

Westminster Media Forum Keynote Seminar - Priorities for women and sport – participation, audiences and commercial investment (article submission)

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Growing and Sustaining Female Sports Participation

As we are all more than aware, growing and sustaining female sports participation starts with us 'getting things right' in the early years and then continuing to do so throughout adulthood and into older age. The consistent message that research is evidencing is that there is a worryingly low percentage of young teenage girls (12% was quoted according to the most recent findings) taking part in enough physical activity to meet minimum recommended health guidelines, let alone give them real long-term benefits.

While much strategy nationally appears to focus on initiatives to increase participation, many of which seem to be accessibility and awareness related, maybe we need much greater emphasis on the reasons **why** this figure remains so low and shows little sign of improving. What are the barriers to participation for girls, which are the most important to address and what are we actually doing to respond to these at the base level? Of course we need to continue to review school sport programmes in terms of content, as well as provision of clubs and activities for young people outside of school. I also believe that greater commitment and a collective integrated strategy shared by all major stakeholders in this field would be a positive step, however in my opinion, the underlying issues require us to identify and pinpoint the real, specific barriers that lead to female dropout or promote non-participation in activity.

None of us would surely disagree with the concept that girls being comfortable in the environment they are in is fundamental to them both starting and continuing to participate, as well as enjoy physical activity over time. This is, therefore, perhaps what we need to ensure we therefore address to start with; but what does being comfortable in an environment actually mean?

The introduction of the 'Hierarchy of Needs' concept by Maslow (1943) to explain the theory of human motivation, recognised the importance of ensuring physiological, biological and safety needs were met before we could climb the pyramid further through social and esteem needs to reach a state of self-actualization. Over 70 years ago the notion that these had to be right to make progress was proposed and although dated, in my opinion this still has much relevance when considering initial reasons why a female may become a participant or non-participant in physical activity. So what does this actually mean in this context?

While there is no one answer that will explain everything or account for everyone, there are four basic themes that I believe underpin the decisions and commitment to participation in activity with relation to girls feeling comfortable in their environment and thus having their basic needs met to start with. It could be argued that our experience of Physical Education during our education timeline largely shapes our future activity behaviour and attitude, thus Schools have a considerable role to play in supporting these themes and I propose some ideas as below.

1. Image: we all remember our school PE kit, but is this for the right reason? Not for me. To help girls feel comfortable we must get PE kit right – variety in options within school uniform guidelines might help each girl find something that suits their body shape, style and personality and thus helps them to feel more at ease from the start
2. Body Awareness/Education: we all remember those talks about puberty, periods and how our bodies will change, but how many girls are actually given really helpful advice and information about breast awareness, support, the need for a bra or the

right sports bra? Whether an early, average or late developer, the body changes experienced (or not) can have huge impact on comfort and confidence, particularly during activity so this must become a more important part of the education process so the changes do not have detrimental effect on commitment to exercise

3. Enjoyment: what does the PE curriculum look like and how we are encouraging and motivating young girls? How many PE lessons do not involve that much activity or have a severe lack of differentiation with everyone doing the same thing? Remember the 1500m, swimming lessons or the school Cross Country? If these are your lifelong representation of what sport is, it might put you off forever. Variety in activities within PE and high quality, enjoyable lessons that enable every girl to experience progress and success in some form are imperative; then they might actually find something they enjoy and are good at, and bingo, they may even catch the exercise bug for life
4. The Fear Factor: nobody likes to feel stupid because they cannot do something and worry they will be patronised or teased by others; it is the first thing that would put anyone off and this prevents many from even trying. Thus ensuring positive praise and encouragement is so important. On the flip side though, we also need to help girls to become more resilient and learn that 'failing' or not being the best at something is actually okay! Otherwise we also lose those girls who struggle to cope when they do not win or feel under so much pressure to perform that they opt out

Obviously these four concepts are not the sole answers to improving the current statistics and dramatically increasing the participation figures of young girls in particular. However, going back to basics and considering how we might be able to address the issues that focus around being comfortable in the first place seems, in my opinion, a great place to start.