenue.

Safety in numbers and biology, again

As a positive, East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure has an excellent free jogging group. This is a particular benefit to women, who need running groups more than men do, because it's less safe for women to go out running alone and in the dark than it is for men. Because it's free, people can just turn up when they are able to without worrying that they have paid for a block of sessions they can't use, all they need is trainers. It's not competitive, we all just do it for fun, health, personal achievement and the social benefits. And as it's mostly women, we all understand the pelvic floor issues that many women suffer from which makes running more difficult for us. An example of a barrier in running is that lots of women in my group are reluctant to enter organised 10k or half marathon road races, even though they really want to, because of the lack of toilets – usually there are either none during the course (only at the start/finish), or there is one toilet station halfway through a course and that is too long for many women to wait when running (men can dart behind a tree, women can't).

Why participation in sports is vital for girls

We need to create an environment where women and girls feel safe and supported to enable them to enjoy participating in sport. There is a sport or type of exercise out there for everyone, they just have to feel like they can have a go, try different things, and find the one for them. There is so much self-confidence that girls can gain from participating in sport. I experienced the benefits of this myself – sport was a massive part of my identity as a child and teen, and where I laid the strong, life-long foundations for all of my belief in myself. Knowing that I was strong and fit, and that if I trained hard I would improve, gave me both self-confidence and self-esteem. I practiced every day and so had a close group of friends in my club that were separate to my friends in school. Feeling like I could do one sport gave me the belief that I could have a go at other sports too. All of this was invaluable to me as a teenager, and still benefits me in many ways now. Through sports I learned that hard work, determination and persistence through failure lead to success and this knowledge has helped me succeed in other areas of my life, too.

How to increase participation

What is most important is that sport needs to *feel* accessible for girls and women, including (if not *especially*) for those with health issues, mental health issues, religious and cultural restrictions and other limiting situations, as well as those who are clearly talented and will be the future of Scottish sport.

We have seen a conscious effort to boost women's sports recently. There has been greater visibility on television and in the news of female competitions and achievements, and more female sports commentators. More visibility means more awareness, more interest means more sponsorship, and more funding means improved results. More females then taking up the sport means more talent to develop, more medals - creating a virtuous circle.

An existential threat to women and girls' sports

What would undo all of this progress would be to change Scottish sport from objective sex-segregated categories of male and female, to segregation based on, or blurred by,

subjective gender identity. I appreciate this is a contentious issue, but we must acknowledge that there are physical differences between someone born male who identifies as a woman, and a natal woman; if there weren't, then there would be no reason to have males and females competing in separate events. There is a conflict between promoting transgender inclusion and protecting the integrity and accessibility of women's sports which needs to be sensitively managed. We have already seen male transgender people (transwomen) competing in women's elite competitions, winning medals and breaking world records. This is not fair. Everyone *knows* this is not fair on women, especially the girls who we want to encourage into competitive sports. It's why we have separate categories in the first place. While sport must be open to all genders, it needs to be within the parameters of biological sex.

Female exclusion – acceptable collateral damage in the interest of male inclusion?

The number of male-born transgender people taking part in or competing in women's sports is increasing, but the numbers of women and girls who quietly drop out or don't join at all because of it will not be reflected in the statistics. The opportunities lost to all the women and girls who could have gained so much from sports, but never felt able to join, will never be counted. We cannot consider a reduction in women and girls' participation in sport as acceptable collateral damage for increasing transgender participation. We must increase both. Even if a small percentage of girls decide not to participate, whether that is because they are embarrassed and feel less comfortable in a mixed-sex (but same gender) group, or because they know they won't be able to compete with someone male so they give up, is a significant loss. And as a double whammy, the girls who are most likely to give up are the ones that we need to encourage most, and the ones that all of these initiatives to increase women and girls participation are there for.

Why we have women and girls' sports in the first place

We cannot start down the path of trying to segregate sports on the basis of subjective gender identities. For one thing, we couldn't only have male and female categories, as where would non-binary people compete (an equally valid gender identity as trans)? Sports are segregated based on biological sex, because the physical body being male or female is the only relevant factor. Male and female bodies are different; sexuality, gender identity, religion, ethnicity, personality, etc shouldn't be a factor in deciding which sex category someone belongs in.

Physiological differences reflected in performance

A male body has many advantages over a female one. A male skeleton means longer, larger bones: a longer arm span, thigh bones, and bigger hands and feet and a narrower pelvis which all give mechanical advantages. A larger male frame means more space to build muscle. The male cardiovascular system has a larger heart, blood vessels, VO2max levels, lung capacity and aerobic capacity, higher haemoglobin levels increases males' ability to carry oxygen to the muscles. Males have more fast-twitch muscle fibres and lean muscle mass than females, who carry more fat. This is not an exhaustive list.

There is a performance gap between males and females of 10-30% in almost all sports and events, from beginner to elite; from athletics to weightlifting. And it's not just once puberty is finished that the physical differences between the sexes emerge: teenage boys are faster than the elite women; if we look at Laura Muir's 800m time, it's slower than the fastest 13-year-old boy (or for 1500m, the fastest 14 year old boy) in British Athletics.

We know the effects that testosterone has on the body; it's why we ban competitors (both male and female) from taking it. We know what a difference it made to the East German female athletes, we all agree that was unfair and cheating. We cannot then have a blind spot where we allow a male, who has gone through a testosterone-driven male puberty with all the physical sporting benefits that brings over females, to compete against a female. We do not allow natal females to benefit from the levels of testosterone that males do: they get banned for doping. Even if a male suppresses their testosterone levels to less than 10nmols, that is still a) several times more than a natal female would have, and b) does not undo all the other advantages the (even testosterone-suppressed) adult male body has over a female one. Suppressing testosterone does not atrophy the muscles down to a level that is comparable with females.

The importance of female-only sports at grassroots level

But it's not just about elite sports, it's about women and girls' participation from the grassroots level upwards. There are plenty of sport and exercise groups that are mixed-sex where anyone can take part, where everyone is aware that they are mixed-sex and comfortable with that. All trans people should be supported to take part in these and be free from discrimination. Where there is a need for a female-only class/event/category, then that provision is there because it's considered necessary.

The Equality Act 2010 allows single-sex groups and sports because it is deemed necessary to increase female participation and for fairness and safety. Women who have explicitly chosen to attend a female/women/girls-only class or group have often chosen that *because* it's female-only. *Curves* gym is popular with women who otherwise wouldn't go to a gym because it is women-only, and there is a feeling of safety for them in that. A male is not going to be perceived as female by all people just because they are told they are a transwoman; you cannot mandate how people perceive others. The threat or discomfort that women sometimes feel around men is because they are of the male sex, it's not influenced by how they identify. If one male is added to a female-only group, it ceases to be a female-only group.

Vulnerable females must come first in women and girls sports

It is wrong to decide that making a women-only group gender-inclusive (of male transwomen) doesn't matter because it's not elite, or it's mainly just a social group rather than competitive, and therefore it would be kind to prioritise including transwomen. If the women have chosen to go to a female-only group, it should be kept as a female-only group. There are plenty of mixed groups that transwomen can attend. Some women might not mind, but one person cannot give consent for everyone else, and the political climate around this topic means many women are unable to speak up as they fear being called transphobic or bigoted. The degree to which women need single-sex spaces and groups exists on a spectrum, the harm and upset that could be caused if that feeling of "protection" is breached

depends on the degree of physical and emotional exposure the woman feels – and we cannot know where an individual woman sits on that spectrum or why.

I appreciate that there is a valid argument that many trans people are also vulnerable, but their needs are not *more* important than women's, they must be accommodated in a way which is not at the expense of vulnerable women.

If categories must change, a proposal that does not disadvantage females

The only traits that every person in the female sex-class shares is their biological sex; beyond what is linked to their sex, their lives, beliefs, personalities and experiences could be as varied within the group as they are between males and females. The only thing I need to know my about fellow female competitors is that they are female; fairness is the only thing that matters in sports.

The only fair way to protect women's sport (while increasing transgender participation, which we want to see too), is to change the categories and make the men's category an "Open" category, and keep the women's category as a strictly biological female category. The fastest men will not be impacted by the inclusion of transgender people as they don't have a physical advantage over men.

This way, the Open category could include:

- Men
- Male transgender transwomen
- Female transgender transmen (if they want to)
- Non-binary and genderfluid people of either sex
- Women who prefer to compete in an open category

And the woman's category is for (natal) women, including transmen and non-binary or genderfluid females (if they want to) so long as they have not taken any testosterone as this would give them an unfair advantage. While women may choose to take part in the Open category, they would be unlikely to be competitive against the males. And there shouldn't be a situation where it's more financially rewarding to rank low in the (Men's) Open event than highly in the women's, as that is the sort of sexism we are trying to combat in women's sport.

Making the men's category the more inclusive one solves another issue too, because the men currently do receive more funding, and more coverage, so it is sharing the men's larger slice of the pie more widely, and the increased visibility of men's sports means that more people will see the diversity.

An appeal to protect female-only sports

We must guard the sanctity of women's sports protectively; the hard won gains are precarious and so easily lost to those who are not female. Elite female sports have to be for extraordinary female athletes, not ordinary males. Women and girls need to have role models of women pushing their female bodies to the limits of their capabilities, and be inspired and believe that commitment and hard work might pay off. To allow the women's category to be opened up to those with the physical advantage of a male body would be akin

to opening up the Paralympics to those who do not have a physical disability, or opening up the junior categories to those who are adults. These are separate categories for a very clear reason of fairness, without that fairness in women's sports, it will become dominated by male people, and the end result will be no women's sport at all.