

Health, Social Care, and Sport Committee

Female Participation in Sport Inquiry – Summary of Evidence

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Introduction

The call for views for the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee’s inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity ran from 30 September to 9 December 2022. Respondents were asked to answer 20 questions.

220 responses were received, one of which was removed for inappropriate language. 175 of these responses were submitted by individuals, and 45 by organisations.

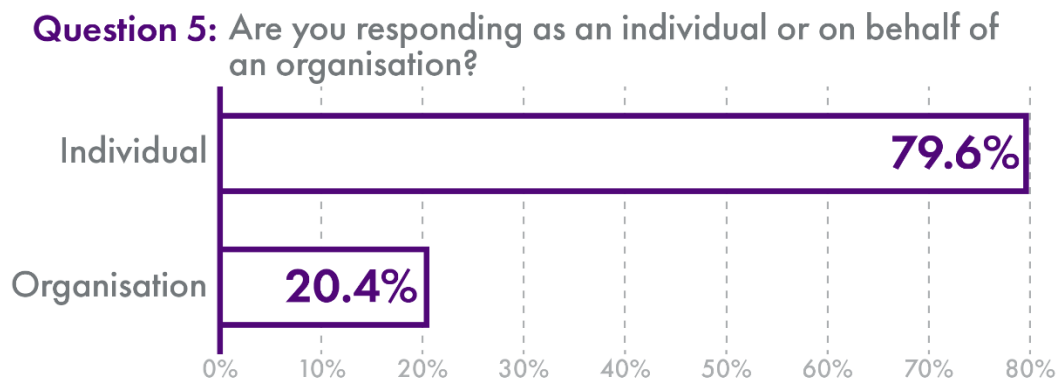
The call for views sought to explore the challenges affecting female participation in sport and physical activity at community and elite level, and any additional challenges affecting [women and girls from marginalised groups](#). This inquiry is partly informed by the Committee’s previous inquiry into [the health and wellbeing of children and young people](#), which found that rates of participation in sport and physical activity among girls decline as they reach adolescence.

Respondent characteristics

220 respondents completed the Committee’s call for views; 175 individuals and 45 organisations. Questions 1-4 captured individual respondents’ personal and contact information. Questions 10 and 11 gathered the names of the organisations, and information regarding their remit. The call for views form contained an administrative error which caused individuals to be directed towards the questions intended for organisations, affecting the responses to questions 10-13. This error was corrected in the first week of the call for views being open.

Question 5: Are you responding as an individual, or on behalf of an organisation?

This question received 220 responses. The majority of respondents (79.6%) were individuals, and 20.4% of responses were submitted on behalf of organisations.



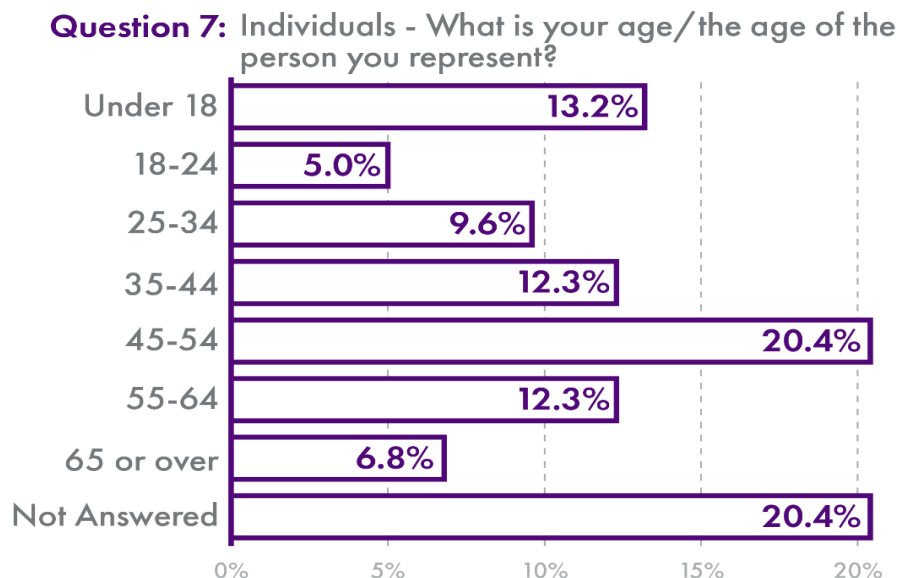
Question 6: For individuals - Are you completing this survey on behalf of yourself, or someone else?

Individual respondents were asked whether they were completing the survey on behalf of themselves, or someone else, for example, a parent completing the survey on behalf of their child. Of the 184 responses received, 71.8% completed the survey on their own behalf, 11.8% completed it on behalf of someone else, and 16.4% gave no answer.



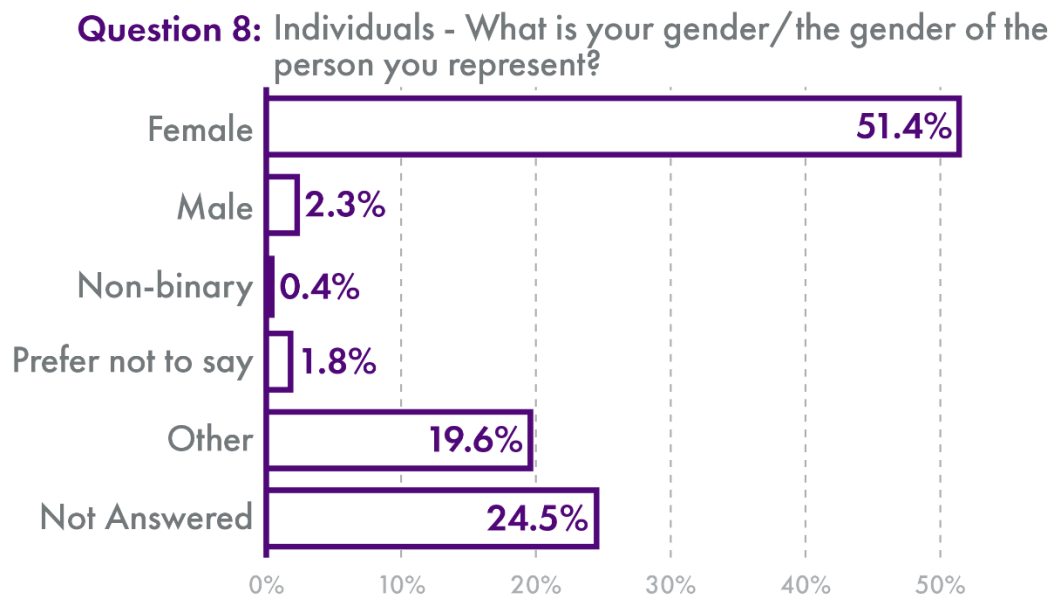
Question 7: For individuals - What is your age/the age of the person you represent?

There were 175 responses to this question. Of these responses, 20.4% of respondents, or those represented by the respondent, were aged between 45 and 54. 13.2% were under 18, 12.3% were aged 35-44, 12.3% were aged 55-64, 9.6% were aged between 25 and 34, and 6.8% were 65 or over. 20.4% of respondents did not answer this question.



Question 8: For individuals - What is your gender/the gender of the person you represent?

There were 175 responses to this question. Of those responses, 51.4% answered female, 19.6% responded other, 2.3% were male, 1.8% preferred not to say, and 0.4% were non-binary. 24.5% of respondents did not answer this question.



A text box was available to enable those who had responded 'Other' to input further information. 75 responses were received. Of those, one respondent shared that they were "M2F transsexual as of 1997."

The remaining responses challenged the survey's use of the term "gender" as opposed to "sex". For instance, one respondent said:

"Under the [Equality Act 2010](#) the protected characteristic is sex not gender. However, you could have an additional question relating to gender identity for additional information."

"Gender" is the standard term used in the Scottish Parliament's call for views surveys.

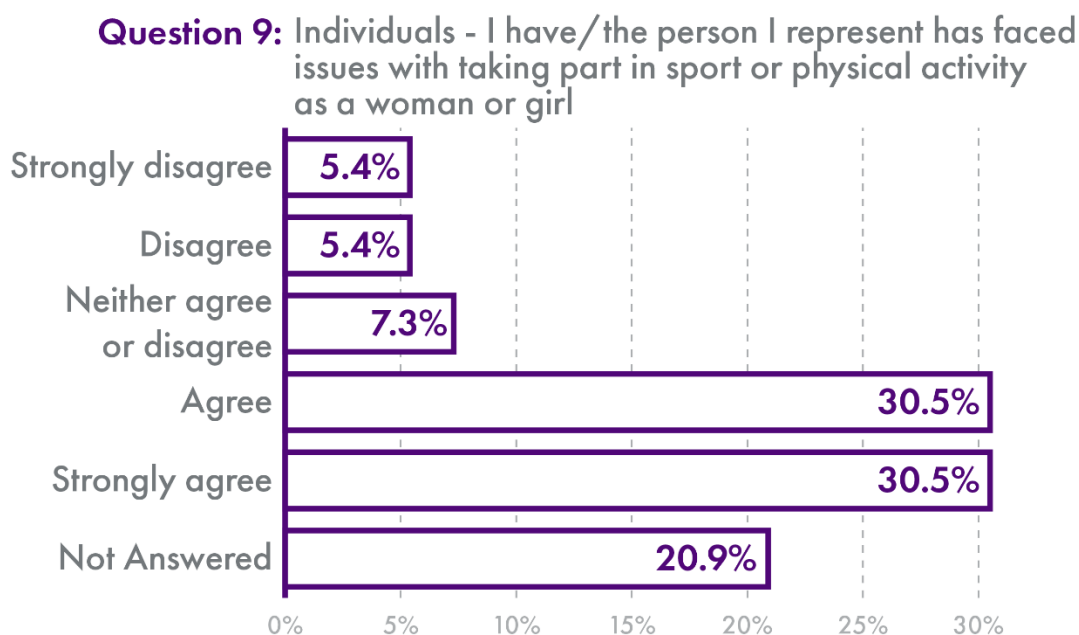
Question 12: For organisations - What demographic does your organisation represent?

This question received 83 responses, some of which were from individuals highlighting the error in the form. Of the organisations who responded, several represented women and girls in sport at all ages. Some, such as the Lawn Tennis Association, represented members of sports governing bodies. Several Health Boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships submitted responses. Some organisations represented students and young people, and one organisation represented middle-aged women. Organisations such as Ramblers Scotland represented people who engage in recreational physical activity. Some, including Parkinson's UK Scotland, represented people with disabilities.

Likert scale questions

Question 9: Individuals - Please indicate your agreement with the following statement, from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree: I have/the person I represent has faced issues with taking part in sport or physical activity as a woman or girl

175 individual respondents answered this question. Of those respondents, 30.5% strongly agreed that they or the person they represented had faced issues with taking part in sport or physical activity as a woman or girl. A further 30.5% agreed with this statement. 7.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 5.4% disagreed, and 5.4% strongly disagreed. 20.4% did not answer.

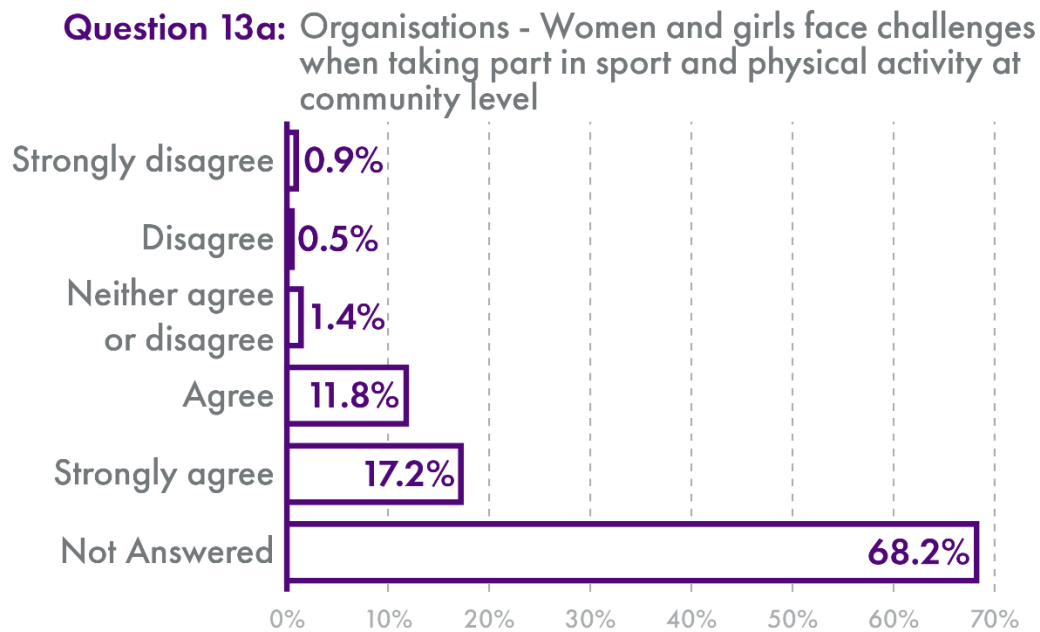


A text box was provided underneath Question 9 to enable respondents to share their views and experiences. 107 respondents shared further information regarding the issues that they or the person they represent had experienced. These responses were analysed alongside the open survey questions, and incorporated into the themes reported in this paper.

Those who completed the call for views on behalf of an organisation were asked to answer three Likert scale questions regarding different aspects of female participation in sport. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there was an error in the call for views form that directed individual respondents to the questions intended for organisations. This affected initial responses to these questions before the error was corrected.

Question 13a: Organisations - Based on your own experience, please indicate your agreement with the following statement, from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree: Women and girls face challenges when taking part in sport and physical activity at community level

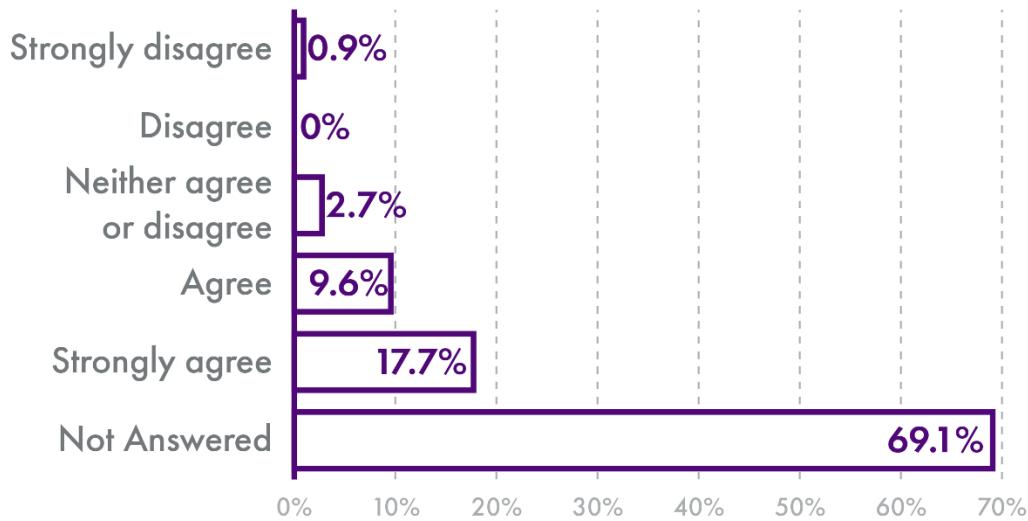
There were 70 responses to this question, though 68.2% of these respondents gave no answer, reflecting the error in the form through which individuals were directed to answer questions intended for organisations. Of the remaining respondents, 17.2% strongly agreed with the statement, 11.8% agreed, 1.4% neither agreed nor disagreed, 0.5% disagreed, and 0.9% strongly disagreed.



Question 13b: Organisations - Based on your own experience, please indicate your agreement with the following statement, from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree: Women and girls face challenges when taking part in sport at professional/elite level

There were 68 responses to this question, although 69.1% of these respondents gave no answer, again reflecting the error in the call for views form. Of the remaining respondents, 17.7% strongly agreed with the statement, 9.6% agreed, 2.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, 0% disagreed, and 0.9% strongly disagreed.

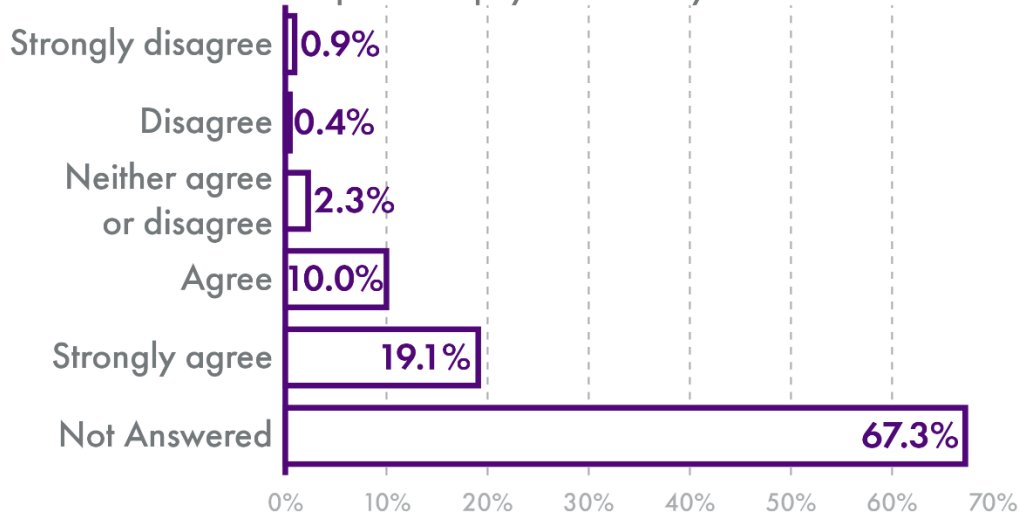
Question 13b: Organisations - Women and girls face challenges when taking part in sport at professional/elite level



Question 13c: Organisations - Based on your own experience, please indicate your agreement with the following statement, from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree: Women and girls from marginalised groups face additional challenges when taking part in sport and physical activity

72 respondents answered this question, though 67.3% gave no answer due to the error in the call for views form. Of the remaining respondents, 19.1% strongly agreed with the statement, 10% agreed, 2.3% neither agreed nor disagreed, 0.4% disagreed, and 0.9% strongly disagreed.

Question 13c: Organisations - Women and girls from marginalised groups face additional challenges when taking part in sport and physical activity



Open questions for all respondents

All respondents were invited to answer a series of open questions regarding different aspects of female participation in sport:

- What issues, if any, affect women and girls taking part in community sport and physical activity? (217 responses) How might these challenges be overcome? (205 responses)
- What issues, if any, affect women and girls taking part in elite sport? (201 responses) How might these challenges be overcome? (186 responses)
- What additional issues, if any, affect women and girls from marginalised groups taking part in community sport and physical activity? (188 responses) How might these challenges be overcome? (171 responses)

The themes emerging from the responses to these questions are summarised below.

Issues affecting participation in community sport and physical activity

Theme 1: Lack of opportunity and funding, and feeling “second best”

Many respondents shared that they felt women and girls had fewer opportunities to participate in community sport and physical activity. One respondent said:

“Women’s sport is the poor relative to male sport, funding, coaching, matches and opportunity wise.”

The relative lack of financial support available for women and girls’ community sports, particularly in deprived areas, was considered by some respondents to be a barrier affecting participation. Some clubs in deprived areas were attempting to address this issue by reducing fees as much as possible; however, they consequently struggled to make ends meet due to the high fees charged by local authorities for the use of sports facilities.

With regard to overcoming this challenge, one respondent suggested:

“Consider support or grants for those who are disadvantaged to enable them to access a range of different sports. Consider the demographic of each area. Has each area access to a range of sports?”

Some respondents shared that the lack of opportunities for girls to participate in sport, and the perception of girls’ sports as “second best”, began in school. One respondent gave an example from their school experience to highlight this inequality:

“The secondary school I attended placed a very high value on athletic performance and had state-of-the-art facilities. Yet, there was still inequality

between the funding for the boys' and the girls' resources. There are several boys from my year currently competing at an international level for rugby but while I was attending the school there wasn't even a girls' team despite having over 7 pitches and multiple coaches."

Older sports facilities initially designed for men and boys were not considered fit for the needs of women and girls. Several respondents therefore suggested upgrading sports facilities to meet the needs of women and girls, with particular attention to toilet provision:

"Improve changing rooms and shower facilities - cubicle showers, mirrors, hair dryers, appropriate sanitary ware in toilets.

Toilet facilities to be close to all pitches."

Theme 2: Leadership, role models, and representation

Some respondents shared that the representation of women and girls' sport in the media contributed to the perception of female sport as secondary. Although events such as the Lionesses' victory in the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 final were celebrated as a catalyst for improved representation of female sport, the respondents who mentioned media coverage felt that there was still significant progress to be made. Respondents felt that greater media coverage and promotion of women's sport would encourage girls to become more involved in sport and physical activity.

A number of respondents suggested that a lack of female role models and women in leadership and coaching roles may deter women and girls from participating in sport. Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport made a series of recommendations regarding this topic:

"A wide range of factors can support women and girls to participate fully in sport and physical activities at community-level. These include:

- Positive role models
- Peer-to-peer support
- Increasing the women and girls involved in the governance and management of sports' clubs and associations
- Single-sex provision. It would be helpful for more detailed guidance on managing single-sex provision in the context of the Gender Recognition Act and balancing the needs of groups with different protected characteristics
- Female coaches and programmes focusing on the recruitment and retention of female coaches

- Implementing relevant learning from other contexts which have improved participation for women and girls
- Targeted recruitment programmes where girls and women are under-represented in clubs, associations or sports
- Media campaigns
- Bidding to host women's sport events and including specific local gender-based programmes and commitments as part of bid documents."

Student Sport Scotland also highlighted the role of male leaders and role models in promoting women's sport:

"A common solution within all of these issues is male leaders and peers. Ensuring it is not just women trying to invest and develop women's sport locally it is vital that the men are raising and part of these conversations and actions."

Theme 3: Clothing, body image, and confidence

Respondents shared a variety of issues regarding sports clothing and its impact on participation. The cost of clothing and equipment was a matter of concern to many respondents, in addition to the perceived social pressure to dress fashionably in revealing clothing whilst exercising. Some respondents also shared that they felt self-conscious in exercise clothing, struggled to find supportive sports bras, and were worried about leaking whilst wearing white or form-fitting clothing during their period.

One respondent stated that helping women and girls to learn about supportive sports bras may address this barrier to participation:

"Helping them learn about breast support and movement too so that they can get supportive sports bras that allow them to move freely and concentrate on sports."

Another respondent shared that modifying rules around sports kit to accommodate period-related concerns may be beneficial:

"Allowing dark kit to avoid period problems."

North Lanarkshire Council suggested that increasing the number of female coaches may help women and girls to feel more confident when exercising:

"Female led coaching – By introducing female trainers onto our gym floors young female members have a relatable member of staff to seek comfort in when confidence is low, this alongside female only gym floor sessions such as ladies lifting has increased the number of females training with free weight spaces which historically has always been male dominant."

Theme 4: Puberty and school experiences

Many individuals and organisations highlighted the impact of puberty and adolescence on participation in sport, and the significant decline of participation in sport among teenage girls. A number of reasons for this decline were shared by participants, including body consciousness, difficulties when managing periods, and sexism from both male pupils and teachers regarding their appearance and abilities. Sharing communal changing facilities, even with other girls, made some respondents feel self-conscious, and a number of respondents shared that they had experienced sexism and harassment during mixed-sex PE lessons.

Negative experiences at school can have an enduring impact on respondents' participation in sport and physical activity as adults, according to LEAP Scotland, who said:

“Studies found that girls were actively marginalised in PE class by boys and many described not being able to get involved in games or even getting to use equipment. Many teachers were found to be complicit in this marginalisation by not challenging the disruptive behaviour of boys in class. These negative experiences track throughout adulthood and can severely impact women and girls participation rates for the rest of their life.”

Several respondents stated that the physical activity options available in schools are often directed towards boys, resulting in the exclusion of girls from sport. The Scottish Women's Convention said:

“Women also stated that the sport and physical activity options given throughout their schooling were male-orientated, with PE teachers regularly prioritising the boys' activities over the girls', and with more space being dedicated to football/rugby pitches.”

The Children's Parliament, a Scottish charity that supports children's participation and engagement, shared key findings from their [2022 Gender Equality in Education and Learning report](#), which suggested that informed, supportive integration of boys' and girls' sports may help to address the barriers to participation in sport experienced by girls:

“The girls' 4th Call to Action asks for adults/key decision makers to:

- Support inclusion of girls in sport and play
- Provide space for girls to play alongside boys
- Ensure girls are included in all sport and play
- Provide trained supervision in playgrounds and spaces where girls experience sexism and sexual violence
- Remove gendered uniforms and sports kit to allow more inclusive play.”

Theme 5: Menstruation, reproductive health, pregnancy, and menopause

The impact of menstruation, menopause, and reproductive health conditions was highlighted by a number of respondents as a barrier to participation in community sport. A variety of challenges related to periods were identified by respondents, including period pain, leakage, and the need for adequate toilet facilities in sports environments. The impact of reproductive health conditions such as endometriosis also impacted on some respondents' ability to participate in sport. Some respondents felt that support for people to participate in physical activity when pregnant or post-partum could be improved.

Some respondents referenced research concerning the increased risk of injury at certain points of the menstrual cycle. However, though [some existing evidence suggests a potential link](#) between hormonal fluctuations and Achilles cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries, the studies conducted so far are largely considered to be of low quality. Further research is recommended to conclusively demonstrate a connection between the menstrual cycle and increased risk of sports-related injuries.

With regard to how barriers related to periods might be overcome, one respondent suggested:

“Free period products and more education on managing your period and sport. Moon cups or allowing girls to learn how easy movement can be with them in.”

Under the [Period Products \(Free Provision\) Scotland Act](#), which came into force on 15 August 2022, period products, including menstrual cups, are made available free of charge in a range of local authority settings to anyone who needs them. Similarly, the [Period Products in Schools \(Scotland\) Regulations 2020](#) require education authorities to make period products available free of charge to pupils who need to use them. However, some respondents still reported difficulty in accessing period products.

A lack of understanding of the impact of the menopause on physical activity, and support for women to feel comfortable participating in sport whilst experiencing the physical symptoms associated with menopause, was also highlighted by a number of respondents. Some raised concerns that the marketing and promotion of female sport and physical activity made women in midlife feel that sport was “not for them”. Women in Sport shared their five principles for encouraging women experiencing menopause to become involved in sport and physical activity:

“Endless possibilities, expand perceptions and opportunities for being active.

Judgement-free zone, make active environments welcoming and supportive.

Support network, offer activities with built in social support.

Expand the image of what ‘sporty’ means with inspiring, relatable role models.

Make it relevant by referencing specific benefits for activity and sport.”

Another respondent highlighted the role of research into the impact of periods, the menopause, and reproductive health concerns in supporting female participation in sport:

“Do proper research into periods, endometriosis and menopause and put the sport scientists to work on alleviating these problems that only affect females.”

Theme 6: Mixed sex sports and facilities

The mixed sex nature of many changing facilities and sport environments was a matter of concern for respondents. Many respondents expressed discomfort, self-consciousness, and safety fears when sharing exercise facilities such as gyms or swimming pool with men.

Changing facilities were highlighted by many respondents as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity. Respondents disclosed fears of harassment and unwanted sexual advances from men, and felt that mixed sex changing villages did not offer sufficient privacy or safety. One respondent shared their experience of giving up swimming due to harassment in a mixed sex changing facility:

“I’m disabled & swimming is the only sport I can easily participate in and it’s incredibly beneficial for my mobility problems.

Due to mixed sex facilities I was victim to 3 males trying to film me in a changing cubicle. I’m now too scared to go back. I can’t afford to pay for private sessions, and there isn’t another pool close enough for me to use. This has made me have to quit completely. Against my wishes and against medical advice I no longer swim. At all.”

A majority of individual respondents expressed worries regarding the potential presence of trans women in female changing facilities, including one individual who said:

“I have been sexually assaulted and have been made to feel uncomfortable in the past being expected to wear fairly skimpy clothing. Fortunately, my current gym / swimming has female only changing rooms so I can feel safe and comfortable showering and getting changed. If trans women with male bodies were allowed to use the female changing room in future I would no longer feel safe and comfortable and would not use the gym anymore for this reason.”

To address this, respondents suggested the removal of mixed-sex changing villages, and the introduction of single-sex changing rooms, with robust reporting procedures in place for incidents of harassment.

One respondent, a trans man who both plays and works in sport, compared his experience to highlight the discrimination experienced by trans women who wish to participate in sport:

“For almost 20 years of my life I lived as a girl/woman who was active and interested in sport. Since my transition I have faced new barriers to sport but I have also found it a lot easier as I no longer have to contend with the same level of sexism, misogyny and the other burdens women still face within sport. While the topic of transgender men in sport is often swept under the rug, this only highlights to me how extreme and insidious the debate around trans women in sport has become...

“Reading this testimonial I hope that you understand that the issues faced by trans women are not unique to them but are the issues that are faced by all women. If we want all women to be accepted and succeed in sport, that needs to include trans women as well. It is also counter intuitive to believe that the way to increase physical activity in women and girls is by stigmatising, marginalising, and banning women and girls from taking part in physical activity.”

The need to compete against men due to lack of provision for female-only sport and physical activity, was suggested by respondents as an issue affecting participation. One respondent highlighted that this barrier is present in schools, and could be demoralising for girls:

“Lack of single sex opportunities, being able to compete on level playing fields against other females.
Schools, even at primary level, not splitting sports into boys & girls.
Girls seeing boys win against them constantly just demoralises them.”

The provision of female-only clubs and sporting events was identified as a potential solution to this challenge:

“Encourage schools, councils & sporting organisations to promote female only clubs and events.”

Theme 7: Harassment and safety

Many respondents shared their experiences of harassment whilst exercising, and their concerns regarding safety. A number of respondents had been catcalled whilst exercising in public, and threatened when running in the dark. At gyms and in pools, respondents reported being harassed by men, and filmed on mobile phones whilst exercising and in changing areas.

Living Streets Scotland shared information from their [“Tools for Inclusion: Equality Impact Assessment in Local Authority Streets Practice” report](#), to suggest how this barrier might be overcome:

“At a high level, policy such as the [National Walking Strategy](#) and the draft [National Planning Framework 4](#) should provide the framework for improving structural support for improving everyday walking rates among women. However, the NWS’s stated commitment to equality is not broken down into specific areas or targets around gender and participation or provision. Implementation of these strategies needs to happen with equality awareness designed in from the earliest stages. Funding, strategy and infrastructure

should be subject to equality impact assessment at every level to make sure that it is fit for the whole of Scotland's population."

Regarding addressing safety issues that prevent women and girls from enjoying walking, Ramblers Scotland highlighted the potential role of group walks:

"Infrastructure and maintenance is one aspect of safety, such as having well-lit paths in urban areas to enable people to continue walking in winter months, or ensuring vegetation is regularly cut back to give clear lines of sight. Women are also less likely to want to walk alone, which means finding a walking group or a walking partner is important for many... Group walks can provide a valuable social contact as well as the security and confidence of being on an organised event with like-minded people."

Similarly, one respondent suggested that initiatives like Parkrun offer an opportunity for women to become involved in group physical activity:

"Parkrun has been an incredible movement for getting women moving. More friendly, inexpensive, drop in and have a go, en masse with other women seems like a winning formula. Be as competitive as you want to. Bring your kids/buggy if you need to. (Still issues with unwanted solicitations from men, though)."

One respondent said that concerns regarding safety could be overcome through the provision of self-defence training:

"Free self-defence classes too could help many women feel safer when walking outside."

The Scottish Women's Convention suggested that a feminist approach to town planning, such as [the approach adopted by Glasgow City Council](#), could create the conditions for improving the safety of women when exercising:

"Lastly, a way in which to reduce fears around safety is to implement feminist town planning across Scotland. As stated, women do not feel comfortable exercising in public places, greatly limiting their ability to stay fit and healthy. By ensuring that towns and cities have good street lighting, public transport hubs within town centres and better paths, women and girls will have improved opportunities to partake in exercise... Therefore, it is vital that the Scottish Government implement feminist town planning Scotland-wide and improve walking paths for rural communities."

Glasgow Life/Glasgow Sport stated that educating men and boys about the impact of sexism and harassment is crucial to addressing these safety concerns:

"As a result a range of integrated structural and personal approaches are required to address these issues. This includes the education of boys and men regarding attitudes to girls and women, misogyny and violence against women.

This should take place in a variety of formal and informal education settings

and should focus on the responsibilities of boys and men to understand the impact on women and girls of sexism, misogyny and violence against women and their responsibilities to challenge these attitudes and behaviours.”

Theme 8: Access, availability, and cost

The availability of female-only sports clubs, gym sessions, and other sporting opportunities was highlighted by many respondents as a barrier to participation in community sport, particularly those sports considered to be “male-dominated”. It was suggested that introducing women-only days in skate parks, football clubs and other “male-dominated” spaces may help to encourage female participation.

Caring responsibilities and childcare needs were identified as barriers to accessing physical activity. Intelligent Health said:

“For women particularly capacity is a considerable barrier as they make up the majority of unpaid caregivers globally with two to ten times more time spent on unpaid care work (https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf). Unpaid care work here refers to household tasks such as cooking and cleaning and caring for children (whether their own or others), ill and elderly relatives. Women disproportionately spend more time doing this than their male counterparts. This is a physical barrier for women to participate in community sport and physical activity as structured sport doesn’t allow enough flexibility to manage the care burden and to participate in sport.”

One respondent suggested that the provision of affordable, timely support with caring responsibilities could address this barrier:

“Childcare and help with elderly, sick, and disabled relatives must also be available, free or at low cost, and at the convenience of the women, not the local authority (who may try to centralise this help at inconvenient locations or only during “office hours”).”

North Lanarkshire Council shared an example of their good practice to highlight the impact of removing cost-related barriers to exercise:

“Teen membership – By removing the financial pressure of being able to afford a membership we have seen a sharp rise in both male and female teenagers accessing the facilities and the opportunity exercise in a fun and safe environment.”

Challenges affecting female participation in elite sport

Theme 1: Funding, resources, and pay

A lack of funding for elite women’s and girls’ sports, particularly in comparison to men’s and boys’ sports, was identified as a challenge by many respondents, in terms of pay for athletes, sponsorship, and prize money. The LGB Alliance said:

“Promotion and sponsorship remain lower, and remuneration for elite women athletes is considerably less than for men. In large part, this is a result of sexist ideas about women’s sport being inferior and less entertaining than men’s sport. Despite the success of the England women’s football team, the Lionesses, girls and women continue to experience attitudes regarding female sport as ‘not as important’ as male sport.”

Respondents also highlighted that female athletes are often expected to pay their own transport costs to travel to competitions and training, a challenge that particularly affects women and girls in rural areas, who often have to travel to the central belt for competitions. Funding for support such as physiotherapy and high-level training was also considered to be lacking in comparison to men’s sport.

Due to the lack of funding available, many female athletes have to hold full-time jobs, affecting their capacity to train and compete. One respondent said:

“Elite sport takes a huge amount of effort – women’s elite sports receive less funding so it is harder for girls and women to participate. They often have to work other jobs alongside in a way that their male counterparts do not.”

Many respondents felt that the perception of women’s sport as second best, and the comparative lack of media coverage surrounding women’s sports, contributed to the lack of funding and sponsorship. One respondent suggested:

“Media outlets should be fined for failing to report on female teams, events, and athletes and it should be mandatory for 50% of their sports sections to focus on female athletes. Companies who provide sponsorship to male athletes should have to provide the same level of funding to female athletes or face fines.”

Theme 2: Media coverage and societal attitudes

The lack of media coverage of women and girls’ sport was identified by a number of participants as a challenge affecting elite female athletes. One respondent highlighted the impact of insufficient media coverage upon the funding available for women’s sports, and the consequent effect on female athletes:

“Additionally, there appears to be an undervaluing of women’s sport by the media and some institutions that affects the media coverage and level of financial reward for participation in certain sports. This inequality can have a negative impact on the motivation and participation of some elite sportswomen.”

Some respondents felt that elite female athletes face disproportionate pressure to be physically attractive. The clothing regulations for female athletes in some sports were considered to be too restrictive and revealing, and contributed to respondents’ sense that female athletes are unfairly sexualised by the media and in society.

Respondents referenced a number of sexist stereotypes affecting women and girls in sport. The perception that women and girls are not typically “sporty”, and the notion that certain sports are “not for girls”, were highlighted as issues affecting funding for,

and participation in, sports such as football and rugby. The perception of female athletes as “less than” their male counterparts was also considered to be an issue within the sporting community, with one respondent sharing their experience of derogatory comments from coaches and competition judges.

To address these challenges, respondents suggested improved promotion and media coverage of female sport, and parity of pay to challenge the perception that female sport is inferior. One respondent also recommended an increased representation of women as experts and pundits. The provision of training for the media to improve coverage of women’s sport was proposed by one respondent:

“Further funding available to women’s sport both non-competitive and competitive will increase participation levels. Additionally, training and support for the media to give the same level of attention to women’s sport will raise the profile for those disciplines.”

Theme 3: Harassment and abuse

A number of respondents pointed out that female athletes receive disproportionate levels of online and social media abuse, and called for sporting bodies to step in to support female athletes, and put pressure on social media platforms to address abuse. The introduction of fines for social media platforms who fail to address abuse was mentioned by one respondent as a potential solution to this issue.

Some respondents referenced recent international reports of sexual misconduct and abuse committed by coaches against elite female athletes, and called for action to protect women and girls in elite sport. Women in Sport said:

“Women in Sport is calling for the creation of an independent non-departmental 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, athletes, volunteers, coaches, and management would be able to have full faith that its findings would be fair and beyond reproach. In short taking this approach would make the sports sector safer for everyone involved and build back trust in the sector, not least amongst female athletes and parents.”

Theme 4: Periods, pregnancy, and parenthood

A lack of understanding of the impact of periods on athletic performance and training was discussed by a number of respondents. Training programmes and competition schedules are often based on the “default male” approach according to some respondents, who felt that greater provision could be made for the impact of the menstrual cycle upon athletes’ ability to train and compete. More research into the impact of periods on training regimes and injury prevention, and education about periods for coaches working with female athletes, were identified by respondents as potential solutions to these challenges.

Some respondents felt that there was little provision in elite sport for pregnant and post-partum athletes. There was also a perception that elite female athletes were expected to retire following pregnancy and parenthood, forcing a choice between their career and parenthood. One respondent believed that the media's focus on such issues during coverage of female sport perpetuated this inequality:

“The media focusing on female athletes’ marital status, referring to them as “wife/girlfriend of X male athlete”, asking about childcare arrangements or future plans to marry or have children.”

Greater support for pregnant and post-partum athletes, including maternity leave and pay, and improved provision of childcare, were suggested by respondents as potential methods of addressing this issue.

Theme 5: Participation of trans people

Many respondents felt that the inclusion of trans women in female sport was unfair to women competing at elite level. Some felt that the inclusion of trans women athletes would create a further disadvantage for ["cisgender" female](#) athletes, exacerbating the challenges faced by elite sportswomen. One respondent said:

“Female elite athletes’ voices are rarely heard however, one peer-reviewed research paper details the views of 19 female Olympians regarding the inclusion of transwomen with retained male advantage in female sport. [Research with female Olympic athletes](#) which includes a Scottish Olympian, finds that they feel silenced by being called bigoted and transphobic. As a consequence, the fundamental right to freedom of expression is compromised.”

Some respondents suggested that a separate category for trans athletes in sporting competitions may offer a solution to this issue. Women in Sport highlighted the need to ensure that both cisgender and trans female athletes are supported to take part in competitive sport:

“Women who play sport must be able to compete in a fair and safe sporting environment. Transgender people must be able to compete in sport too. We must recognise that categories, including the female category, exist to ensure everyone can compete, to ensure inclusion. The focus of effort should, in our view, be on providing for transgender competition in a way that does not deprive natal women of the chance to take part in fair and safe sport.”

Additional challenges affecting women and girls from marginalised groups

Theme 1: Religious and cultural considerations

Considerations associated with some religions and cultures were highlighted by respondents as barriers to participation in sport and physical activity. Respondents noted that women of some faiths, including Islam and Orthodox Judaism, held beliefs

concerning modesty that would prevent them from participating in mixed sex sport, or sharing mixed sex changing facilities. The potential presence of trans women in female-only sports environments and changing areas was also referenced by some respondents in relation to this issue. One respondent said:

“Religious women and girls are at a much higher disadvantage since separation by sex is required for some faiths. All those women are then excluded from sports.”

Some respondents also felt that the clothing rules associated with some sports, such as wearing revealing clothing or being forbidden to wear a hijab, would potentially prevent women and girls from some faiths from participating. The provision of single sex activities and spaces, and offering alternative clothing choices, were identified as methods of supporting women and girls facing these challenges to participate in sport and physical activity.

Concerns regarding racism in sport were also shared by a number of participants. sportscotland shared some findings from [a recent review into racism and racial inequality in sport](#), which found that women and girls were deterred from participation in sport by experiences of racism and stereotyping:

“Participants discussed negative stereotypes, how these had an impact on confidence and motivation from an early age, feeling that they didn’t fit the expectations of their coaches and team leaders, how in school they were directed into sports that would “suit them”, how they felt sexualised and objectified, how cultural expectations of communities and families compounded these experiences, how they experienced microaggressions, casual racism and sexism, how they were overlooked for team sports, and how the media’s negative representation of women of colour across all sports reinforced a negative culture. Muslim women spoke of experiences of negative innuendos, micro aggressions and exclusionary practices.”

To tackle this issue, Women in Sport suggested:

“As well as ensuring a robust legal framework exists to tackle discrimination, and that it is enforced, governments can consider how to use their resources to support efforts to help more marginalised women and girls into sport and activity. Initiatives like the culture, heritage and sport stream of the Welsh Government’s [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan](#) show that there are creative ways to do this.”

Theme 2: LGBTQ+ people

Respondents discussed a variety of barriers affecting the participation of LGBTQ+ women and girls in sport. Many respondents felt that homophobia was pervasive in sport at both community and elite level, and some said that some elite LGBTQ+ athletes have reported avoiding coming out for fear of losing sponsorships and opportunities. The LGB Alliance felt that increasing homophobia meant that sport was no longer a place of refuge for lesbian and bisexual women and girls:

“While sport has been a traditional ‘refuge’ for lesbians and bisexual women, a place where they can meet other lesbians and hence provide vital social opportunities, it is also the case, particularly with the apparent resurgence of homophobic attitudes in schools, that some girls are reluctant to be too enthusiastic about physical activity lest this makes others suspicious of their sexual orientation.”

Some respondents said that LGBTQ+ women and girls may fear harassment and abuse in changing rooms and sport environments, and that prejudices around queer women affected their ability to participate in sport. One respondent shared their personal experience:

“Being a bisexual woman and not necessarily fitting into gender norms for girls I have felt quite excluded from physical activities such as dance and university netball as I haven't fit the mould of their usual participants. During high school there were issues in the changing rooms as my sexuality was questioned and girls assumed I would want to watch them undress, this was horrible for me and made me feel very singled out and embarrassed, I hope it goes without saying that the majority of queer women do not use changing rooms as a means of sexual gratification and most of us are trying not to be targeted by homophobia.”

Respondents said that greater education for sports teams, coaches, and teachers regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people would help to address these fears. Robert Gordon University felt that involving people from marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ people, in the design of sport and physical activity opportunities was essential:

“Create a culture where representatives of marginalised groups are able to lead the conversation and inform the design, creation and implementation of sport and physical activity initiatives for under-represented groups. Practice needs to be based on the views and experiences of marginalised groups, rather than assumptions being made about their needs.”

The impact of transphobia upon the participation of trans women in sport and physical activity, particularly in the context of the current debate regarding this issue, was highlighted by a number of respondents. One respondent, a trans man and staff member of an LGBT sports charity, said:

“Transgender people face various barriers to access and continued participation in sport. These include bathrooms and changing facilities, policies, doping regulations, a general lack of an inclusive environment, being a strictly sex segregated environment, sexism and hegemonic masculinity, overt homophobia / transphobia and poor or dated designs of sport facilities. Subsequently, research suggests that overall transgender people are less physically active and report lower social support and physical self-perception than their cisgender peers, alongside reporting feeling “less safe in school” and sports facilities.”

With regard to addressing the transphobia experienced by trans women in sport and physical activity, respondents suggested the development of safe, inclusive spaces

to open up opportunities for everyone, and providing training for staff and coaches to enable them to feel more informed and confident when working with trans women. One respondent highlighted that the concerns regarding trans participation in sport are rooted in fears about male behaviour, and suggested that addressing the issue of men's behaviour in sporting environments would be a more appropriate approach:

“The rise in interest in protecting single sex spaces is overall to protect women from the behaviours of men, and they are the issue that must be addressed here, not other marginalised women.

It is counter intuitive to believe that the way to increase physical activity in women and girls is by stigmatising, marginalising, and banning women and girls from taking part in physical activity.”

Theme 3: Health and disability

Disability was highlighted as a barrier to participation in sport and physical activity by many respondents. A lack of appropriate opportunities and facilities, inadequate equipment, and a lack of understanding of support needs, were identified as challenges affecting women and girls with disabilities. Discrimination experienced by disabled people, whether conscious or unconscious, further affected the willingness of some women and girls to participate in sports. The lack of visibility of elite athletes with disabilities was highlighted as a factor affecting the participation of disabled people in sport.

With regard to physical activity such as walking, respondents felt that disabled women and girls faced additional barriers such as poor design and inaccessible infrastructure, and higher rates of harassment and abuse whilst in public.

The Scottish Women's Convention pointed out that the lack of opportunities for girls living with disabilities begins in school:

“Furthermore, current physical education is not facilitative of children with additional needs, or physical disability, instead those that fall within these categories are separated from their classmates. This can lead to a sense of isolation and does not encourage these young people to live healthy lifestyles.”

To overcome this barrier, respondents suggested a greater provision of accessible sports facilities, and training for coaches and teachers to help them understand the needs of people with disabilities. Some respondents also suggested raising the profile of elite female athletes with disabilities, to provide role models to inspire others to take part in sport. NHS Lanarkshire highlighted the need to ensure provision across all sports to support women and girls with disabilities to progress through professional pathways.

The positive impact of sport and physical activity for those experiencing mental health challenges was discussed by a number of participants. The Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) emphasised that despite these benefits, women and girls facing mental health difficulties were less likely to be physically active, due to factors including lack of confidence, a perceived lack of support, and

fear of stigma and discrimination. In their response to the Committee's call for views, SAMH shared details of their leadership and mentorship programme, developed with Scottish Women in Sport, to tackle issues of self-confidence and lack of support. The organisation also recommended training professionals and volunteers working in sport to enable them to better support people experiencing mental health challenges.

Some respondents highlighted the impact of particular health conditions upon the ability to exercise. Parkinson's UK suggested that group exercise opportunities with other people living with Parkinson's may encourage women living with the condition to become more physically active, addressing their concerns about being judged by others, and enabling them to be guided by coaches who understand their condition.

The provision of support for unpaid carers of people with disabilities to take part in sport was also highlighted by Parkinson's UK:

"Lack of carer identification means that unpaid carers are missing out on support, including access to short breaks or home care packages that could help them make time for physical activity. Action needs to be taken to make sure that carers are identified and enabled to access their rights under the Carers Rights Scotland Act."

Several respondents also referred to the impact of urinary incontinence on female participation in sport and physical activity. Respondents felt that the prevalence and impact of urinary incontinence was underacknowledged at health service and government level, and that further research and support was needed to facilitate the involvement of women experiencing incontinence.

Theme 4: Socioeconomic inequality

Socioeconomic deprivation was acknowledged by many participants as a barrier affecting participation in sport. The cost of participation in sports clubs and activities such as gyms, the availability of sporting facilities in deprived areas, and the cost of equipment, and the time cost associated with participation in physical activities, were considered to disproportionately impact upon women and girls experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Respondents argued that people facing deprivation experienced greater benefit from taking part in sport and physical activity than those from less disadvantaged circumstances, and that increased provision should therefore be made to create sporting opportunities for people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. The Fighting Chance Project, an initiative that supports disadvantaged young people to participate in judo classes in Dunfermline, said:

"We know that girls from poorer households and more deprived areas are less likely to walk into the dojo. But we also know that these are the children to which our sport can make the biggest difference."

North Lanarkshire NHS suggested:

"Sport and physical activity can be costly. Targeting social and economic inequalities to ensure equitable access to all and promoting opportunities for

free or subsidised access, could provide more access to those in our communities who are unable to access sport/ physical activity due to cost being a barrier to participation.”

Regarding supporting marginalised communities in general, Scottish Student Sport highlighted that cultural change within sport is everyone’s responsibility:

“It is not the job of people within a community to address and solve the barriers they face. It is for the majority of the sporting community to educate themselves and those around them to create and secure an inclusive community going forward.”

Further comments

Question 20: Do you have any further comments?

There were 124 responses to this question. The majority of answers reinforced points raised in response to previous questions, and many raised objections to the inclusion of trans people in women and girls’ sport. Some organisations utilised this question as an opportunity to share details of their organisation’s achievements in this field.

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