

**The Young Women’s Movement Parliamentary Briefing:   
Debate on Female Participation in Sport and Physical Activity**

Tuesday 28th November 2023

**BACKGROUND**

The Young Women’s Movement is Scotland’s national organisation for young women’s feminist leadership and collective action against gender inequality. Our vision is a fairer Scotland where young women and girls are meaningfully heard, valued and supported to lead collective action and enact transformational change throughout society, systems and structures.

**RESEARCH**

Our research is imagined and led by young women, for young women. The below analysis is taken from two reports that focused on young women’s body image and participation in sport and physical activity: the [Status of Young Women in Scotland 2019: Body Image](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/647dedf4e7d502356980cb98/1685974541130/SYWS19_digital_high.pdf)[[1]](#footnote-2) and [Young Women Lead 2018/19](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/6436813200147a17b9886888/1681293623598/YWL+18-19.pdf) (produced in collaboration with the Scottish Parliament).[[2]](#footnote-3)

* In our *Status of Young Women in Scotland 2019: Body Image* report, over **half (56%) of young women said their body image affected their participation in sports or exercise activities**. In comments they described feeling vulnerable, exposed and scrutinised. 74% of young women who responded to the survey said their body image had **stopped them from engaging in sports or exercise activities**.
* Young women often have a negative experience that exercise is a form of punishment used to change aspects of their bodies. Finding an environment that is **fun**, **supportive**, and emphasises **community** **over competition** can change this perception.

**SUMMARY**

* In our *Young Women Lead 2018/19 report,* we found that **53% of school-aged respondents advised that their enjoyment of PE between primary and secondary school declined.**
* An over-emphasis on technical aspects of sport and exercise in school can be off-putting for some young women.
* For both primary and secondary school students, factors that would increase young women’s enjoyment of PE included **more choice of activities**, **better facilities** and **more focus on fun as opposed to competition**.

**BODY IMAGE**

In our SYWS 2019 report, over **half (56%) of young women said their body image affected their participation in sports or exercise activities**. In comments they described feeling vulnerable, exposed and scrutinised. 74% of young women who responded to the survey said their body image had **stopped them from engaging in sports or exercise activities**.

*“I didn’t attend the gym for years because of it. I still struggle with public exercises where my weight will be showcased (rock climbing, wet-suit rafting, for example). It’s put me off going to the gym, there are so many slim beautiful gym bunnies in there, I just feel so terrible at the gym.”*

From the young women we spoke to as part of our *Young Women Lead 2018-19* report, it was clear that **negative feelings around exercise began early**, with negative experiences in school a key factor. For both primary and secondary students, factors that would increase enjoyment of PE included **more choice of activities**, **better facilities**, and **more focus on fun** as opposed to competition.

**SUPPORT**

Teenage girls appear to benefit from women-only spaces. One Scottish High School we spoke to discovered a marked increase in PE attendance for swimming lessons when they introduced ‘girl-only’ classes.

*“I hated being in a class with boys. They would make fun of the girls and stare at our breasts and bums. It was even worse in swimming. They also would never pass the ball to us when we did sports, and they excluded us.”*

Open-plan changing rooms are also a barrier as young women, particularly from those from disadvantaged groups, can be made to feel **insecure and self-conscious**. Over a quarter of respondents to our *Young Women Lead 2018-19* report identified as LGBTQ+, with nearly 22% of respondents commenting that they had **negative experiences in PE due to their LGBTQ+ identity.** A recurring theme was issues faced by women identifying as being part of the LGBTQ+ community in changing rooms. Changing areas need to be **safe, private, accessible and well-managed** to support young women’s participation in sport and physical activity.

81% of respondents to our *Young Women Lead 2018/19* report also told us that **family income and disposable money impacted on their relationship with sport,** with membership fees, cost of competing, cost of equipment, and travel costs to facilities all mentioned as barriers to participation. Parents and teachers need to be **educated and made aware of the range of changes and challenges young women face** when participating in sport and physical activity. Something as simple as **providing supportive clothing** (such as a sports bra) or different period products can be the difference in a young woman participating in or avoiding sport and physical activity.

**CONCLUSION**

* We need **high** **quality education about social media’s impact on young women’s mental health, self-esteem and physical wellbeing**. Our YGirls school programme focuses on positive messages around body image, safe use of social media and improving self-esteem. We currently deliver it in Glasgow to P7 girls, but we are committed to expanding it to include boys and families.   
    
  *We ask the Scottish Government to work with a partner organisation which specialises in youth information to co-design a portal for young women. This would contain information about young women’s health issues, puberty, body image and changes, and sport or physical exercise. This should be co-created with young women so the information is relevant and helpful to them.*
* More focus should be given to **participation in sport and physical activity that is fun**, whether this is through provision of free facilities (like tennis courts and outdoor gyms) in parks, or funding of non-competitive clubs and classes. If we can create a well-rounded approach to physical education in schools, which focuses on **wellness rather than thinness**, **fun rather than competition**, and **heathy diet rather than calories**, the experiences which follow young women from school will be positive.
* *We ask the Scottish Government to commit to supporting and monitoring* sportscotland’s ‘*Active Girls’ programme to fund and deliver non-competitive, community-based sport programmes for young women across Scotland.*

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Contact: Dr Rebecca Mason, Research and Policy Lead, The Young Women’s Movement  
Email: [rebecca@youngwomenscot.org](mailto:rebecca@youngwomenscot.org)

**ABOUT US**  
The Young Women’s Movement is Scotland’s national organisation for young women’s feminist leadership and collective action against gender inequality. We value the power, and recognise the necessity, of working both intersectionally and intergenerationally to achieve change. Young women, girls and non-binary people who recognise themselves within this movement are at the heart of everything we do by participating, co-designing and leading our research and programmes.

1. The [*Status of Young Women in Scotland 2019: Body Image*](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/647dedf4e7d502356980cb98/1685974541130/SYWS19_digital_high.pdf). The Young Women’s Movement. Around 380 young women from across Scotland shared their views with us in focus groups, interviews and an online survey. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [*Young Women Lead 2018/19*](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6413232bf29ba901ed614415/t/6436813200147a17b9886888/1681293623598/YWL+18-19.pdf) (produced in collaboration with The Young Women’s Movement and the Scottish Parliament). The Young Women Lead Committee is a leadership programme for young women aged 30 and under who live in Scotland. This report focused on the relationship young women have with sport and physical activity, with particular regard to issues that might prevent participation. The questionnaire was aimed at young women under 30 living in Scotland, and teachers in schools, receiving over 600 responses to the general survey, 257 responses from teachers, and 192 responses from school-aged pupils. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)