

Sports Marketing Surveys

WOMEN'S SPORTING JOURNEYS:

How to keep women engaged
in sport throughout their lives



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FOREWORD

Our special advisor in women's sport, Sue Anstiss MBE, shares her reflections on this report.



There's so much in this report that resonated with me – both professionally and personally – and I know that the findings will provide a fascinating insight for all those driving sports participation for women and girls.

Gender inequalities in sports participation still exist at every age, so any insight that helps to re-dress this balance is incredibly valuable.

One of the most striking recommendations from the research is sport's need to 're-frame' the value it offers women across every stage of their lives so that sport is properly recognised as a powerful tool for wellbeing.

Women are more likely than men to view sport as a luxury to indulge in rather than a place where, along with benefits to physical and mental health, they can find lifelong friends, obtain emotional support and experience constant personal growth.

The research shows that tapping into these intrinsic motivations to exercise and play sport can significantly reduce women's tendency to drop out of sport at various life stages.

As Sport England's brilliant campaign 'This Girl Can' highlighted, lack of confidence is a huge barrier for female sports participation at all ages. Whether that's a teenage girl who won't try a new team sport as she's concerned about looking foolish in front of her peers, to a middle-aged woman scared to return to sport last played in childhood, worried about rule changes.

Fear of judgement is preventing millions of women from enjoying sport in their lives, but there is so much more that sports can do. This research highlights the enormous positive impact of providing compassionate, welcoming environments and showcasing women of all ages and backgrounds participating.

"Understanding these changing motivations and reflecting that in the way sport is marketed to women and girls, could be very significant for many sports bodies."



Credit: Sport England Image Library

What women are looking for from their main sport also changes over time. Whilst enjoyment is the standout motivator in childhood and adolescence, as women enter young adulthood the motivation to compete declines and the desire to try something new and meet new people through sport increases. As women age, it's health benefits and friendships that are key drivers.

Understanding these changing motivations and reflecting that in the way sport is marketed to women and girls could be very significant for many sports bodies.

As I read this excellent report it was hard not to reflect on my own sporting life journey, the reasons I'd started and stopped sports at different stages and what playing sport has given me.

Having met one friend for the first time at a local swimming club when we were both just 10, we went on to play netball in a variety of teams – school, borough, adult leagues etc. – and this month start walking netball together. A 45-year friendship through sport and beyond. Here's hoping the findings in this report help other women and girls enjoy the myriad of benefits sport can provide across their entire lives.



Sue Anstiss MBE
CEO Fearless Women



Credit: Sport England Image Library

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Gender inequality in grassroots sport cannot be ignored

Research has consistently proven that women are less active than men and that women's participation decreases with age. Sport England's Active Lives data suggests that more than 13.9 million women are not active enough.

In this report, Sports Marketing Surveys explores how sport can better appeal to and support women to enjoy a more fulfilling, longer sports participation journey, irrespective of their background, circumstances or performance level.

Sport needs to reframe the value it can bring to women throughout their lives

Women motivated to participate in sport for intrinsic reasons, such as to improve wellbeing, enjoyment and to meet new people, are more likely to continuously participate in sport compared to those who take part for extrinsic reasons such as to win or compete.

Women accept, and society encourages them to accept, that sports participation will move down their priority list and decrease with age. This mindset needs addressing early to prevent it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Assumptions about women's caring roles in society need to align with reality. Whilst maternity and motherhood may undoubtedly impact sports participation, so too does caring for other and older family members throughout life stages.

Sport has the power to enrich women's lives beyond the physical health benefits. Conversations should where appropriate highlight how sport can provide a positive wellbeing outlet as well as a respite and a saviour throughout life's ups and downs.

"It's more than just being active for 90 minutes, it's the friendships, the fun, the laughs, self-improvement, good mental health, and competitiveness. Love it and won't give up sport again anytime soon!"



Whilst every woman's sporting journey is different, every woman's life can be enriched by sport

Many women pick up and put down different sports throughout their life. The focus should be on normalising attitudes towards squiggly sporting journeys with breaks amongst both female participants and deliverers of women's sport.

Young adulthood (18-35yrs) and middle-aged adulthood (36-55yrs) are prime times to support women to be more active more often and for longer. They are both key times for the transition of women's participation motivations and habits.

Lack of confidence is a very common barrier for women. Sport should support all women to conquer their confidence barriers by providing a compassionate environment, offering quality activities appropriate to women's changing bodies and minds, and showcasing how sport is for everyone irrespective of ability and experience.

Women's passion for their main sport doesn't leave them, it's just hidden underneath life's busyness and perceived higher priorities. Innovatively reigniting this passion sooner rather than later can prevent more women from saying "I wish I'd returned sooner!"

Growing women's participation in grassroots sport is interlinked with the visibility of women's sport and the growing commercial revenue already entering the industry. Working collaboratively across the industry can help the entire sector to flourish and close the gender gaps across sport.

Sport should be framed as being:

- An enjoyable activity
- A go-to tool for boosting wellbeing
- An accessible means for personal growth
- A second home and family that enhances your sense of belonging
- A place to nurture friends and connections for life
- A chance to challenge yourself on your terms
- A guilt-free and valuable activity for women of all ages and roles, including mothers.

"The focus should be on normalising attitudes towards squiggly sporting journeys with breaks"

INTRODUCTION

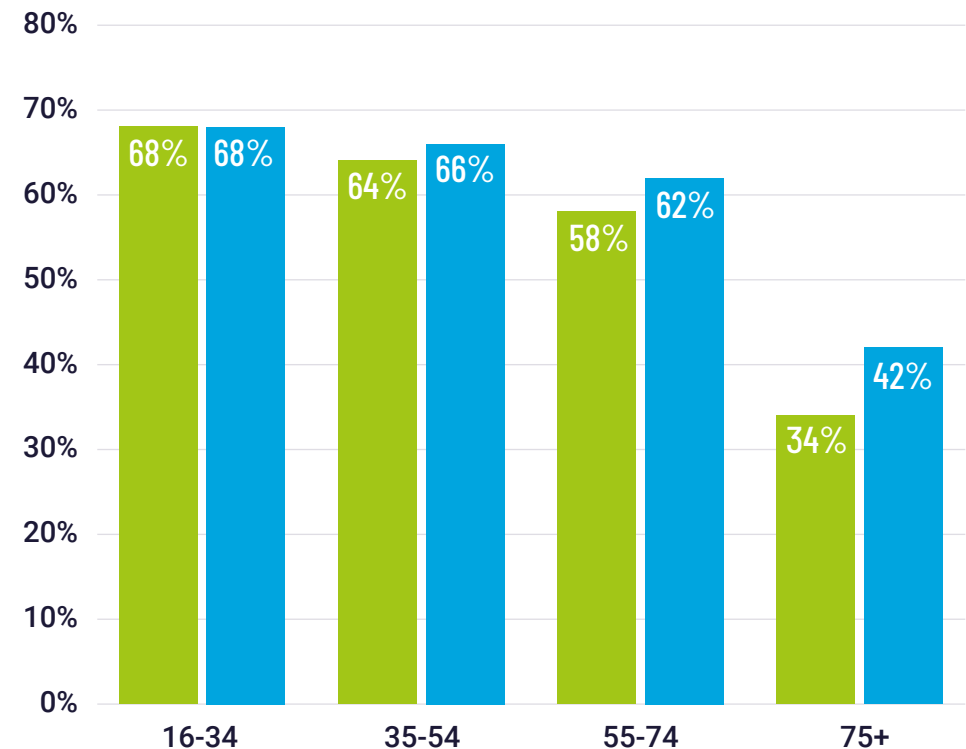


More than 13.9 million women are not active enough

It is widely acknowledged that regular participation in physical activity across all ages is beneficial to both personal physical and mental health. Physical activity also has wider social benefits for individuals and communities as well as delivering cost savings for the health and care system¹. But we know that in England activity levels amongst adults of all ages are lower than recommended, and this is seen more amongst women².

- 13,913,500 women in England are not meeting the CMO recommended weekly levels of at least 150 minutes of physical activity a week²
- Compared to men, the percentage of women meeting the CMO recommended weekly levels of physical activity is lower in almost all life stages²
- The percentage of women meeting the CMO recommended weekly levels of physical activity decreases with age².

% of the adult population in England that were active for at least 150 minutes a week



Source: Active Lives, Nov 19/20

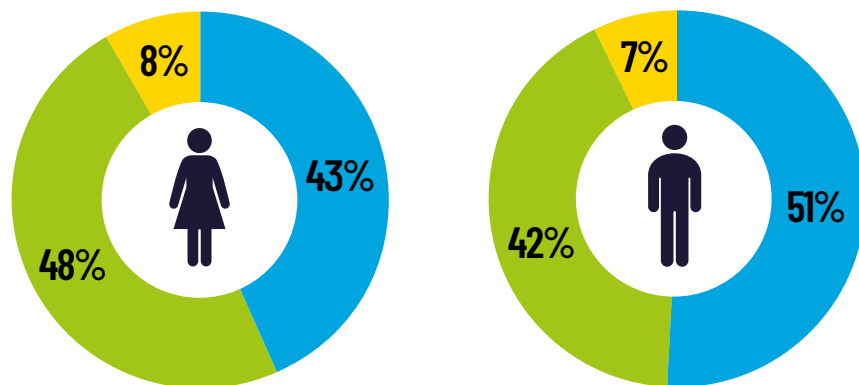
¹ UK CMO Physical Activity Guidance (2019)

² Active Lives (Nov 2019/20)

Almost half of women take a break from their main sport

The majority of women in our research started participating in their main sport during their childhood. Amongst our sample, taking a break was far more common than dropping out of their main sport entirely for both men and women. When it comes to continuous participation in their main sport, 51% of men enjoyed continuous participation compared to 43% of women.

Have you taken a break from or stopped your main sport?



Continuous participation Break and return Stopped

Base: F 2564, M 2230

Connecting women's sporting journeys is key

If taking a break from your main sport is as common amongst all women as it is amongst our sample, this means that potentially 8.3 million women³ are likely to take a break from their main sport at some point in their sporting journey and 1.3 million⁴ are likely to drop out.

As well as working to reduce drop out in women's sport, there is enormous opportunity if:

- Fewer women took breaks from their main sport
- Those who needed to take a break returned to their main sport sooner.

"Potentially 8.3 million women³ are likely to take a break from their main sport..."

This research aims to understand how those working across the industry from National Governing Bodies of Sport to grassroots sports clubs and leisure facilities can better support more women already engaged in their main sport to participate more often and for longer.

³ 48% of the population of women who have participated in a minimum of two sessions of at least moderate intensity activity in the last 28 days combining to at least 60 minutes in total over the 28 days (48% of 17,419,600). Taken from Active Lives (Nov 2019/20)

⁴ 8% of the population of women who have participated in a minimum of two sessions of at least moderate intensity activity in the last 28 days combining to at least 60 minutes in total over the 28 days (8% of 17,419,600). Taken from Active Lives (Nov 2019/20)

HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED?



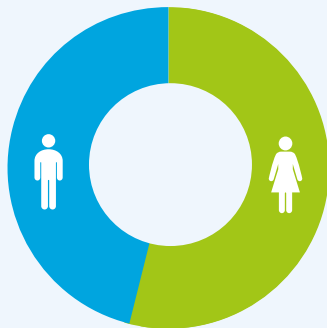
Sample



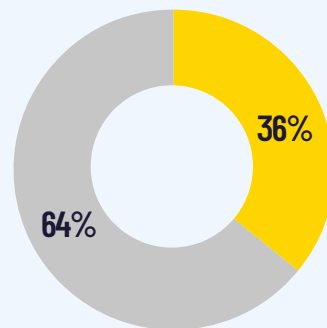
**5,338
respondents**



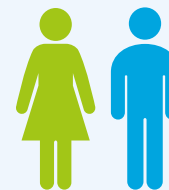
**Existing and lapsed
sports participants**



**53% Women
46% Men**

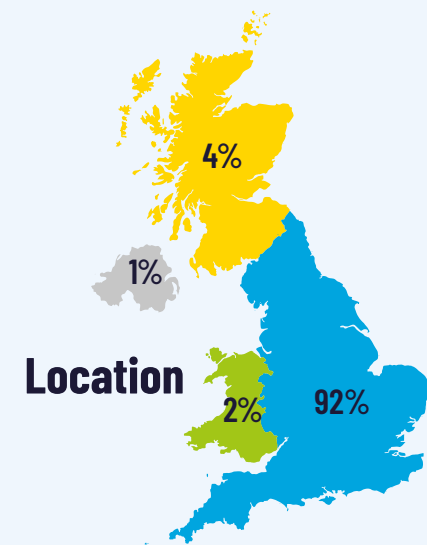
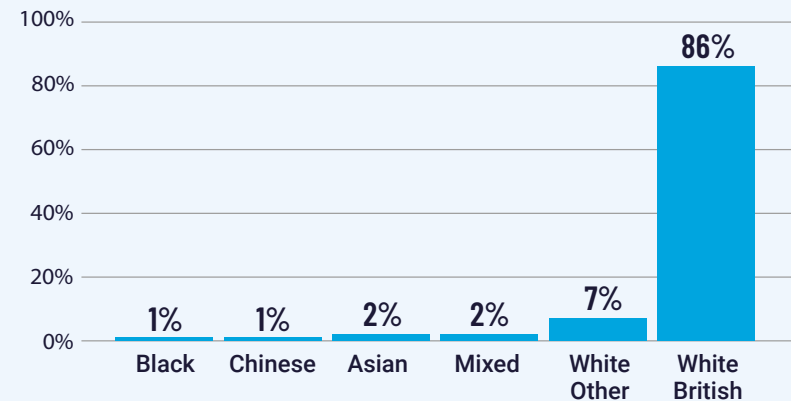


Individual sports participants
Team sports participants
(Main sport)



**84%
No disability
or long-term health
condition from birth**

Ethnicity



Location

Main sports

Team sports

- › Baseball
- › Basketball
- › Cricket
- › Football
- › Hockey
- › Lacrosse
- › Netball
- › Rounders
- › Rugby Union
- › Rugby League
- › Softball
- › Volleyball

Individual sports

- › Archery
- › Athletics – Track/Field
- › Badminton
- › Climbing
- › Cycling
- › Equestrian
- › Golf
- › Group exercise / dance
- › Gymnastics
- › Martial arts
- › Orienteering
- › Rowing
- › Running
- › Shooting
- › Snowsport
- › Squash
- › Swimming
- › Tennis
- › Triathlon
- › Walking

Methodology

The sample was gathered in June 2021 via National Governing Bodies of sport and sports organisations. The survey was promoted to existing databases of known sports participants and followers. Respondents participated in response to a generic voucher prize draw incentive.

Life stages explored



Childhood
(5 – 12yrs)



Adolescence
(13 – 17yrs)



Young adulthood
(18 – 35yrs)



Middle-aged adulthood
(36 – 55yrs)



Late adulthood
(56 – 65yrs)



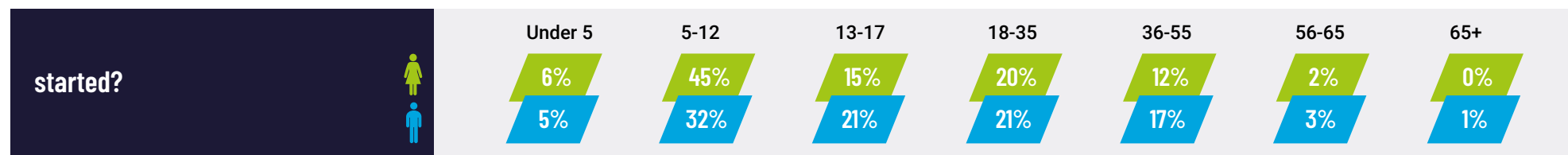
Older adulthood
(65 yrs +)

WOMEN'S SPORTING JOURNEYS AT A GLANCE

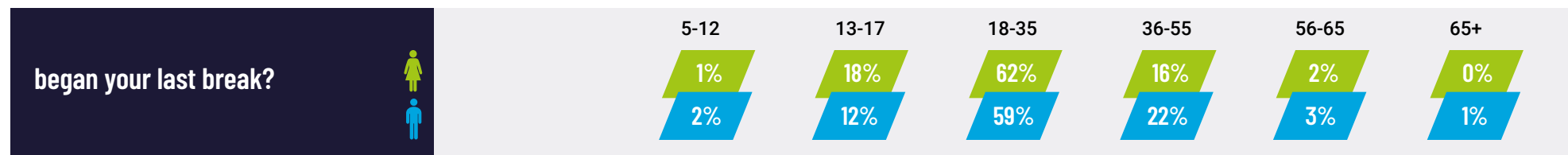
This section aims to share headline data and real life stories to provide context for the full report.



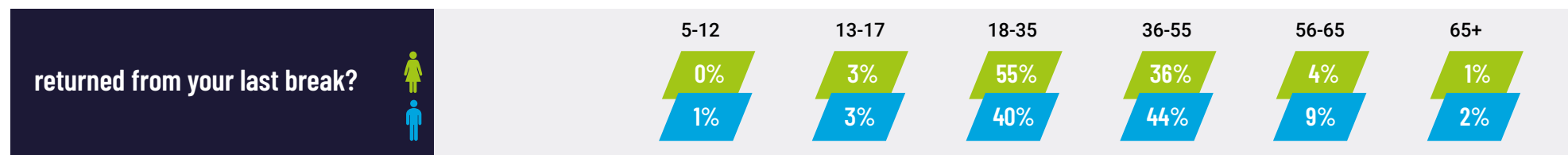
Thinking about your participation in your main sport, what age were you when you...



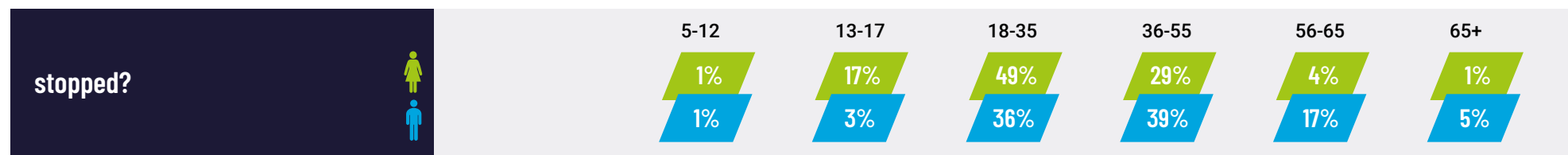
BASE: F 2748, M 2361



BASE: F 1214, M 918



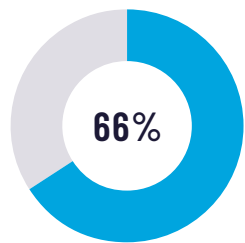
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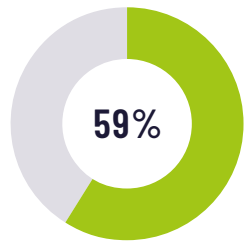
BASE: F 189, M 150

Team vs Individual sports participation amongst women

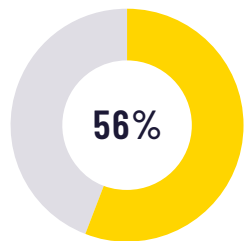
Team sports participants



started in childhood



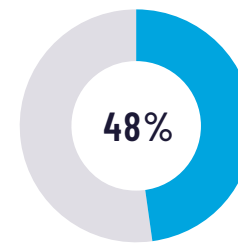
have taken at least one break



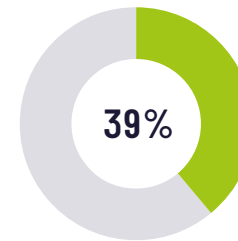
of those who dropped out stopped during early adulthood (18-35yrs)



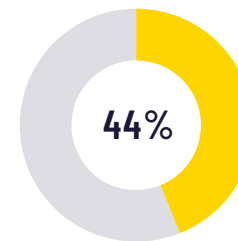
Individual sports participants



started during young and middle-aged adulthood



have taken at least one break



of those who dropped out stopped during early adulthood (18-35yrs)



Helen: The squiggly sporting journey

At school, I used to play sport all the time. I did netball, swimming, tennis, athletics, gymnastics - I loved it! But in my teens, I found it challenging to still do the same sports as my body changed. I would feel embarrassed doing activities with male spectators and participants without a proper supportive bra. Having heavy periods also prevented me from doing a lot of activity too.

Leaving school was also a real shock to the system. School clubs didn't cost me anything, but when I had to find work and accommodation, I couldn't afford the time and money to carry on my sports. I did try ultimate frisbee with a bunch of colleagues after work, it was only for 6 weeks but I didn't carry it on.

I got married at 25 and then had my first child. I went back to running and ran for a local club for a bit. It was brilliant for me, it carved out time for me without demands from other people, I didn't realise how much I missed sport! Then I had my second child and sport took a back seat. I was busy ferrying my boys to football, rugby and parties! I didn't have time to indulge in sport for myself.

I got divorced aged 44 and decided to take up leisure running. It was a chance to do something I enjoyed, time to be myself again and I loved getting out in the outdoors. But I had to have knee surgery, so I started spinning. I now go twice a week with my friend, I even entered a bikeathon to challenge myself to see how far I could ride!



“It was a chance to do something I enjoyed, time to be myself again and I loved getting out in the outdoors.”

Karen: The lost and found sporting journey

I was a shy and quiet girl at school. This was a very, very, very big barrier to sport for me. I found the rules difficult to understand and as a visual learner I needed to be shown to learn but that didn't happen. I was always picked last and was never good enough to be in the team. Everyone else was better than me. I did try an archery course with my family one holiday when I was 16. I LOVED it!

I joined my local gym for a bit in my twenties, I got a good membership deal so it seemed like a good idea. I did some classes, but my motivation soon waned. In my 30's I developed a chronic health condition which meant it became stressful and difficult to manage certain activities.

During lockdown I watched The Avengers and the Hunger Games

and thought why not see if there was an archery club nearby. I liked it when I was younger and it gives me the opportunity to compete against myself, I'm not letting anyone down. I get time outdoors and the chance to have a bit of a chat. It gives me some exercise and movement to my shoulders and neck similar to my physio exercises. But at any point I can have a rest, I can manage the stamina aspect so much better than cardio exercise.

I even booked my family in for a taster session too. My daughter and I took part as something to do together. It wasn't long before the whole family was shooting. The kids have now drifted onto something new but my husband and I still are actively engaged in the sport. I love my archery family!



“I was always picked last and was never good enough to be in the team. Everyone else was better than me.”

KEEP WOMEN ACTIVE BY REFRAMING THE VALUE SPORT CAN BRING

In order to support more women to participate in sport more often and for longer, we need to reframe the value sport brings to women's lives. This section aims to outline the reasons why.



Continuous activity more likely with intrinsic motivators

When women's participation is motivated by internal rather than external rewards, the positive emotions they experience help them to be engaged and invested in their sport, leading to more continuous participation. Helping women to identify their intrinsic motivations for sport can lay robust foundations for a long-lasting sporting journey.

In comparison, a similar percentage of men who started their sport to improve their wellbeing, meet new people and to compete, also continuously participated in their main sport. However, 35% of men who started their sport without a choice ended up participating continuously compared to only 17% of women, indicating the importance of personal choice to start sport as more important for women.

Women motivated to start their sport to improve their wellbeing were less likely to drop out of their main sport compared to the average dropout rate amongst women (3% v 8%).

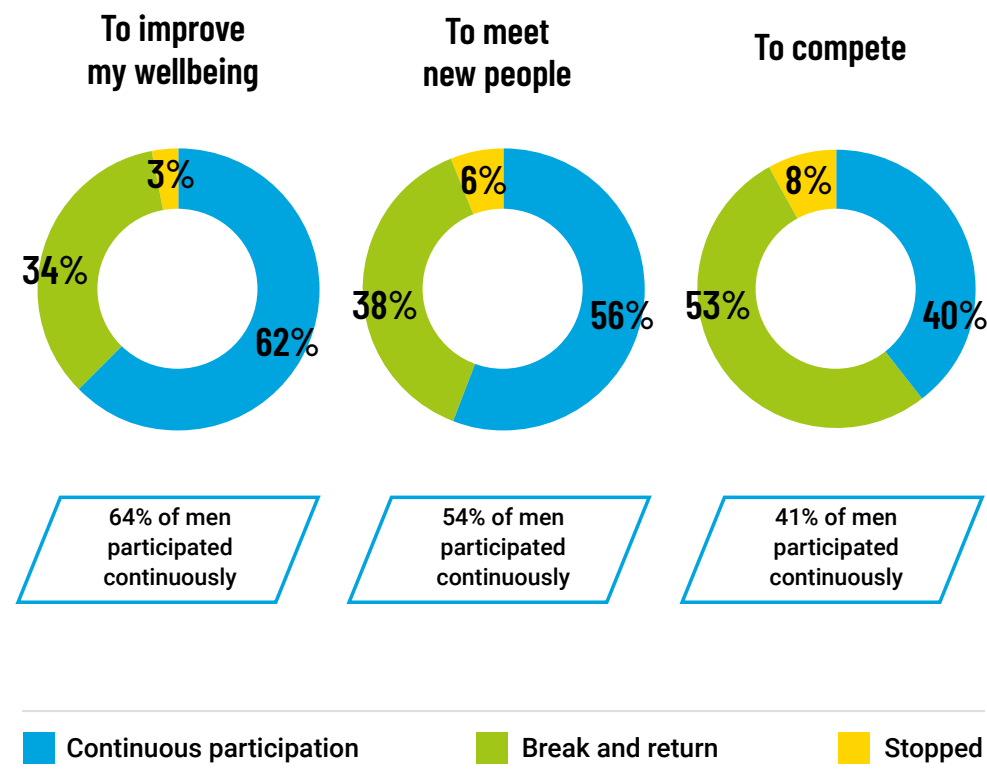
6 in 10 women who were motivated by improving their wellbeing, physical health and meeting new people continuously participated in their sport compared to an average of 4 in 10 women.

Almost three quarters of women who started their sport without a choice (e.g. part of the school day, taken by a parent/guardian) took a break and 10% dropped out.

More than half of women who started their sport motivated by the desire to compete or win took a break.

Have you taken a break from and returned to or stopped your main sport?

% of women who started their sport for the identified reason who took a break, stopped and continuously participated in their main sport.



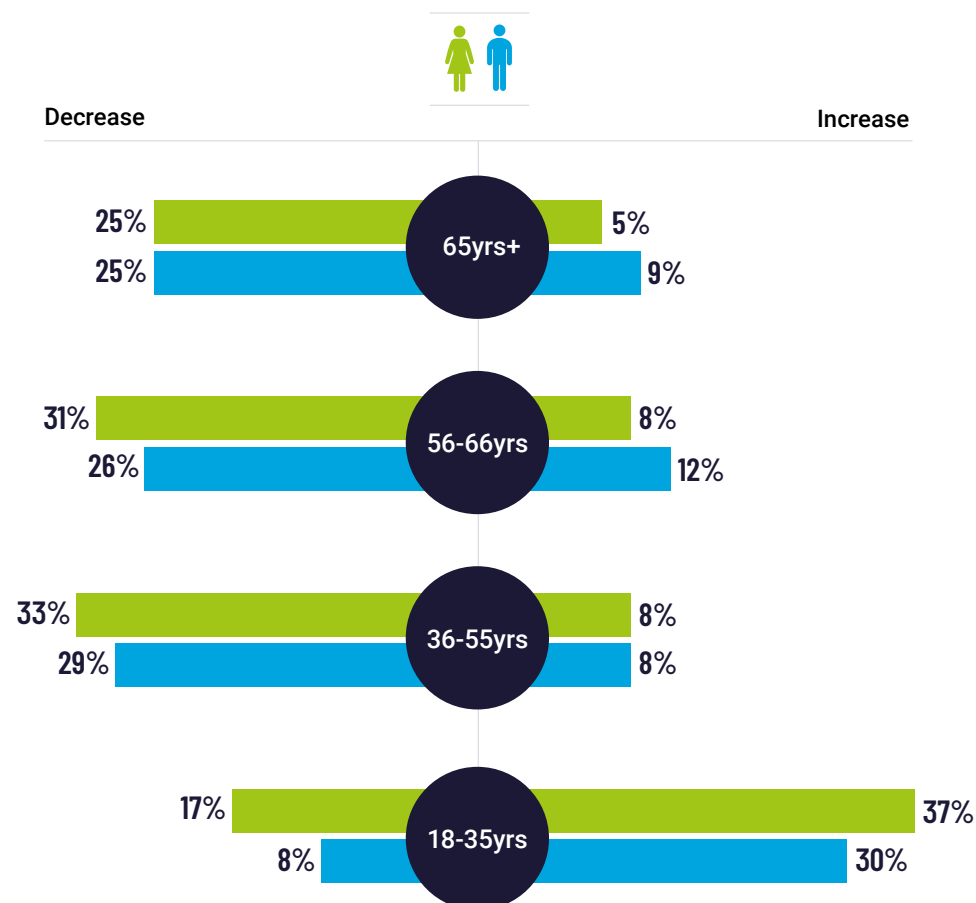
Women have accepted that their participation will 'inevitably' decrease with age

As women move through their life stages, the perceived role of sports participation changes and often it drops down a woman's priority list. This expectant and acceptant mindset of reduced women's sports participation with age needs to be addressed from a younger age onwards in order to reduce its influence and stop it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Between a quarter and a third of women predicted that their participation levels would decrease in middle-aged, late and older adulthood. A similar trend was seen amongst men, but the percentages were slightly higher amongst women than men. This predicted decrease in women's activity levels during adulthood matches the actual steady decline seen in women's activity levels (see page 10), indicating a strong link between prediction and reality.

Women in our research largely attributed this predicted participation decrease to the likelihood of family and work commitments, injuries, general body wear and tear, fitness declines, energy reductions and inhibitive health changes. We found that these predictions actually matched up to reality. The main reasons why women took a break from or stopped their sport were related to physical body challenges (28% of women stopped due to injury) and lack of time (37% of women stopped due lack of time).

Do you think your participation will increase or decrease in later life stages?



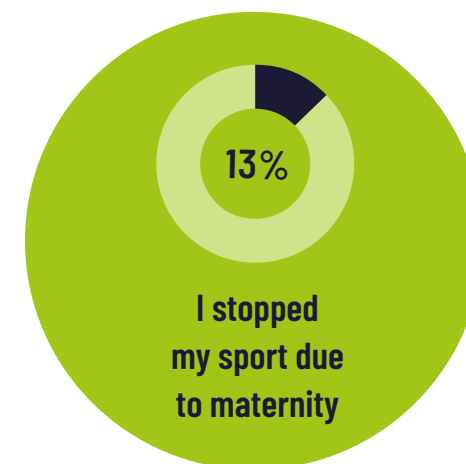
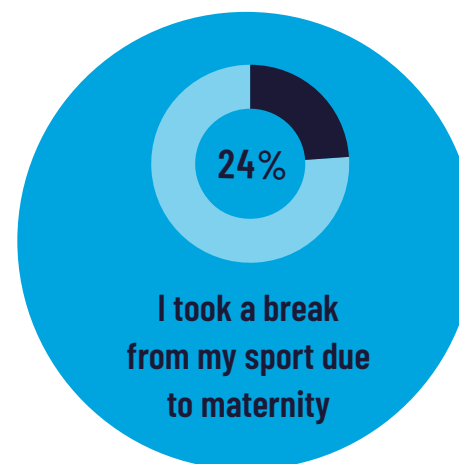
Base: F 1435, M 987

Maternity / motherhood isn't a scapegoat for women's participation drop off

If only 18% of women are known to be childless at the end of their childbearing years⁵, it is logical to assume that many of the 48% of women who took a break from their sport did so due to maternity and motherhood reasons. However, this is not necessarily the full story for all women who take a break from their main sport. Women typically adopt caring roles within their family unit, but this isn't always constrained to caring for children and can include caring for other family members including parents.

A quarter of women in this research cited maternity as the main reason why they took a break from their sport (24%) whereas only 13% cited it as the reason why they stopped. Lack of time was the main reason why women stopped participating in their main sport (37%). For men, lack of time was the second most common reason for stopping after injury, cited by 25% of men. Women largely attributed their lack of time to homelife and family duties such as childcare and caring for older family members.

"Lack of time was the main reason why women stopped participating in their main sport (37%)."



1 IN 4 WOMEN HAVE CARING RESPONSIBILITIES



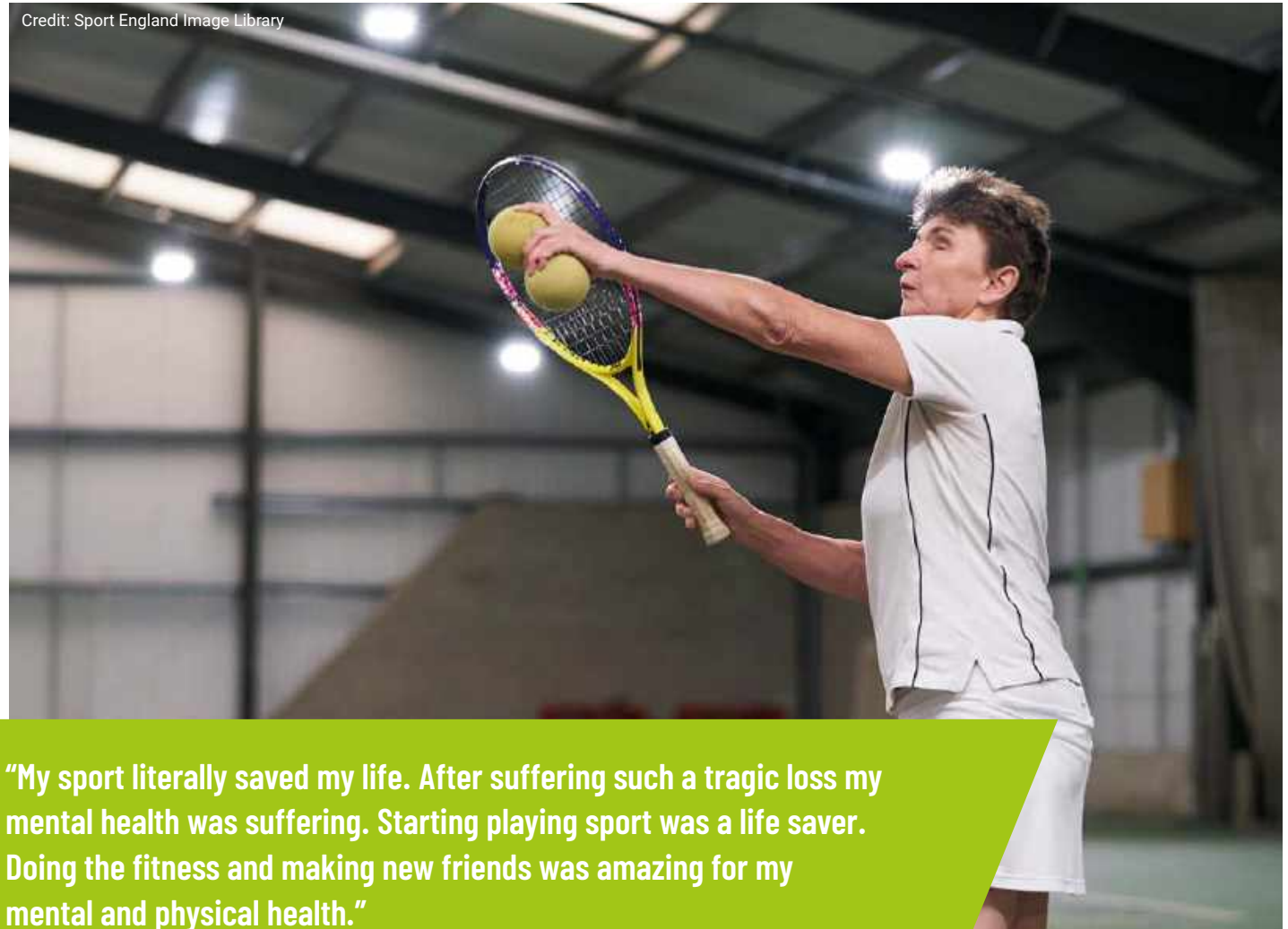
It is reported that women are more likely than men to be "sandwich carers", caring for children and older relatives or disabled loved ones at the same time. Carers UK (2016) also highlight that one in four women aged 50-64yrs have caring responsibilities. These findings support our research's assertion that the caring responsibilities that impact women's amount of available time to participate in sport extends beyond maternity and motherhood.

Sport has the power to improve and even save women's lives

Sport can be a positive outlet, a respite and a saviour throughout a woman's life stages. Reframing the conversation about how sport can bring broader and deeper value to women at key life events could help to encourage more women to prioritise continually harnessing the power of sport.

Women in our research shared how their sport helped them to cope with life's daily ups and downs as well as be their saviour in major life events such as a family bereavement, a relationship break up or a major health challenge. Whether their sport was a constant activity, providing them with support and stability, or a safe and inspirational activity to return to or join, sport played an invaluable role in helping many women navigate and survive the challenges in their lives.

Credit: Sport England Image Library



"My sport literally saved my life. After suffering such a tragic loss my mental health was suffering. Starting playing sport was a life saver. Doing the fitness and making new friends was amazing for my mental and physical health."

SPORT ENRICHES WOMEN'S LIVES THROUGHOUT THEIR JOURNEYS

This section outlines the most important factors we should keep in mind when reframing the value sport can bring to women throughout their life stages and the evidence from this research. What this means and how to apply it follow in the next section.



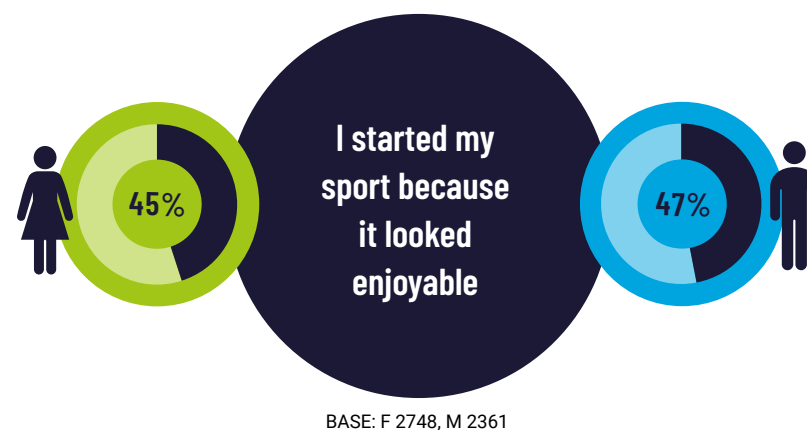
Never, ever underestimate the importance of having fun

Enjoyment is a key intrinsic emotion that can impact both men's and women's sports behaviour. It can affect the decision to give something a try, to invest time and effort in skill development and to turn up every week even when it's dark and cold. Sport should be framed as an enjoyable activity for all and deliver on this promise in order to engage more women in sport more often for longer.

Enjoyment was one of the top motivational factors and why around 90% of women participated in sport across all life stages. It was also a key decision-making factor for women, with almost half of women citing it as one of the main reasons why they started their sport. Enjoyment was a strong motivator amongst men too, cited as the main reason for starting sport by almost half of men.

Amongst returners, almost three quarters of women cited enjoyment as one of the main reasons why they returned to their sport, a motivator not as prominent amongst returning men. The appeal and experience of having fun whilst participating in sport is clearly a key motivating factor for women of all ages.

"Enjoyment was one of the top motivational factors and why around 90% of women participated in sport across all life stages."



Sport is the go-to tool for boosting wellbeing

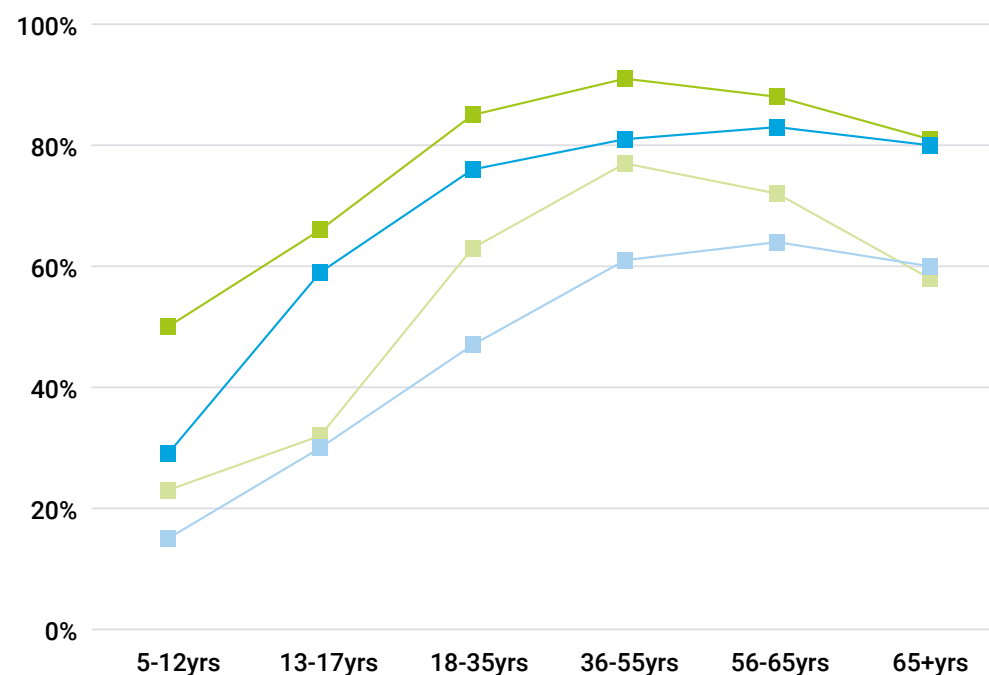
Wellbeing is another key intrinsic emotion that can impact both men's and women's sports behaviour. Boosting wellbeing is about more than improving health, it's about engaging in activities that are energising and fulfilling. This can be the result of physical exertion but also social connection, skill development and achievements. Sport should be framed as a valuable tool for boosting wellbeing in order to engage more women in sport more often for longer.

Wellbeing: The state of being comfortable, healthy and happy (Oxford English Dictionary)

For both men and women, improving physical and mental wellbeing were important motivating factors during adulthood, with improving physical wellbeing rated as more motivational than improving mental wellbeing. Enhancing wellbeing was more motivational for women than men across almost all life stages. Improving mental wellbeing was notably more important for women than men during young and middle-aged adulthood (18-55yrs). The benefits to women's mental and physical wellbeing are particularly important motivating factors for women during adulthood.

To what extent did the following wellbeing factors motivate you to participate in your main sport?

% female and male respondents who agreed or strongly agreed



- To improve my physical wellbeing (Women)
- To improve my mental wellbeing (Women)
- To improve my physical wellbeing (Men)
- To improve my mental wellbeing (Men)

Sport is a game for life

Beyond the known health and wellbeing benefits, sport also provides opportunities for women to develop a broad spectrum of transferable life skills which may not be available in other aspects of their lives. Sport should be framed as an accessible and valuable tool for personal growth in order to engage more women in sport more often for longer.

Women strongly valued the range of life skills they gained from their sport both during and outside of their physical participation. For a number of women, their life-long participation fostered a deep-rooted belief that their sport had become part of who they were and how they got to where they were in their life. It has become, for many, a game for life.



"My sport has given me a lot in my life. It's taught me about teamwork, commitment, discipline, how to win / lose with humility / pride, how to come back from defeat. It's given me confidence and built my self-esteem."

It's not just about participating, it's about feeling like part of the family

Sport is more than an activity, it's a community that can become an extended family. The sense of belonging women gain from sport can help reduce feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness, and enhance feelings of love, support and acceptance. Sport should be framed as a worthwhile opportunity for women to increase their sense of belonging in order to engage more women in sport more often for longer.

Over three quarters of women considered themselves to be part of their sport's family, a feeling strongly held amongst both regular and occasional female sports participants (80% and 68% respectively) as well as amongst men. Sport provided a sense of belonging and acceptance, relationships with like-minded people and an invaluable support network to help women navigate everything life threw at them.



"It really is a huge supportive family and I would now be lost without them all."

Credit: Sport England Image Library

Sport brings friendships and connections for life

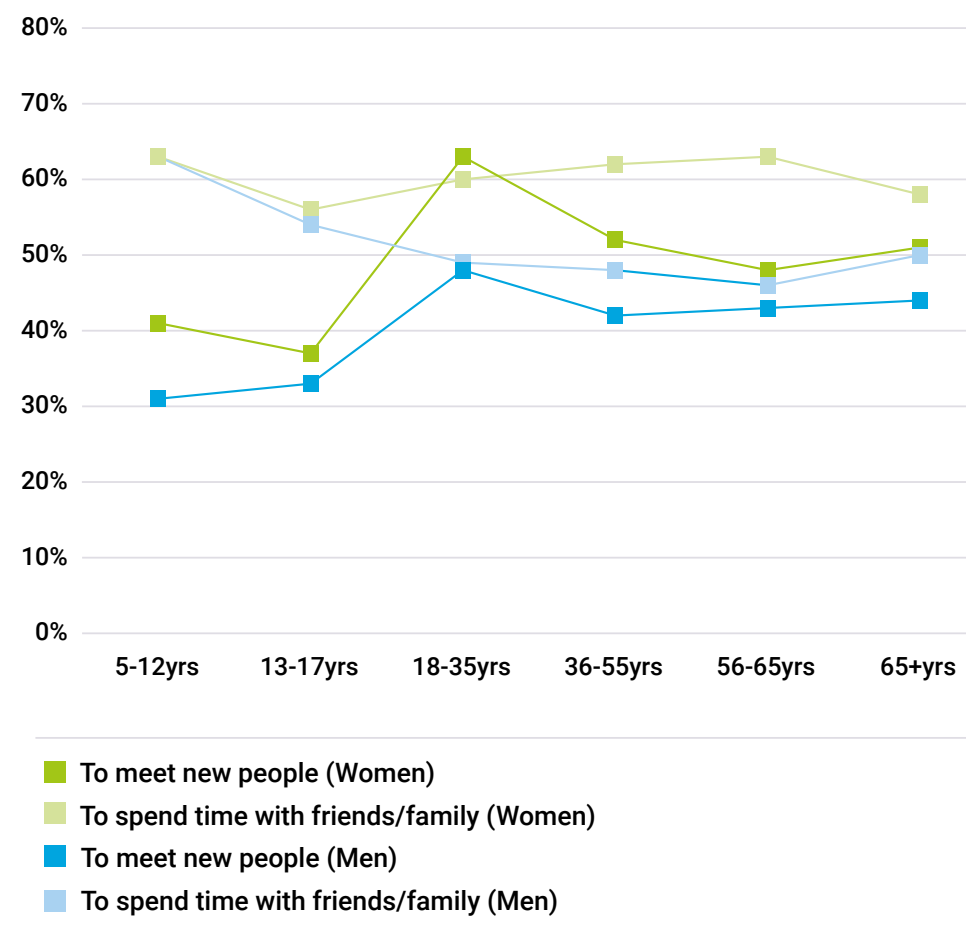
As human beings we have a need for positive social interactions and relationships. From warding off loneliness to role models providing inspiration, the social needs we have can vary between individuals and life stages. Sport should be framed as a prime opportunity for women of all ages to engage in positive social interactions and to grow their social network of valuable friends and contacts.

Social interaction was a stronger motivational factor for women participating in their main sport across all life stages compared to men. With the exception of young adulthood, spending time with friends and family was the most important social factor for women of all ages, motivating more than half of women across life stages. From early adulthood onwards, the importance of spending time with friends and family through sport became noticeably more important for women than men.

Meeting new people peaks in importance for both men and women during young adulthood. It then remains an important factor during adulthood which is more prevalent for women than men, motivating 48-53% of women and 42-44% of men. Meeting new people was also a more important factor for women returning to their sport (24%) compared to when they started their sport (15%), and even more so amongst returning team sports participants (33%), compared to individual sports (16%).

To what extent did social factors motivate you to participate in your main sport?

% female and male respondents who agreed or strongly agreed



Sport can challenge you on your terms

Personal development and achievement are key motivational factors for women's participation in sport. Whether it's trying a new activity or working on skill development, many middle-aged and older women were more motivated by the desire for personal mastery rather than the desire to win. Similar trends were seen amongst men which indicates that sport should frame itself as an accessible activity for people of all ages and abilities to challenge themselves in a way that is right, enjoyable and satisfying for them.

Women were more motivated than men by the desire to win/compete, to develop skills and to achieve my goals across life stages. All three follow similar trends over time amongst both genders, and decline in importance from adolescence through adulthood.

The desire to win/compete was a key motivational factor for three quarters of women during adolescence, but it declined by almost half by late

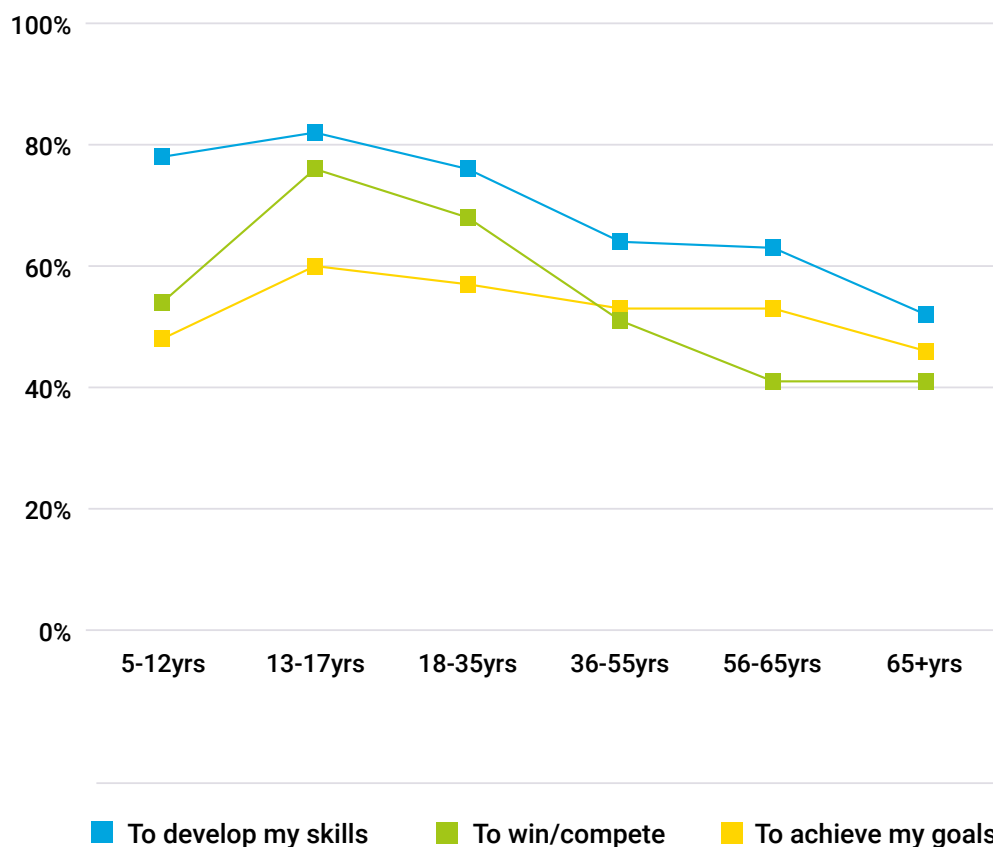
adulthood. The desire to achieve personal goals and develop personal skills declined at a steadier rate and by middle-aged adulthood these personal mastery factors were more important than participating for the external rewards of competition and winning.

Behind enjoyment, trying something new was the second most popular main reason why both men and women started participating in their sport overall. This factor was especially important for women during young adulthood, motivating 42% of women compared to 32% of men.

42% of women started their sport aged 18-35yrs to try something new

To what extent did the following factors motivate you to participate in your main sport?

% female respondents who agreed or strongly agreed



Motherhood isn't a lost sporting life stage

Undeniably, during the maternity phase of some women's lives, they will need to take a break from their sports participation and motherhood may affect their availability to participate in sport. That said, these women should be seen more as a group of sports participants taking a pause rather than a group of lost sports participants.

Sport should be framed not as a self-indulgent activity taking women away from their maternal roles, but as an accessible and valuable activity for mothers to participate in, and something that can help mothers be good role models, encouraging their children to start their own sporting journeys.

A number of women in our research spoke about how returning to sport provided a number of valuable physical and emotional benefits. The value sport can bring to women shouldn't be undersold, it needs overselling.



"Returning to running after having children was brilliant for me – I felt more like me again through getting out to exercise alone, and it carved out time for me without demands from other people. Training for marathons has given me focus and huge fitness benefits."

MEETING WOMEN'S SPORTING NEEDS IS A LIFELONG PROJECT

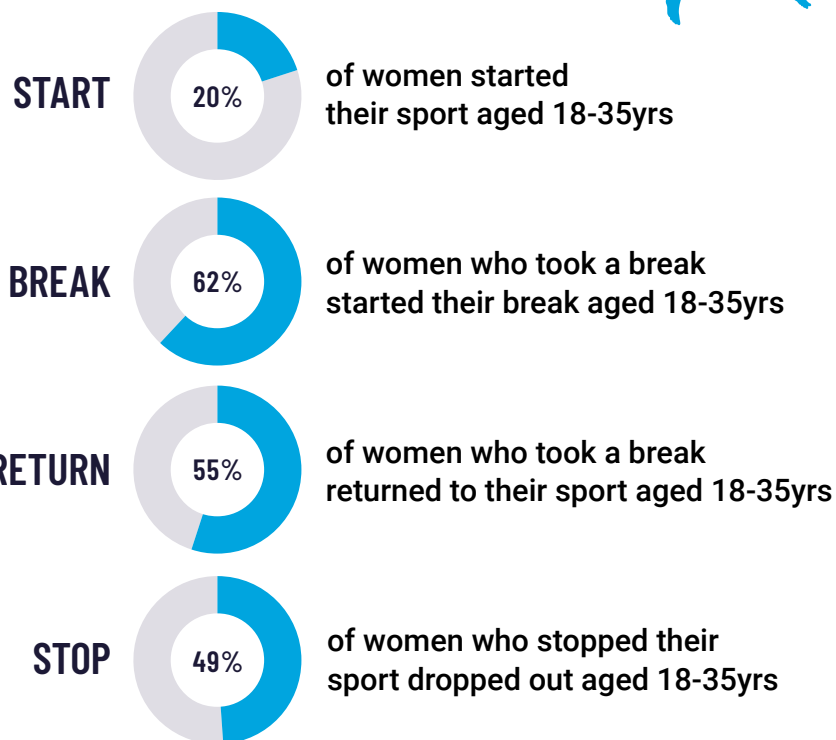
This section guides you through some key techniques that can be used to reframe the value of sport to women across life stages.



Of the six life stages, sports organisers should pay particular attention to the following two, where there are important changes in women's motivations and barriers.

Pay particular attention to:

Young Adulthood (18 - 35yrs)



Young adulthood is a key life stage in women's sporting journeys because it was the most common life stage for women taking a break from, returning to and stopping their main sport. It was also the only life stage where women predicted their sports participation would increase due to the belief that they would have greater independence and freedom in their activities in young adulthood.

Young adulthood also appeared to be the life stage where the motivational factors for participating in sport changed. During childhood and adolescence, enjoyment was the standout motivator and whilst this continued to be a key driver in adulthood it was no longer the top motivator.

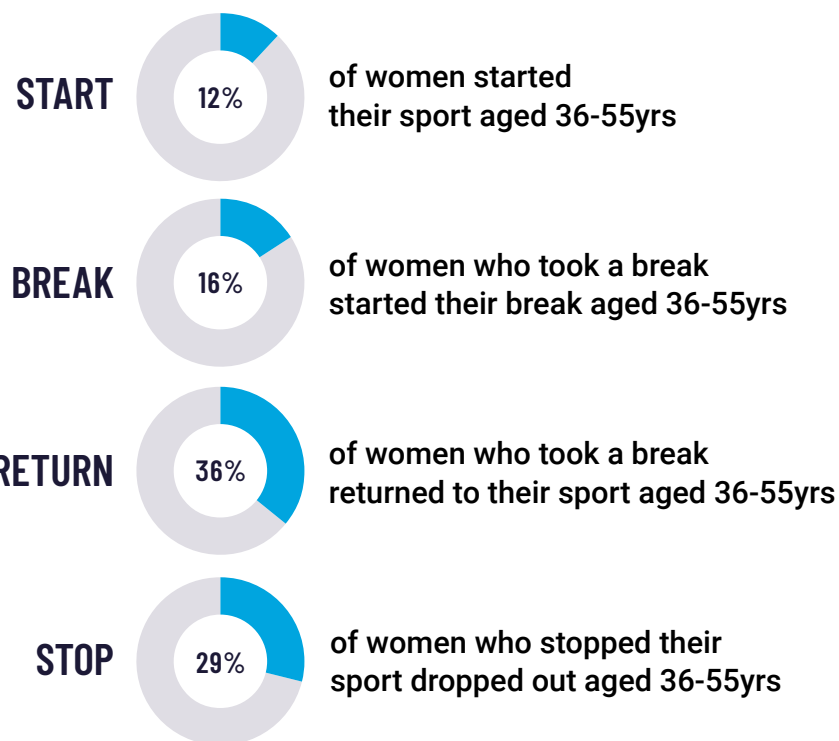
As women entered young adulthood, the motivation to compete declined and, conversely, the motivation to meet new people increased. Trying something new became the most prevalent motivator for starting a main sport and the importance of health-related reasons also increased as women moved into adulthood.

A third of women who took a break from their main sport during this time cited maternity at the key reason for their break, closely followed by lack of time. Access to facilities and sessions was also a notable reason for almost a third of women stopping sport and a fifth of women taking a break.

"Young adulthood appeared to be the life stage where the motivational factors for participating in sport changed."

Pay particular attention to:

Middle-Aged Adulthood (36 - 55yrs)



Data for women who participated in this research project

Middle-aged adulthood is another key time in women's sporting journeys as the percentage of women who take a break drops sharply from the previous life stage, and a third of women returned to their main sport during this life stage. Additionally, those still playing at this stage showed less sign of hanging up their boots, with fewer women stopping at this point compared to the previous life stage.

During middle-aged adulthood, trying something new was an important motivator for starting a new sport. This could be a consequence of women

having fewer opportunities, and seeing fewer role models to encourage them to take part in sport at a younger age. At this age, women were also strongly motivated by improving physical health and wellbeing, as well as the ever-present desire for enjoyment.

Along with maternity, injury was the main reason for taking a break from and stopping your main sport. The social motivators of meeting new people and spending time with friends and family became more evenly balanced as important reasons for returning to sport.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORT FOR MID-LIFE WOMEN

Research by Women in Sport (2021) found that more than eight out of ten midlife women who are currently inactive wanted to do activity and recognised some of the important benefits of exercise. They highlighted how sport can play a pivotal role in alleviating some of the negative aspects of midlife and menopause, enabling women to feel more in control of their health, and enhancing wellbeing and happiness well into later life. This research supports the recommendation that focus should be given to supporting women in middle-aged adulthood.

Support all women to overcome their confidence barriers

Low confidence is a very common barrier for women of all ages participating in sport and is more prevalent amongst women than men. Whether they were starting or returning to their sport, a regular or occasional participant, a teenager or an empty nester, a team or individual sports participant, most women were affected to some degree by a lack of self-confidence throughout their sporting journey.

Belief in your capability to take part and fear of being judged were more prevalent barriers for women during adolescence and then both declined with age. Whilst common across all ages, the nature of the confidence gremlins changed with age from body self-consciousness in adolescence to fear of not being fit enough in adulthood.

What is a confidence gremlin?

Confidence gremlins are beliefs that hold an individual back from doing something or doing their best. These assumptions live in our minds, often getting stuck in a negative cycle and making it difficult to do anything to prevent them impacting our actions.

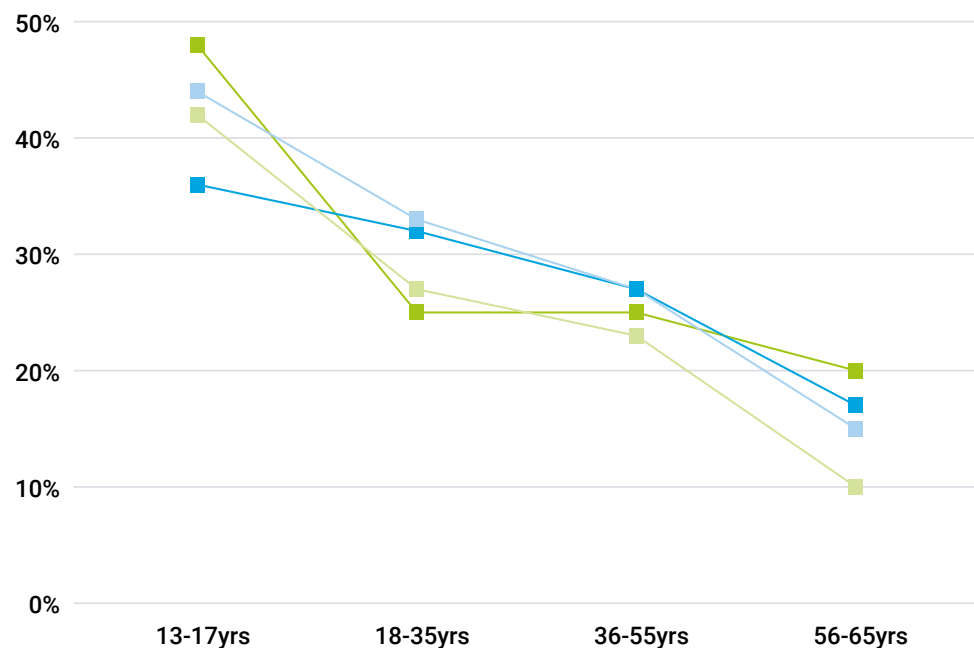
The most common confidence gremlins amongst women in our research

- › I am not fit enough to take part
- › I am not capable enough to participate
- › I don't have enough knowledge about the sport
- › I won't be as good as I was before I took my break
- › I'm not as good as the younger participants

We identified 4 ways sports can support women in lifelong sports participation which are outlined on the next pages.

To what extent did the following barriers impact the amount you participated in your main sport?

% female respondents who agreed or strongly agreed



- Occasional - My confidence to take part
- Occasional - Fear of being judged / not being good enough
- Regular - My confidence to take part
- Regular - Fear of being judged / not being good enough

Regular participant - Participates at least once a week

Occasional participant - Participates at least once every few months

How to support women

1. A compassionate environment

The sporting environment was noted as a very important element to helping women feel more comfortable participating in their sport. As low confidence can be difficult to conquer, the environment created consciously and sub-consciously by the sport and all those involved is vital. Women in our research identified that a relaxed, non-judgmental, and supportive environment was important to helping them feel less apprehensive about participating in their main sport.

"Opportunity to play in a non-judged environment"

"Find a supportive team"

"More relaxed, less competitive clubs and more flexible participation times"

"Finding a nice club"

2. Don't compromise on quality

Changes to a woman's body and health associated with aging may mean they cannot compete at the same levels as younger athletes. But this doesn't mean they are happy to participate in poorer quality sessions and competitions.

Many women in our research accepted that their participation in sport would shift from performance to recreation with age. But women commented on how their decision to stop taking part in their sport was because they felt the opportunities available to them in later ages did not meet their needs, and they therefore lost their enjoyment for their sport.

"Not being able to live up to my past results yet people still expecting me to be able to perform at that level. Just fell out of love with it."

"Lack of structured coaching and development, therefore lack of education and ability when playing which diminished pleasure from participation."

3. Recognise the lifetime value of a participant

Injury was the second most common reason why women stopped participating in their sport and the top reason why men stopped. It was also a key reason why some women took a break from their sport, starting at just 18 years of age.

Sports need to ensure that from an early age women are supported to maintain their ability to continue their participation for many years.

This can be a range of support from an emphasis on and education of good habits such as stretching, conditioning and recovery activities to aid injury prevention, to available and accessible rehabilitation support and advice. Provision should be available to all participants irrespective of performance level in order to support more women to have longer and happier sporting journeys.

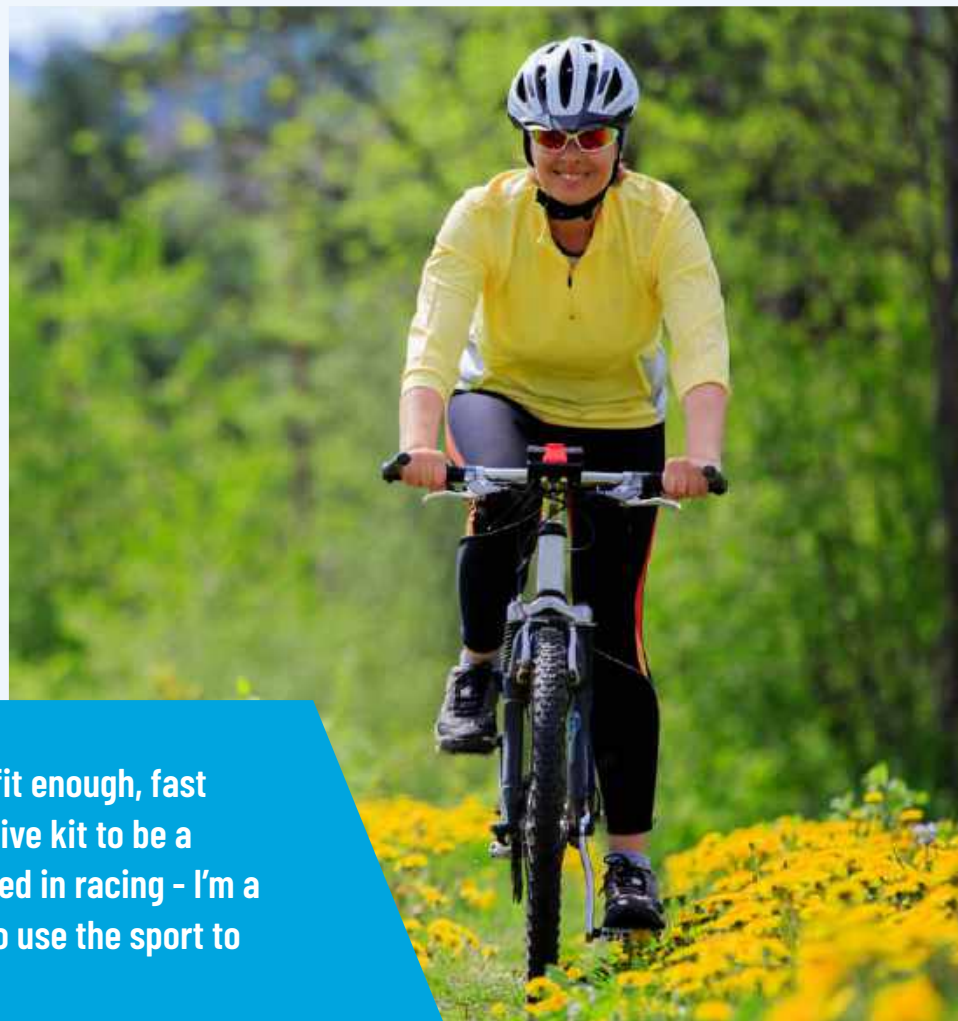
"Sports need to ensure that from an early age women are supported to maintain their ability to continue their participation for many years."



4. Sport is for people like them

The sporting role models and participants women see in both mainstream media and local sessions/clubs are vitally important to painting a picture that the sport is an activity for all women. Of the 22% of women in our research who didn't feel like part of their sport's family, there was a general consensus that their sport wasn't for people like them or that they were not worthy.

"I don't consider myself to be fit enough, fast enough or own enough expensive kit to be a proper cyclist. I'm not interested in racing - I'm a leisure cyclist despite trying to use the sport to get fitter and lose weight."



VISIBILITY REMAINS KEY

Sport England's (2015) research found that sport felt more attainable when marketing used relatable women and girls visibly enjoying being active, at their own pace and somewhere local. They advocated the principle that seeing is believing and this has been, and continues to be, effectively delivered through the This Girl Can campaign. Our research indicates that this principle is still as important as it was more than 5 years ago, indicating that there is still work to be done across the sector to increase the visibility of sport for all women.

Normalising sport engagement for life

Every woman's sporting journey is different and far from linear. Many women pick up, put down and pick up sports at different phases of their life, take part in a range of secondary sports and engage in voluntary roles in their sport throughout their life. The focus should be on fostering positive attitudes towards squiggly sporting journeys with breaks amongst both female participants and deliverers of women's sport. Normalising this type of sporting journey can help women to continue feeling part of their sport and comfortable to return when the time is right for them.

Participation

Three quarters of women in our research played another sport alongside their main sport at some point in their sporting journey. And for the majority of women, this did not negatively impact their participation in their main sport. This highlights how sports can be working collaboratively to encourage women to build a commitment to engaging in multiple sports throughout their life and to help foster engagement with sport rather than a single sport.

Giving Back

Engagement in sport can go beyond taking part and includes supporting the next generation's journey. As well as participating, many of the women in our research who felt a strong affinity with their sport were engaged as volunteers, committee members and/or coaches. There was a strong desire amongst women to help others benefit from their sport just like they had. Engaging women in different aspects of the sport can help to develop a deeper association with their sport as well as keep them engaged during participation breaks.



Credit: Sport England Image Library

What other sports did women participate in at each life stage (top 15)



Our research found that women tended to participate in a greater number of other sports in childhood, whereas in adulthood a quarter of women focused on one sport. During childhood and adolescence, the main other sports girls participated in were typically traditional sports that appeared on the Physical Education curriculum such as netball, athletics, gymnastics and tennis. Swimming was also a common second or third sport for girls.



In young and middle-aged adulthood, fitness-based activities became more common as other sports, including running, group exercise, dance, cycling and swimming. Team sports like netball and hockey remained common during young adulthood but began to decline in middle-aged adulthood.



Into the later life stages, there was a transition of more women participating in low-intensity sports alongside their main sport such as golf, walking and yoga. Swimming continued to be popular and cycling increased in popularity from 56 years onwards.



Credit: Sport England Image Library

Innovatively re-ignite women's passion for their sport

For many women the passion they have for their sport does not fade. It's just buried under life's commitments and busyness, waiting to be reignited. A number of women in our research claimed that they didn't realise how much they missed their sport and regretted not returning sooner.

When encouraging women to return to their sport, explore innovative ways to tap into and rekindle women's passion for their sport. Some women in our research shared how they were inspired to return by pop culture, attending events and being able to participate together with their children.

"I started playing again at the age of 40 as I had been watching and enjoying my daughter immersed at her club and remembered how much I used to love playing."

"I only re-discovered my love and passion for netball thanks to the NWC Liverpool 2019! As I watched matches and began to understand the rules, I decided I would join my local club, in 2020."



Image courtesy of S Butler

Grow the visibility of women's sport

For the vast majority of women in our research, the life changing benefits they experienced from sport were gained within their community or club sports setting. Whilst this demonstrates the power of local grassroots sport, it provides governing bodies with an opportunity to grow their sports family further through wider engagement with both participants and fans.

A handful of women spoke about how activities within their wider sport had led them to feel like part of their sport's family. The opportunities for increased connections with like-minded people and further experiences with a sport they feel passionate about enhanced their feelings of belonging.

"I feel social media has opened (up) the sports family. I am a member of some cycling networks on Facebook which bring me closer to like-minded people even if we never meet or participate together."

"Love the current coverage of super league and feel like a PROPER fan now. Being able to watch all the games and get to know the players has been amazing. It's all me and my friends can talk about!"



Credit: Sport England Image Library

AN UNMISSABLE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE SECTOR



A holistic approach is needed to grow both participation and visibility in women's sport

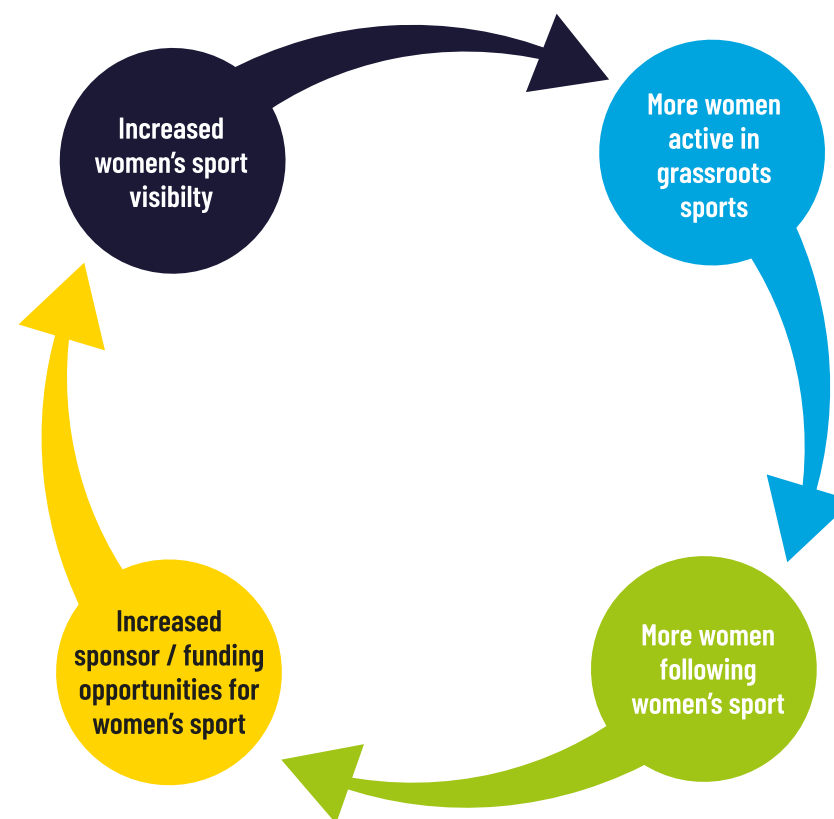
As the UK rebuilds from the Covid-19 pandemic, the health of the nation remains a key societal priority and the momentum behind the growth of women's sport seen before the pandemic reignites and grows in strength. Bolstered by the remarkable performances from Team GB's female athletes at Tokyo 2020, the popularity of female cricket teams in The Hundred, the extraordinary triumph of Emma Raducanu at the US Open, and the new Women's Super League football on free-to-view TV for the first time this autumn – the sector has a fantastic opportunity to grow and make a real difference to the lives of more women and girls in the UK.

Recent research predicts that over the next decade the annual UK revenue generated from women's sport will rise from approximately £350m to more than £1bn a year (Women's Sport

Trust, 2021). With global brands like Barclays, Vitality and Allianz already taking the lead on actively investing in women's sport, it's a truly exciting time for the industry to harness the opportunities to increase visibility and to close the gender participation gap.

Grassroots sports participation and the visibility of women's sport are closely interlinked. Recent research found that 50% of female tennis and netball participants follow the elite women's sport (Women's Sport Trust, 2021). Another study found that 38% of UK respondents became interested in following women's sport because they played sport as a child and interest continued (You Gov, 2021). Growing the base of female grassroots sports participants will not only help improve the health of the nation, but it will also help to grow women's sport visibility and the sector as a whole as shown on the right.

The cycle between grass roots sport and women's sport visibility



ACTIONS FOR CHANGE

In this section we share Sports Marketing Surveys' recommended actions for change that we hope readers will take away and consider how they can be implemented in order to help more women to participate in sport more often and for longer.



What if “I wish I’d returned sooner!” could be replaced with “I came back as soon as I was ready!”

Nurture an authentic intrinsic connection to sport

Truly understand the intrinsic rewards and values your sport helps women to experience, such as improving mental and physical wellbeing and spending time with friends and family. Embed these in everything your sport does, from marketing and social media, to sports delivery and administration services.

Conquer confidence barriers throughout life stages

Be empathetic and flexible to the different confidence barriers women experience throughout their life stages. Ensure coaches and staff are comfortable to recognise the barriers and are empowered to help women take steps to overcome them.

Challenge embedded assumptions

Celebrate and share real life sporting journey stories from women of all ages, abilities and circumstances that have debunked popular societal assumptions such as older women cannot participate, sport and motherhood cannot co-exist, and taking a break means you’re cast out of the sporting family.

For more information

If you wish to find out more about this research or to request a bespoke deep-dive into the data set for a specific sport or region please contact:

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FURTHER INFORMATION



About Sports Marketing Surveys

At Sports Marketing Surveys, we are passionate about helping more people enjoy sport and physical activity more often. We are curious about understanding participation behaviours, attitudes and barriers and work with sports organisations to deliver meaningful and actionable research that helps them to enhance the impact of their work.

Sports Marketing Surveys

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- › British Triathlon
- › EMD UK
- › England Athletics
- › England Golf
- › England Hockey
- › England Netball
- › RFU
- › Scottish Golf
- › Snowsport England
- › Surrey Sports Park
- › Swim England
- › Volleyball England
- › Women's Sports Collective

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