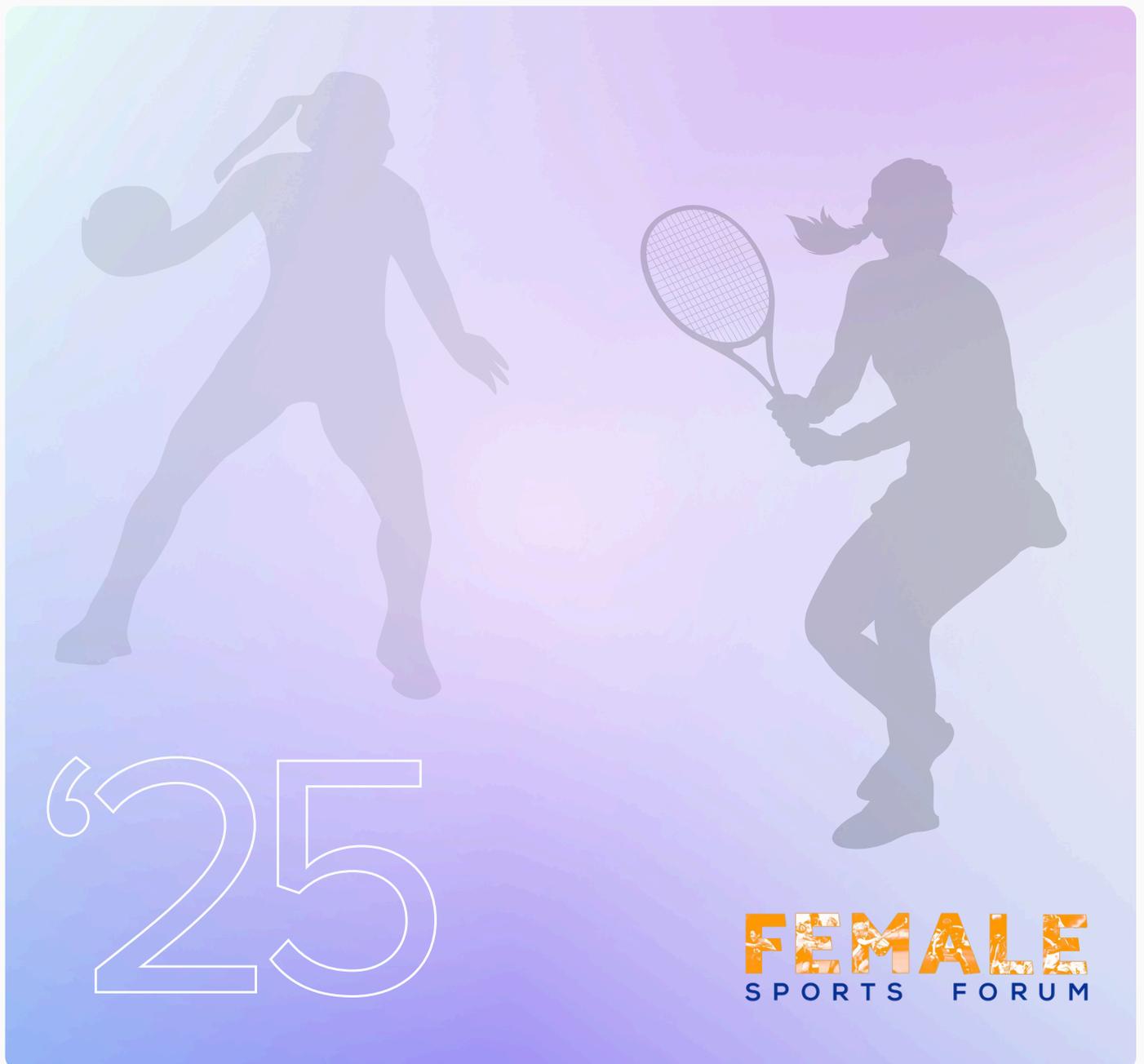


SURVEY REPORT — 2025

Female Sports Forum Insights Report



Introduction

The Female Sport Forum recently conducted a survey with 598 individual responses from across the 11 council areas in Northern Ireland.

The survey results, alongside relevant research and data, provide an understanding of the current landscape for women and girls' sport. This information highlights the key motivations, barriers, and opportunities for growth, as well as the structural and cultural changes still required to support inclusive and accessible sport for all.

The Female Sports Forum's mission is to ensure that women and girls find joy in sport and physical activity at any stage of life. Grounded in the pillars of Leadership, Visibility, Advocacy, and Education, we recognise the importance of understanding the environments in which women and girls participate in sport. These insights must be informed by robust research and inclusive education, while also fostering supportive environments through strong leadership, strategic advocacy, and broader sector engagement.

Overview

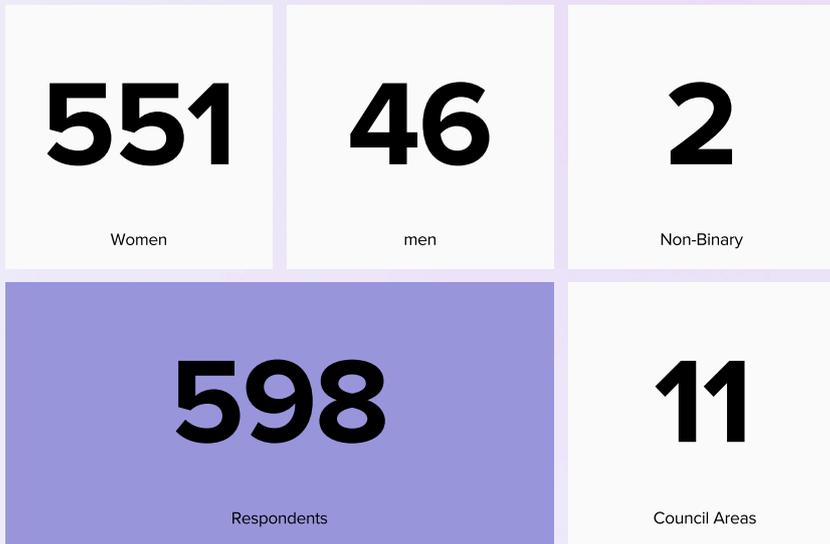
The focus of this survey was to (i) understand how and why women are active in Northern Ireland, (ii) understand what the barriers to participation are and (iii) reflect upon opportunities available to enhance the experience of sport/physical activity for women and girls

⁰⁴ Survey Participant Snapshot

⁰⁶ Understanding Participation

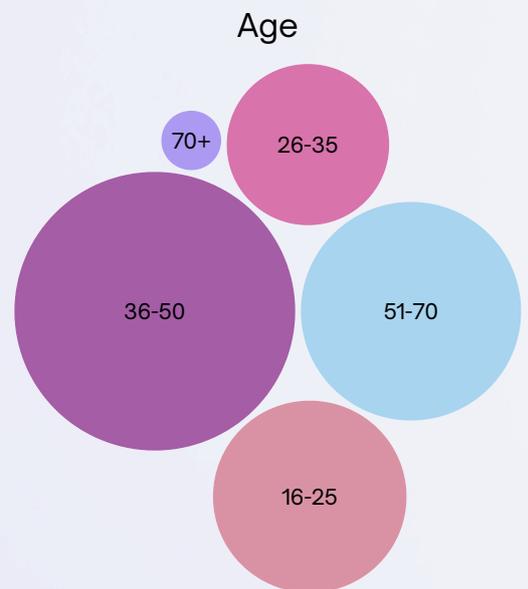
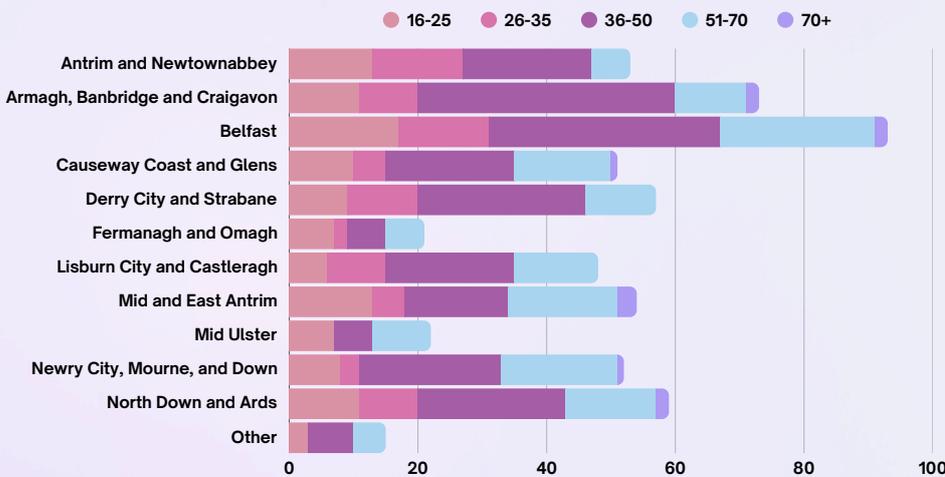
¹¹ Opportunities &
Recommendations

Participation Snapshot

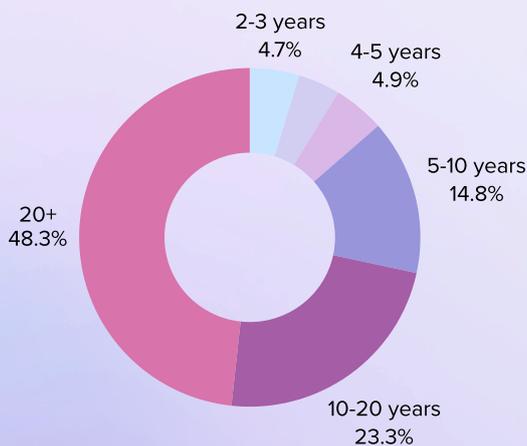


This section summarises the demographic breakdown and types of involvement in sport and physical activity* among respondents to the Female Sports Forum’s participation survey. The data provides insight into how women and girls across Northern Ireland engage with sport, in what forms, and what matters to them.

There were 598 respondents to the survey, 551 women, 46 men and 2 respondents identifying as non-binary. For the age breakdown of respondents: 16-25 (117), 26-35 (81), 36-50 (242), 51-70 (149), and 70+ (11). This breaks down even further to council area shown below:



Years of Participation

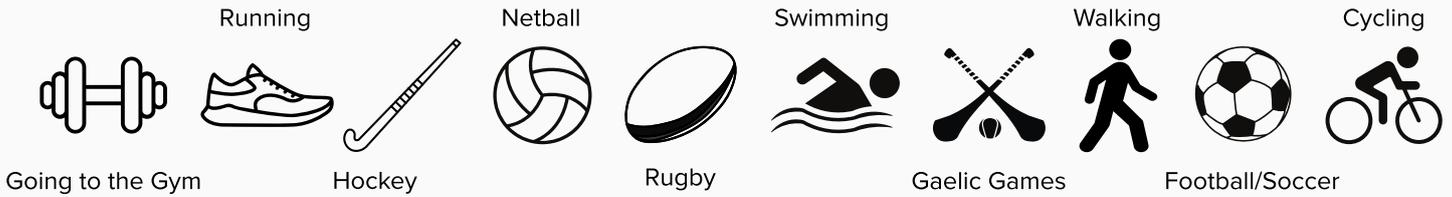


***Note: Sport and Physical Activity are used interchangeably throughout the report**

Most respondents have long-term experience in sport/ physical activity*, with over 70% involved for more than 10 years. This indicates that the feedback reflects deep, sustained engagement, while also including newer voices with 17% participating for 4 years or less.

Physical Activity and Sports Participation

Participants were asked what types of sport and/or physical activity they took part in. The top ten sports were:



Team sports continue to play a vital role, especially through sports like **netball, hockey, and Gaelic games**. Meanwhile, **individual sports and flexible fitness options** - such as **gym sessions, running, and swimming** - offer greater autonomy and accessibility. Multiple sports crossover with swimming and running as notable ones. These types of activities can be both recreational or a club/team based activity.

Many respondents highlighted the importance of social sport, as they emphasise fun, connection, and community over competition. This suggests that social context is just as important as the activity itself, particularly for adult women balancing life commitments and seeking low-pressure environments.

SOCIAL PROGRAMMES EXAMPLES

GAA MOTHERS AND OTHERS

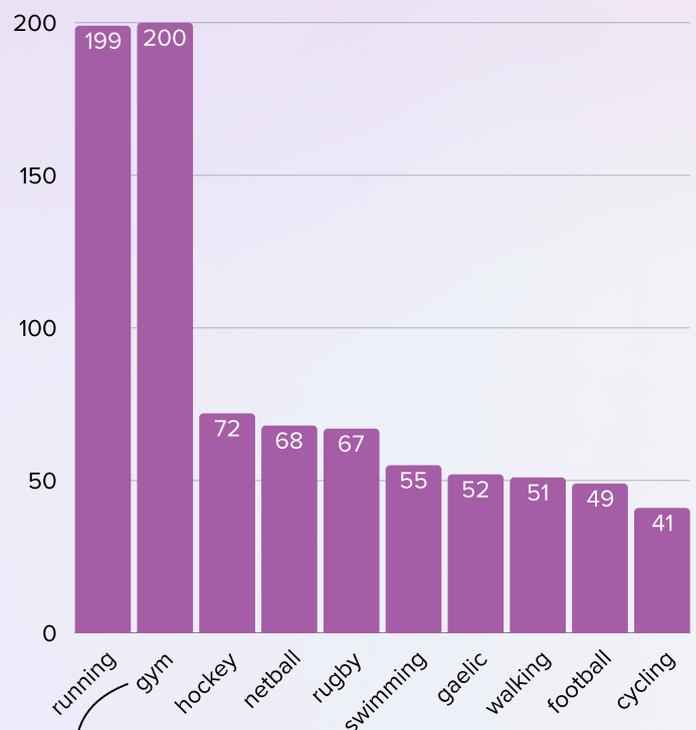
SOCIAL NETBALL

RUNNING CLUBS

More than two thirds of respondents reported taking part in two or more different types of physical activity—most commonly by combining a sport with gym sessions or running. This demonstrates the widespread trend of people embracing a varied and well-rounded approach to staying active.

MORE THAN
2/3
LISTED 2 OR
MORE ACTIVITIES

107 LISTED ACTIVITIES



- Gym Classes
- Workouts
- Strength and Conditioning
- Spin Classes
- CrossFit
- HIIT Classes
- Hyrox
- Circuit Classes

Gym activities were the most popular way women and girls got active, including workouts, classes like HIIT and spin, and strength training. The gym provides flexible, accessible options for all ages and abilities, offering a balance of physical health, mental wellbeing, and social connection. Many participants value gym time as essential “me time” amidst busy schedules, often combining it with other activities such as running and team sports to maintain a well-rounded fitness routine.

Understanding Participation

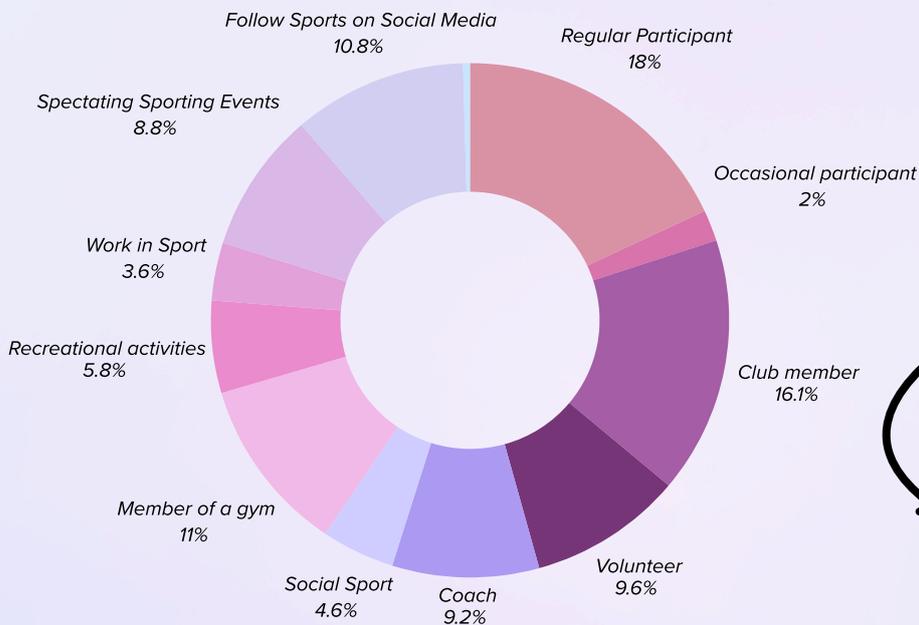
The Experience:

Understanding participation comes in two parts why are people active and why have people who were once active disengaged? When people rated their sporting experience as positive they discussed that sport offers fun, challenge, and personal growth. That it is something they prioritise in their life. It is good for their mental health, social relationships, and of course physical fitness.

However, out of 598 respondents, 142 (23.7%) reported discontinuing participation in organised sport. The most common reasons cited were age-related challenges, injuries, and family commitments. Despite stepping back from active participation, more than half of these individuals remain involved in sport through coaching, volunteering, or supporting their clubs and communities as they see the wider benefits from sport.

Types of Participation

Beyond being active how do you engage with sport and physical activity



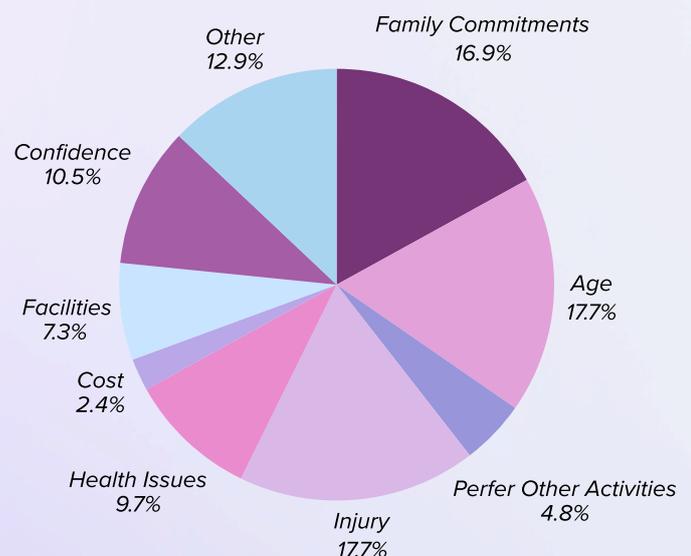
Other Sport Roles

COMMITTEE MEMBER
LADIES CAPTAIN
UMPIRE
PHYSIO
COACH

Discontinued Organised Sport

23.7%

Reason for Disengagement



"I love sports and the keeping fit aspect. The people at my club are really nice and welcoming and friendly and I have many friends at my club. I like the team aspect and succeeding together. I would encourage everyone to become involved in some sort of sport or physical activity because of how good you feel after completing it."

"I PRIORITISE MY CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT AND VOLUNTEERING MY TIME TO COACH THEIR TEAMS" (WOMAN, 36-50)

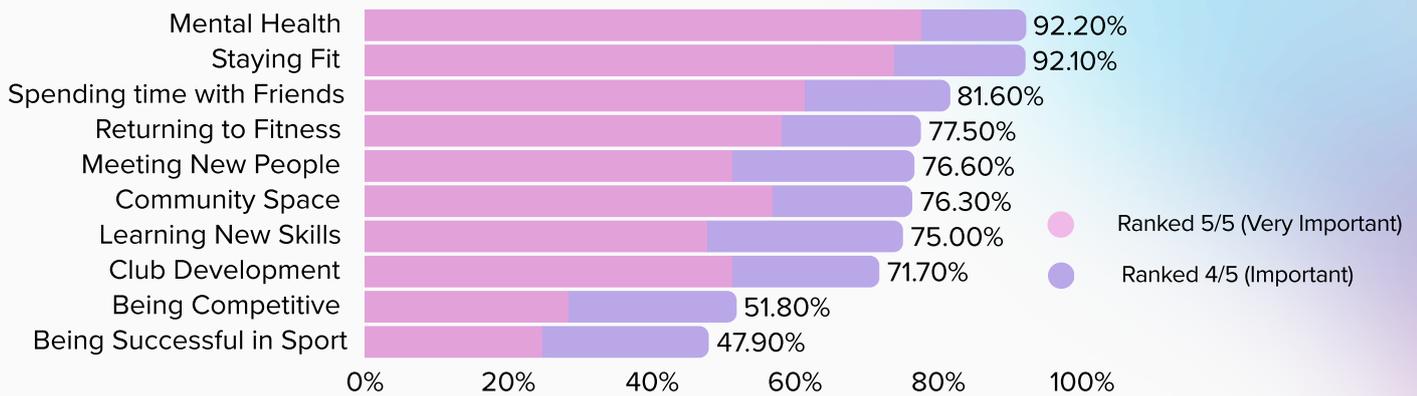
"I'M STILL WORKING AND PARTICIPATING IN MOST SPORTS BUT SOME OF MY SPORTS I'VE HAD TO STEP BACK DUE TO AGE AND INJURY" (WOMEN, 51-70)

"THE RISING COST ASSOCIATED WITH PARTICIPATING" (WOMEN, 36-50)

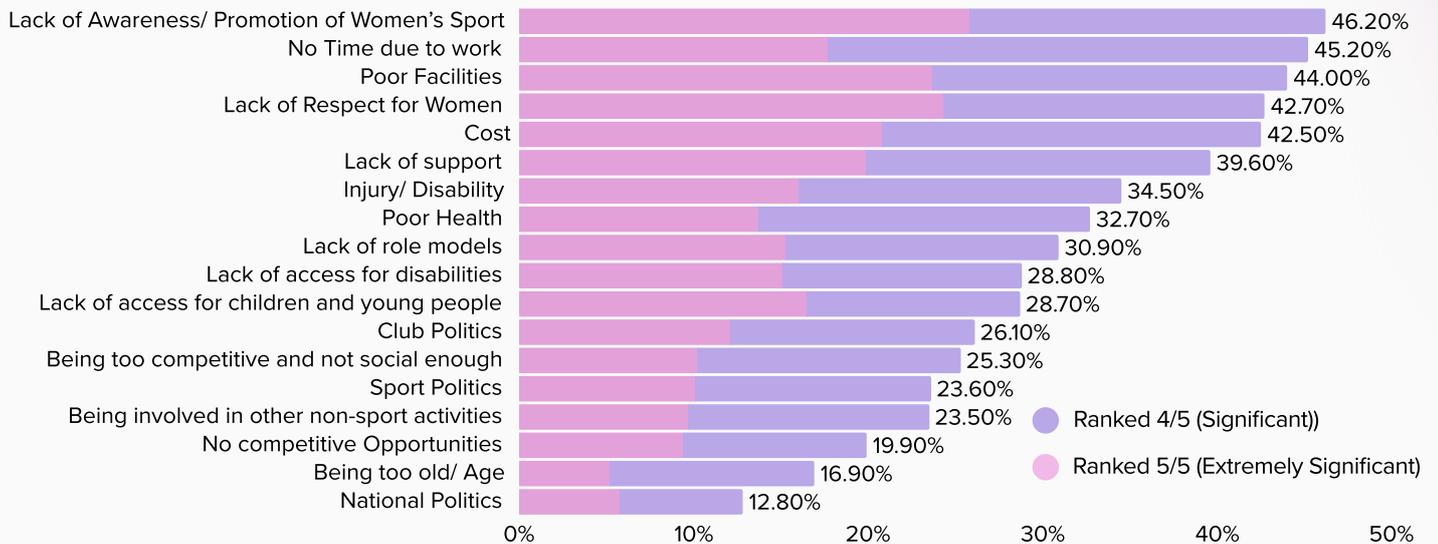
Reasons for Participation:

Mental and physical benefits are key motivators for continued engagement in sport. 92% of respondents rated mental health and staying fit as important or particularly important. Respondents also emphasized the value of safe, inclusive spaces that welcome people of all ages, body types, and fitness levels. Time, accessibility, and the welcoming nature of clubs and facilities were also important considerations. Some individuals highlighted sport as 'me time' and a way to set a positive example for their children.

Reasons for Being Involved



Barriers To Participation



What factors are important to sustain your involvement in sport/physical activity

“Pleasure, enjoyment, adventure, challenge, quality time spent with son as we participate together”

“Having facilities that are easily accessible and within a reasonable travelling distance. The opportunity to participate in the sport I enjoy.”

“Green space/safe space off roads to run, feeling safe when being active/running on my own, well lit areas, activities that family can enjoy together e.g. *running club that has kids and adults section training at same time*”

“Making it easy to attend in terms of location, availability of spaces, making it easier and cheaper for clubs to operate and provide non competitive sessions for mothers/older women.”

What Has Changed?

Respondents want to see more representation—both on screens and behind the scenes—featuring commentators, coaches, and participants that better reflect the diversity of those engaging in sport at all levels.

Despite the strong benefits, role models remain an area for improvement: Only 48% of respondents said they had a role model in sport. However, those who did referenced a diverse range of individuals—from elite athletes to local coaches and club members—demonstrating that positive influence can come from many distinct levels of the sporting landscape. Having this influence be seen is crucial to engaging with the wider population.

Notable Women's Sport Initiatives

THIS GIRL CAN

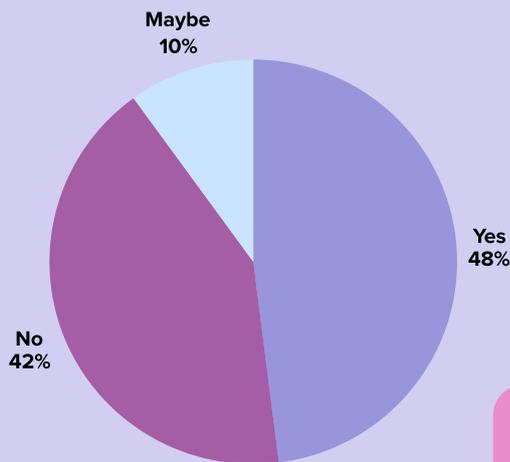
WISPA

BELFAST WOMEN'S 10K

WOMEN ON WATER

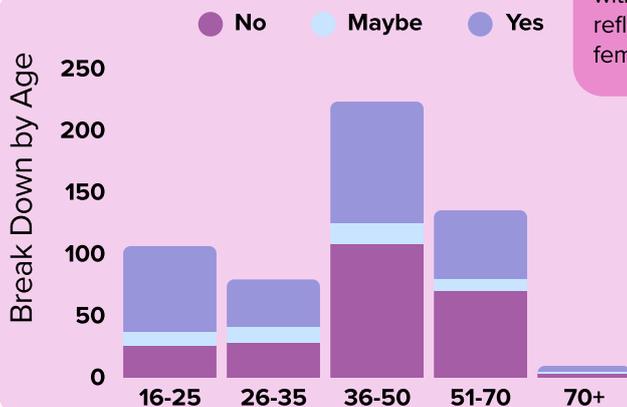
HERSPORT

DO YOU HAVE A ROLE MODEL



Role Models: Lady Mary Peters, Ilona Maher, Marrison Callaghan, Ciara Mageean, Katie Mullan

More girls aged 18–25 report having sporting role models than older women, this could be largely thanks to the increased visibility of female sport on TV and social media. Respondents highlighted improved media coverage and the influence of major events, such as the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 and Northern Ireland's participation, as key factors driving this positive shift in perception. With more opportunities to see and connect with elite female athletes, younger women are inspired and encouraged, reflecting a cultural shift toward greater recognition and aspiration in female sport.



Transferable Skills from Sport

Some of the most cited skills gained



Leadership



Confidence



Communication



Teamwork



Time Management

CHANGES IN THE LAST 3 YEARS

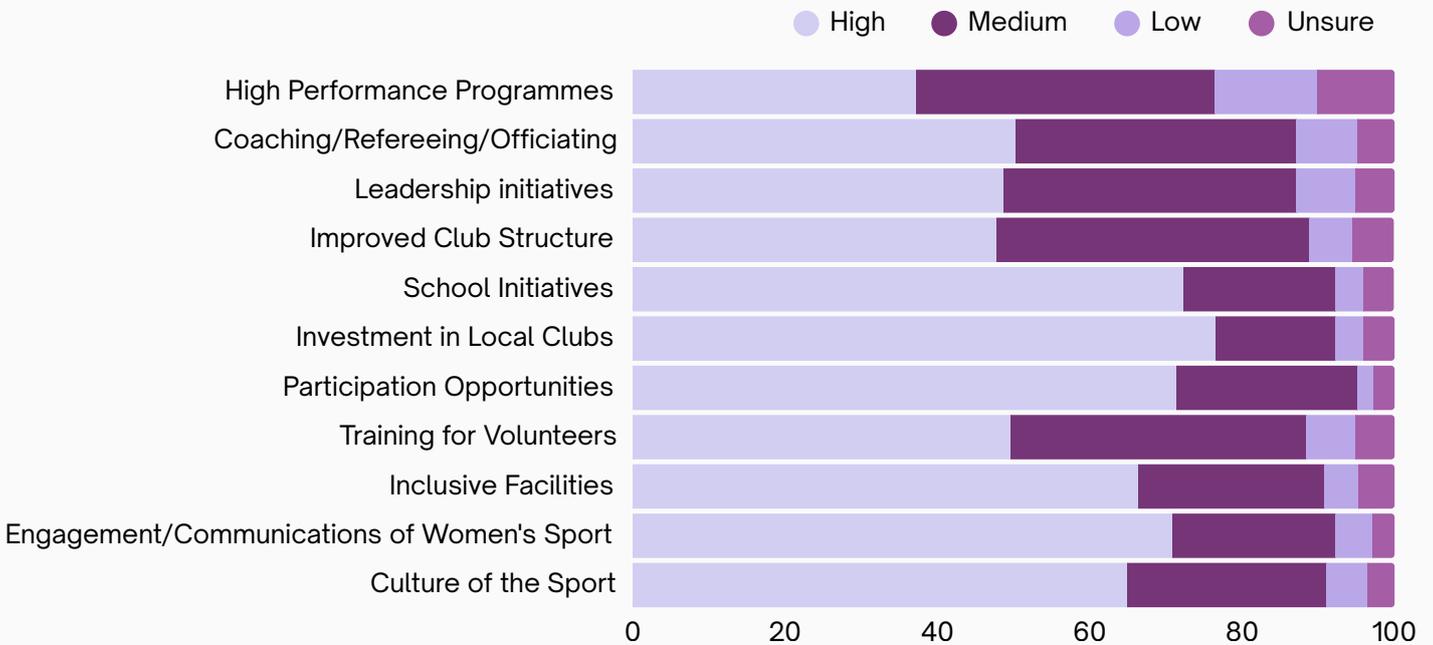


Visibility

Media Coverage

Women's Programmes

Priority Rankings for Women's Sport Development Areas



Respondents were asked to put a priority ranking on development areas of women and girls' sport. Most respondents were participants in sport and physical activity, providing insight into why the highest ratings were given to investment in **local clubs, school initiatives, and participation opportunities, reflecting strong grassroots engagement.** However, areas like **high performance programmes, media coverage, and sport culture** received more mixed responses, suggesting ongoing challenges in visibility and inclusivity.

Importantly, this survey also explored awareness of existing programmes, revealing that while many respondents are engaged in sport, there are gaps in knowledge about available initiatives. This highlights the need for improved communication and outreach to ensure that development efforts are not only impactful but also widely understood and accessible.

AVERAGE RATING

6.45



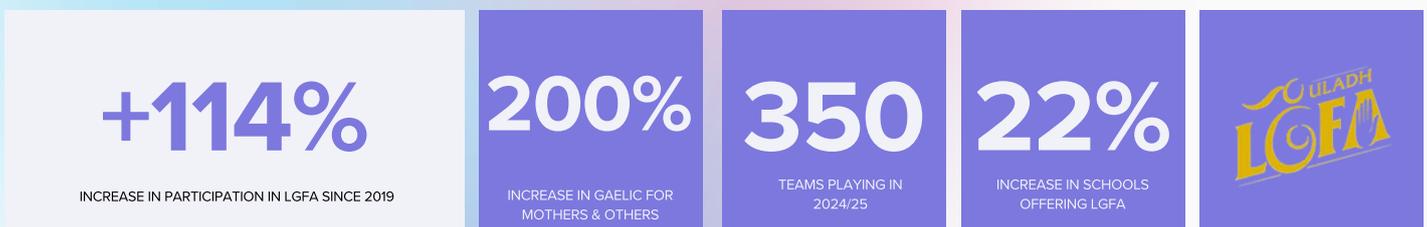
This rating signals overall positive progress and growing support for women's and girls' involvement in sport. It underscores that there remains significant room for further growth and continued efforts to ensure equal opportunities and participation for all.

SUCCESS STORIES

This section highlights key programmes and initiatives identified through our survey question: ‘What programmes/initiatives have you seen relating to women’s sport?’ These examples showcase successful efforts to increase participation, leadership, and inclusivity, reflecting positive progress and commitment to advancing opportunities for women's sport.



TOGETHER WE THRIVE: Elevating the Game for Everyone Strategic Plan for Women’s & Girls’ Football 2025-2029 (2025)



Opportunities and Recommendations

The findings of this survey reflect larger patterns observed in Northern Ireland and beyond. Participation in sport is shaped not only by individual choice but by the environment, investment, and understanding of women's sport. *What does this survey tell us about what the sector should be focusing on when it comes to women's sport?*

01 **Funding and Resourcing**

Strengthen the sporting system through sustainable funding that prioritises women and girls, building capacity at both community and national levels.

02 **Quality Facilities Access**

Inadequate changing facilities, poor lighting, and limited access to safe and inclusive spaces continue to deter women and girls from participating fully.

03 **Enhanced Opportunities for Coaching, Officiating, Refereeing/ Umpiring, and Leadership Development**

There is a strong need to develop more female coaches and leaders, supported by high-quality training that understands the needs of women and girls.

04 **Support and Diversify Participation Opportunities**

Sport offerings must be inclusive for all ages and abilities, with more social, beginner-friendly, and life-stage appropriate programmes to encourage long-term engagement.

05 **Addressing Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers**

Sexist attitudes, exclusionary cultures, and outdated perceptions must be challenged to create clubs where women feel equally valued and respected.

06 **Increased Visibility and Media Coverage**

Greater representation of women and girls in sport — across media, broadcasts, and storytelling - is vital for building role models and normalising participation.

07 **Supporting Women's Health and Safety Needs**

More research, education, and infrastructure are needed to address health issues, safety concerns, and life-stage realities that impact women's ability to stay active.

These are the top themes addressed by survey participants through questions around future programming, reasons of disengagement, and engagement in sport and physical activity.

Focus Areas

Funding and Resourcing

Funding was consistently highlighted as a central area of need across all levels of sport. Respondents, mostly participants, noted the importance of investment in community clubs, as these are often the foundation for participation and long-term growth. Funding at the local level can directly support club facilities and programme development, creating stronger pathways for athletes and more accessible opportunities for participation. Additionally, funding is needed at a NGB level to create unified and cohesive support for participants across the sporting landscape. Alongside financial investment, better allocation of resources—such as facility access, time on pitches, and tailored programmes for women and girls—were also identified as important. Overall, funding and resourcing were seen as the starting point for enabling progress across other priority areas in sport.

“Funding in NI for all levels, from schools, clubs to NGBs” (Woman 16-25).

“Finding coaches and club who respect women playing sport and are able to take them seriously and offer the same funding and support as the men’s team within the club including time allocated for female teams to train. Equal investment.” (Woman, 36-50).

STRENGTHEN THE SPORTING SYSTEM THROUGH SUSTAINABLE FUNDING THAT PRIORITISES WOMEN AND GIRLS, BUILDING CAPACITY AT BOTH COMMUNITY AND NATIONAL LEVELS.

Facilities Improvement

Improving facilities for women and girls requires attention to three interconnected priorities: funding, equity of access, and standards. Sustainable investment is essential to upgrade infrastructure, address long-standing gaps such as inadequate or poorly designed changing rooms and toilets, and expand capacity in line with increasing participation. Equitable allocation of facility use is equally important, with respondents emphasising the need for fair booking systems, transparent scheduling, and affordable opportunities, alongside greater access to pitches, training areas, and indoor spaces for women’s and girls’ programmes. Beyond availability, the standard and suitability of facilities play a crucial role in sustaining participation. Clean, appropriately sized, and dedicated spaces, supported by safe and accessible surrounding infrastructure; such as well-lit paths, cycle routes, and transport links, were all identified as vital to creating inclusive environments. By addressing funding, access, and standards together, facilities can evolve into spaces that not only meet practical needs but also actively encourage women and girls to remain engaged in sport.

“A lack of facilities available for girls when there is so much competition for space in small windows during evenings and weekends.” (Man, 36-50)

“Adequate facilities. We have no adequate toilets or changing facilities at our pitch. This is wholly unacceptable given there are young women of all ages present and a football pitch directly beside.”

IMPROVE FACILITY STANDARDS THROUGH FUNDING, EQUITY OF ACCESS, AND STANDARDS SO THAT WOMEN AND GIRLS NEEDS ARE TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION

Leadership and Coaching Development

There is a strong appetite for more women in coaching, officiating, and leadership roles. Women currently make up just 19.5% of the sports coaching workforce in Northern Ireland, falling to only 10% at the elite level (McCallion, 2021). Respondents highlighted the importance of initiatives that not only increase the number of female coaches and leaders, but also ensure quality coaching. Leadership programmes such as Sport Ireland's Leadership Training, Student Sport Ireland training, and sport-specific coaching networks were valued, as were opportunities to prepare women for boardroom roles. At the same time, respondents stressed that coaches of all genders need education to better understand teenage girls, address women's health concerns, and build confidence, with respect and seriousness towards women's participation seen as essential. Female role models in coaching and leadership create a more inclusive sporting environment and can play a critical role in keeping women and girls engaged in sport.

"Women as coaches" and "growing female leaders" were top responses to what's needed

"coaches and clubs who respect women playing sport and are able to take them seriously" (Women 16-25).

"My kids have been encouraged to participate for fun, and I enjoy watching them having played sport for fun my entire life. When coaching, if the girls are smiling laughing etc it encourages them to come back and play more."

EXPAND PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN IN COACHING AND LEADERSHIP WHILE ENSURING COACH EDUCATION INCLUDES GENDER-SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT AND HEALTH AWARENESS.

Cultural & Attitudinal Barriers

A significant cultural shift is needed to overcome entrenched misogyny and outdated attitudes in sport. Despite growing support for women and girls' participation, many respondents shared experiences of being undervalued, dismissed, or excluded. This creates barriers not only to participation but also to leadership and development opportunities. The opportunity lies in transforming the cultural environment in clubs, governing bodies, and community sport settings to be more inclusive, respectful, and equitable for women and girls.

"It's still a boys'/men's club. Complete lack of respect for women and their achievements. Gaslighting and misogyny rift in club activities." (Woman, 51-70)

"Challenging typical comments and discrimination associated with women playing 'boy sports' like rugby and football." (Woman, 16-25)

"a club which has all its members at the heart of it, that promotes women's participation as equal to that of men's. Not second to it. Club development which aligns to that and not tokenism but clear in club development plans."(Women, 35-50, coach)

CLUBS AND NGBS SHOULD EMBED GENDER EQUITY INTO SPORT CULTURE BY CHALLENGING SEXISM, PROMOTING INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, AND VALUING WOMEN AND GIRLS EQUALLY ACROSS ALL AREAS

Participation Opportunities

Lifelong Engagement

There has been evident growth and renewed momentum across several sporting bodies, with more women engaging in sport and physical activity at local levels. However, the survey demonstrates that current offerings must now evolve to better reflect women's reasons for getting—and staying—active. The value of social connection, accessible entry points for beginners, and the opportunity to re-enter sport after periods of absence were repeatedly highlighted. In particular, women aged 35 and over felt there was a lack of targeted programmes for their age group, often perceiving themselves as "too old" due to a focus on youth participation.

“Social aspect of sport is key benefit and a driver for a lot of girls at early participation, so teams, facilities and regular access is key to keep their interest and last involvement.” (Woman, 36–50)

“Being with women who are on similar journeys to me, [keeps me engaged].” (Woman, 51–70)

“Flexibility and support, alot of females struggle to commit to sport and activity due to other responsibilities, studying and school work, children, work, and generally comes down to time and childcare. Most training is done in the evenings when students have studying or part time jobs and mums have other priorities.” (Woman, 36-50, Strength Coach)

BROADEN PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES TO INCLUDE BEGINNER-FRIENDLY, SOCIAL PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN AT ALL AGES TO SUPPORT LIFELONG ENGAGEMENT

Teenage Girl/School Programmes

Teenage girls are particularly vulnerable to dropping out of sport due to academic pressures, puberty, social dynamics, and overly competitive environments. The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical period where the desire to fit in often outweighs continued participation (Women in Sport UK, 2022). Survey responses reinforced the need for programmes that prioritise enjoyment, choice, and social connection—rather than solely focusing on performance. Girls want more inclusive, beginner-friendly options and education around the mental and physical benefits of being active. By creating supportive, socially engaging spaces, schools and clubs can counteract drop-off and foster long-term participation.

“Target the times when women naturally move away from sport and try to remove barriers at these junctures. E.g. end of primary school/moving to secondary school, perinatal and postpartum period, and then in elderly. Create communities for people to fit into and become part of for lifelong activity rather than a 6-week programme here or there.”

“Safe indoor & outdoor spaces for teenage girls to participate in non team sports. Encouragement for teenage girls to participate. Other participants & coaches to allow women & girls to be led by their own goals not what they think they should be. More opportunities to try different activities. Permission to be ‘bad’ at something but still enjoy it” (Women, 36-50)

PRIORITISE EDUCATION AROUND PUBERTY, GIRLS' NEEDS, AND BROADEN ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOLS AND CLUBS THAT INCLUDE ENJOYMENT, SOCIAL CONNECTION, AND SUPPORTING CONTINUED PARTICIPATION FOR TEENAGE GIRLS.

Visibility & Media Coverage

While visibility of women's sport has improved, more consistent coverage is still needed. Fewer than half of respondents could name a role model, underscoring the gap. Media representation matters when it comes to inspiration, legitimacy, and the normalisation of women's sport. Visibility should highlight both elite athletes and everyday participants, using diverse and relatable storytelling. We are able to create role models and see ourselves in sport more often when these stories are told. Crucially, visibility also means access—when women look for new opportunities to get involved, being able to easily find them is the first step.

"[I want to see] more visibility of local female sport on TV e.g. see results for club football, men's gaa but none for hockey, netball" (Women, 51-70, Netball)

"More visibility of women and girls of varying age, background and physiques enjoying participation in sport. The message [is] that any girl or woman are welcome and can do this."

"When we look at boards and structure of clubs they are usually male heavy. To have more visibility of females in these positions would open eyes more opportunities"

"There is a greater visibility of women and girls in sport which normalises this choice, there is more support for new initiatives for female only activities and training which gives females confidence and develops competence"

COMMIT TO SHOWCASING WOMEN'S SPORT THROUGH A VARIETY OF OUTLETS TO INCREASE VISIBILITY, RELATABILITY, AND ROLE MODEL RECOGNITION.

Women and Girls' Health and Safety Needs

Women's specific health and safety needs remain under-researched, underfunded, and often overlooked. Only 6% of all sports research focuses on women, leaving significant gaps in understanding everything from the impact of menstrual cycles to injury patterns and long-term participation outcomes (MIDE, 2025). This lack of data directly affects the quality of sport programming, coaching, and safety standards. Beyond research, women also raised concerns around personal safety in outdoor activity spaces, the lack of family-friendly support (like childcare), and the need for more tailored health information. There is a growing opportunity to create safer, more informed, and inclusive environments that consider women's lived experiences and physical needs in sport.

"More inclusion, awareness beyond team sports to consider individuals in team setting (...) Teenage girls engagement. Lifelong engagement. Menstrual cycle impact through lifespan in sport" (Women, 36-50, Weightlifting)

"Programmes at universities where the researchers test and evaluate the initiatives to see what works. Couch to 5k or walking groups linked to schools that run in the first hour after school drop off, or in the hour before school pick up or afterschool pickup - activities that happen when there is childcare."

"Injury prevention, maternity awareness, and [how] menstruation/periods may affect performance" (Women, 26-35, Gym)

INVEST IN RESEARCH, FACILITIES, AND PROGRAMME DESIGN THAT PRIORITISE WOMEN'S HEALTH, SAFETY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCES TO CREATE INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE WOMEN CAN THRIVE IN SPORT.

Summary Page

Both the survey findings and external data tell a consistent story: women and girls want sport to be visible, inclusive, and safe at every level. To achieve this, we must address the systemic and cultural barriers that limit access and enjoyment, while continuing to invest in infrastructure, coaching, and representation. We also need more robust and inclusive research to shape our understanding and future actions. By listening to women and valuing their experiences, we can build a sporting environment that truly supports lifelong participation, leadership, and enjoyment.

Focus Area	Recommendation	Examples
Funding and Resourcing	Strengthen the sporting system through sustainable funding that prioritises women and girls, building capacity at both community and national levels.	Women in Sports (Sport Ireland), Active Fit and Sporty (DfC, SportNI), Lionesses Legacy Fund, WISE Fund (CANADA)
Facilities	Improve Facility Standards by Prioritising Cleanliness, safety and gender-Inclusive design so that women and Girls Needs are taken into Consideration	Building Better Sport Facilities, Leveling Up Funding, Hey Girls
Leadership and Coaching Development	Expand pathways for women and girls in coaching and leadership, and ensure coach education includes gender-specific engagement and health awareness.	Women in Sport Leadership Programme (Sport Ireland), Women in Sport Series , Student Sport Ireland Academy
Culture and Attitudinal Barriers	Clubs and NGBs should embed gender equity into sport culture by challenging sexism, promoting inclusive leadership, and valuing women and girls equally across ‘all areas’	Addidas Breaking Barriers Academy (Online), Stride, A., et al. (2025). The power of belonging: Reframing notions of inclusion in sport.
Participation Programmes	Broaden participation opportunities to include beginner-friendly, social programmes for women at all ages to support lifelong engagement	Walking Netball, Gaelic Mothers & Others, WISPA
	Prioritise education around puberty, girls’ needs, and broaden activities in schools and clubs that include enjoyment, social connection, and supporting continued participation for teenage girls.	HerMoves, Coaching Teenage Girls Workshop (Sport Ireland), Female Athlete Toolkit (Online)
Visibility	Commit to showcasing women’s sport through a variety of outlets to increase visibility, relatability, and role model recognition.	20x20, Role Models Project (Female Sports Forum), Be Seen Be Heard Belong, This Girl Can
Women and Girls’ Health and Safety Needs	Invest in research, facilities, and programme design that prioritise women's health, safety, and lived experiences to create inclusive environments where women can thrive in sport.	MIDE Research Network, Women in Sport UK, EVAWG Strategy, FSF Resource Hub

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to both the survey and the development of this report.

To the athletes, coaches, volunteers, and community leaders who generously shared their experiences - your voices have shaped the insights and direction of this work. Your dedication to advancing sport and physical activity for women and girls across Northern Ireland continues to inspire and progress the agenda towards equality.

We extend our sincere thanks to the Female Sports Forum Board, whose leadership and commitment to equity in sport has been instrumental in driving this agenda forward. The Forum's collaborative efforts—brings together the Irish Football Association, Ulster Hockey, Ulster Camogie, Ulster Ladies Gaelic, Ulster Rugby, Ulster Boxing, NetballNI, Ulster University, WISPA, Disability Sport NI and Sported. We also acknowledge the ongoing support from Sport Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Sports Forum, and in particular, Ulster University for specific support and analysis. The collaborative approach across the sector helps strengthen the foundation of this work.

Special thanks to the research and editorial teams for their expertise, rigour, and dedication in shaping this report. Your work has helped illuminate the environments in which women and girls engage in sport and physical activity, and the opportunities for meaningful progress.



Female Sports Forum
Insights Report

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FEMALE
SPORTS FORUM