

Additional information for the Health, Social Care and Sports Committee Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity.

Our response is informed by information gathered from relevant studies in this area, from the groups in our networks, and through our consultation work which includes both our peer research project for lesbian and bisexual women in sport and consultation groups convened specifically for this Inquiry.

Evidence gathered by Pride Sports¹ for Sport England indicates that just over half of lesbian women, and about a quarter of bisexual women, are out in the sport they play; and that the overwhelming majority of women are not taking part in formal sporting activity, but instead prefer informal environments and individual activity.

Through our work, LBT women have told us though, that participating in community sport and physical activity often acts as a driver and vehicle for change. It is a way to get out of dark places, it provides a social space but it also gives women a sense of bodily autonomy alongside the physical benefits of staying active. The experiences of LBT women are shaped through the lens of both their gender but also their sexuality²

Barriers LGBTIQ women might face in accessing/participating in sport/physical activity

We know from the European OutSport³ report that

- More than 82% of lesbian women who had experienced negative events in the past year have been verbally insulted in their sports
- 53% of trans women felt excluded from particular sports as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity

LBT women have told us consistently through our focus groups that when they have had negative experiences these ranged from microaggressions to verbal harassment and in some instances this also included physical harassment and violence. An example highlighted is the verbal harassment and abuse that women receive on the basis of their perceived gender expression. Meaning that someone who might be perceived to look traditionally masculine is also often assumed to be a lesbian.

This is inherently misogynistic in nature, and leads to lesbian and bisexual women often trying to hide their sexuality behind their femininity in sports. Lesbophobia is a combination of misogyny and sexuality-related stigma, affecting athletes that are, or are perceived as, women who aren't straight. Lesbian and bisexual women participating in sport have to deal with barriers as encountered by women in general, as well as with the widespread stigma related with a

¹ Pride Sports (2017) <https://pridesports.org.uk/>

² ILGA-Europe, TGEU, Organisation Intersex International Europe, and European Gay & Lesbian Sport Federation. (2021) LGBTI Women in Sport: violence, discrimination and lived experiences.

<https://tgeu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-violence-and-discrimination-against-LBTI-women-in-sport.pdf>

³ Menzel, T., Braumüller, B., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2019). The relevance of sexual orientation and gender identity in sport in Europe: Findings from the Outsport survey. German Sport University Cologne, Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies. Available at:

<https://www.out-sport.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/OUTSPORT-RESEARCH-Report-EU-Relevance-of-SOGI-in-Sport-in-Europe.pdf>

non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Mainstream discourse on homophobia in sport centres on men's experiences; this often leads to a false conclusion that homophobia in women's sport is less of an issue and experiences of lesbophobia being less understood.

For example, participants in our women peer research tell us that they didn't participate in the sport they wanted to when they were younger for fear of being branded a lesbian and this was the case whether they identified that way or not. This is damaging to all women and girls, and it prevents participation in sport through fear of being associated with stereotypes, or even worse the fear that participating in sport will "turn" your sexuality. Many women athletes who are openly out in other areas of their lives, indicate they are not out in their mainstream sports team. And if they are out, they go further and say they don't discuss their sexuality for fear of becoming the stereotype and letting down their teammates. There is also a stigmatising view that lesbian women might be predatory within changing rooms and within sports spaces and participants in the peer research shared many examples where comments have been made by coaches or others in the team that discourage them from discussing their identities or lives too openly. These findings from participants in our work in Scotland are consistent with the data available from work across Europe, including the report on LBTI Women in Sport: violence, discrimination and lived experiences⁴ as well as the aforementioned Outsport research.

Impact on LGBTIQ women who are excluded from sport

The 2022 NHS Scotland LGBT+ Health Needs Assessment⁵ considered physical activity, and overall the report evidenced that LGBT+ people face health inequalities on every measure of wellbeing (social, physical, mental and emotional, financial etc). This is true for all LGBT+ groups, but non-binary and trans people consistently demonstrate the worst health and wellbeing indicators and bisexual women also have particularly poor indicators for mental wellbeing.

- The survey showed that there were large sections of LGBT+ people who had a desire to participate in physical activity but who did not currently do so
- Barriers to participation were highlighted as high costs, changing facilities, homophobic language and gender binary rules and restrictions
- All elements of the Health Needs Assessment highlighted that LGBT+ people are much more likely than others to feel isolated and/or lonely
- Throughout all stages of the needs assessment, LGBT+ people repeatedly said that they would like to be able to socialise and meet people in LGBT+ spaces that don't revolve around alcohol. Sports settings are a perfect opportunity to do this unless you might feel excluded on the basis of your sexual orientation or gender identity.

⁴ ILGA-Europe et al (2021) LBTI Women in Sport: violence, discrimination and lived experiences <https://tgeu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-violence-and-discrimination-against-LBTI-women-in-sport.pdf>

⁵ Leven, T (2022). Health needs assessment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and nonbinary people. Available at: <https://www.scotphn.net/projects/joint-national-health-needs-assessment-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-non-binary-lgbt-people-in-scotland/>

Specific issues in rural areas and work to address these

This is an area of importance and an area which requires more focus and to that end we would agree with the findings reported in other sessions of the committee about the general challenges and barriers to participation in rural areas.

The dispersed nature of the population within rural areas of Scotland means there are fewer spaces for sports and physical activity in general, and that means even less space for women specific queer spaces. The need for these spaces aren't any less in rural areas, but the opportunities for them are fewer.

The impact of social isolation in rural areas of Scotland has been a significant theme from our work with the University of Highlands and Islands, where we have had to shift more emphasis to one-to-one work with LGBTIQ individuals to overcome this, and to empower individuals and build their confidence to participate in local sport and physical activity. It also means supporting individuals into mainstream sports pathways and opportunities rather than through targeted initiatives or existing or emerging LGBTIQ groups as we may do in more populated areas.

A really great example of overcoming some of those barriers of lack of spaces for LBTI women is the self-organised Oban Lesbian Weekend. This is a space for lesbian women to come together to celebrate and have fun while taking part in social and physical activities.

LEAP Sports run **OUT and About** projects in the Highlands, in Perthshire and in Ayrshire which enables some of this individual work and which works to combat barriers LGBTIQ people might face in these spaces when it comes to their participation in sport and physical activity. To increase visibility of LGBTIQ people in general and to link the sport and physical activity sector to LGBTIQ people, it is always really important that we have a strong presence at local prides in rural areas as this raises visibility and awareness.

High drop-out of sport and physical activity for girls

In relation to barriers to participation at school and youth level, LBT girls face the same challenges as non LBT girls, and with additional barriers regarding their LBT identities on top of this. The evidence from our work in schools shows that where barriers and discomfort in participation most strongly exists such as for LGBTIQ pupils, it is often easier for educators to accept young people dropping out of those activities, rather than taking the steps to look at the causes and in turn finding ways to address them. Through this work we know and work with some fantastic teachers and schools, but we still hear from young people that it is far easier to allow them to sit on the bench than to address issues such as changing room language and behaviours for example.

These challenges are what led to the Scottish Association of Teachers of Physical Education creating an excellent curriculum resource⁶ for LGBTI young people and why we work with many schools using the co-created Manifesto for Inclusive Physical Education⁷.

⁶ <https://www.satpe.co.uk/resources/lgbti-and-pepas/>

⁷ <https://leapsports.org/activities/campaigns-and-resources/manifesto-for-inclusive-physical-education>

Visibility

The aforementioned experience of the stigma that can come with being LBT women often leads to women self-excluding, or hiding their identity, or even when very open about their sexual orientation still feeling reluctant to discuss it in relation to their sport. This can also mean an unwillingness to celebrate the diversity of women in sport for fear of playing into these stereotypes. For example, for Lesbian Visibility Day/Week in April this year, we didn't see a focus on LBT women in sport in the same way we would for Pride or LGBT History Month. Notably, high profile and prominent teams who are often outspoken on many other issues, did nothing to mark this.

As highlighted in focus groups conducted in advance of the evidence to this inquiry, we heard from LBT women that they expect their successes not to be highlighted in mainstream media or at all, so they barely ever think to ask for it any more. For example, a professional athlete told us of instances where their team got no publicity or livestream for a showcase match even though they had won the league, but the men's team three divisions below had live coverage and social media publicity. Tackling issues such as promotion, effort and resources are essential if we are serious about changing the deeply embedded structural disadvantages in women's sport; and this is necessary to do if we expect women and especially women from marginalised communities to take pride in their achievements and their work.

A consistent theme from women at our focus groups and in the peer research work were the challenges around lesbian, bisexual and cisgender women speaking up in support of trans women in their clubs. We heard reports of women players at grassroots and elite levels being accused of selling out women and being faced with threats, including instances of physical and sexual violence. Solidarity and social justice should not lead to this. Again, these women are getting harassed not only due to their perceived sexuality, perceived gender identity but also due to their gender. We, as a sport sector, a nation and as human beings have to be able to provide a safer and more inclusive space for LGBTIQ people to take part in sport.

Trans women

Rates of participation of trans people and especially of trans women and non-binary people in sport are lower than the general population with 54% of trans people having stopped participation or who feel excluded⁸. Overall, 60% of trans people and 64% of non-binary people are not active enough to meet standards of good health⁹. This is a point of concern, which is regularly lost in discussions which have a tendency to focus on regulating trans women's participation. We refer the Committee to further information contained in the correspondence between LEAP Sports and Committee member Tess White MSP which is attached.

⁸ Menzel, T., Braumüller, B., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2019). The relevance of sexual orientation and gender identity in sport in Europe: Findings from the Outsport survey. German Sport University Cologne, Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies. Available at: <https://www.out-sport.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/OUTSPORT-RESEARCH-Report-EU-Relevance-of-SOGI-in-Sport-in-Europe.pdf>

⁹ The National LGB&T Partnership (2016). Survey of Exercise & Physical Activity in LGB&T Lives in England Available at: <https://blgbt.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Survey-of-Exercise-Physical-Activity-in-LGBT-Lives-in-England.pdf>

Recommendations

- Improved robust data on participation levels of LGBTIQ people in general, with a focus on women and girls and other demographic groups. This would aid benchmarking and accurate reporting of participation levels
- More research into lesbophobia as a specific experience in sports contexts as evidence consistently emerges yet it is less well understood
- More research into specific experiences of bisexual women in sport and physical activity settings given that NHS research¹⁰ shows that bisexual women had poorer general health outcomes
- More support for initiatives that enable greater engagement of minority young women in PE and school sports
- Further work that challenges pre-existing assumptions about LGBTIQ+ women in physical activity and sport and be the voice to help shape a different narrative
- Sharing stories and coverage of sporting success of LBT women including those women who might not be seen as traditionally feminine.

About good practice within clubs or in changing rooms:

Women ask that there is clear information made available on conduct and how to challenge inappropriate behaviour, as well as positive and affirming messages to be displayed around specific issues. These positive messages could read “This space is for all women” or even better specifically mentioning lesbians, bisexual women or trans women. This supports ensuring lesbian and bisexual women are visible.

Changing villages were highlighted through focus groups as good practice in changing rooms as you can get changed in a private setting but it isn’t gendered. Well advertised information about the facilities is also a must. LBT women told us they were more likely to take the step to get involved and participate in sport if they access information about the facilities that are available and inclusive for them.

Heidi Vistisen
Policy Manager
LEAP Sports Scotland

¹⁰ Leven, T (2022). Health needs assessment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and nonbinary people. Available at: <https://www.scotphn.net/projects/joint-national-health-needs-assessment-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-non-binary-lgbt-people-in-scotland/>



Office of Tess White MSP
M2.20
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP
Tess.White.MSP@parliament.scot
0131 348 6218

Friday 26th May 2023

Dear Tess,

Thank you for your letter following my attendance at the Health, Social Care and Sports committee's evidence session as part of the Inquiry into Female Participation in Sport and Physical Activity on Tuesday 23rd May. We welcome the opportunity to clarify the position of LEAP Sports.

As Scotland's LGBTIQ+ sports charity, LEAP Sports believes in equality and works towards greater inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people in sport and physical activity.

LEAP Sports considers inclusion, fairness, and safety to be complementary values that can be adopted together. We consider fairness to encompass the need to ensure that no athlete has an unfair disproportionate advantage over others in their sport and we consider safety to entail that physical safety risks are prevented. These values are wholly consistent with the value of inclusion, to the extent that an evidence-based approach to fairness and safety are adopted. An evidence-based approach would entail that excluding athletes from sport on the grounds of fairness or safety would require robust and sound evidence that the excluded athletes indeed possess an unfair disproportionate advantage or pose a safety risk. In the absence of such evidence, the default position should be inclusion. This approach is consistent with the international position set out by the International Olympic Committee (2021)¹ which states that there should be no presumption of advantage based on someone being trans until evidence determines otherwise.

The IOC Framework recognises that "it must be in the remit of each sport and its governing body to determine how an athlete may be at a disproportionate advantage against their peers, taking into consideration the nature of each sport". Thus whilst LEAP Sports recognises the research cited, we do not believe that it can be applied in a universal way across all sports, and we approach the research in line with the principle of the evidence-based approach and standards of evidence outlined in the Framework. The Framework requires not only robust and sound evidence for the existence of unfair advantage or safety risks in order to justify excluding athletes from sport, but it also requires that such evidence must be based on data collected from the specific demographic group that is being excluded, and it must demonstrate that the advantage or safety risk exists in the specific sport that is being regulated.

¹ International Olympic Committee (IOC), 2021 Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations
<https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Documents/Beyond-the-Games/Human-Rights/IOC-Framework-Fairness-Inclusion-Non-discrimination-2021.pdf>

Further, we encourage sports bodies to consider how their decision making is applied at different levels within their sport, and so considerations of evidence relevant at elite and competitive sport could be different from at the community grassroots and recreational level for example. Sports bodies have a duty to ensure that any policies that exclude, are necessary and proportionate, and LEAP Sports does not believe that blanket bans of trans women in sport meet this duty.

Research in relation to trans people in sport continues to be limited, and as The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) 2022² concludes, biomedical studies are overvalued with limited considerations made of sociocultural studies. As the report further highlights, the biomedical studies that do exist in this area are inconclusive and they are generally not based on research on the appropriate demographic group: biomedical studies have used cis men and sedentary trans women as a proxy to make conclusions about trans women athletes, but since trans women athletes are neither cis men nor sedentary, such studies cannot be used to make conclusions about trans women athletes.

Indeed, the Sports Councils Equality Group's International Research Literature Review's³ statement that "there are significant differences between the sexes which render direct competition between males and females unfair in most gender-affected sports" refers to differences between cis men and cis women rather than to differences between trans women and cis women. Research on the specific group of trans women athletes is extremely limited, and current understanding of the effects of gender-affirming medical interventions on trans athletes' sports performance is partial and incomplete.

Public and media discourse on this topic regularly characterises a polarised view where at one end we have inclusion of trans women without restrictions, whilst at the other end is complete exclusion. This does not reflect reality as trans women are already unable to participate in competitive sports that are considered to be gender-affected without some form of restrictions. This often means meeting a regulatory threshold that has been set, as well as providing a level of medical evidence that they meet this threshold. This is most commonly testosterone levels, and testosterone suppression for trans women, and includes the provision of comprehensive records of sensitive medical documents. It also almost always means some kind of process to gain permission to participate. Sport bodies in Scotland have spent more than a decade developing such policies already.

Despite this, policy changes since 2021 have led to increased thresholds and in some cases blanket bans on inclusion and participation. Prior to the change in the Scottish Rugby policy at the start of 2023 for example, there were less than 5 trans women who had met the threshold and were able to play competitive rugby in Scotland. This number is now zero as the new policy means no trans women are able to play. It is our view that this focus is making an already bad situation worse.

We know that participation rates in sport and physical activity for trans people are poor with 54% of trans people having stopped participating or feel excluded from particular sports⁴. We also know that 60% of trans people and 64% of non-binary people are not active enough to meet standards of good health⁵. As many sports bodies are focused on policy revisions that continue to tighten already existing restrictions in their sport (only today British Cycling have become the latest), we are greatly concerned by the lack of concomitant efforts to proactively address these issues of inequality.

² Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport [CCES]. 2022. *Transgender Women Athletes and Elite Sport: A Scientific Review..* Available at <https://cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/transgenderwomenathletesandelitesport-ascientificreview-e-final.pdf>

³ UK Sports Council Equality Group, Carmill Consulting (2021) International Research Literature Review Available at: <https://equalityinsport.org/docs/300921/Transgender%20International%20Research%20Literature%20Review%202021.pdf>

⁴ Menzel, T., Braumüller, B., & Hartmann-Tews, I. (2019). The relevance of sexual orientation and gender identity in sport in Europe: Findings from the Outsport survey. German Sport University Cologne, Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies. Available at: www.out-sport.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/OUTSPORT-Report-Relevance-of-SOGI-in-Sport-in-Europe-3.pdf

⁵ The National LGBT Partnership (2016). Survey of Exercise & Physical Activity in LGBT Lives in England Available at: <https://blgbt.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Survey-of-Exercise-Physical-Activity-in-LGBT-Lives-in-England.pdf>

Sport is a social environment where sexism and misogyny are still present and deeply linked with the history, structure and dynamics of participation of women in sport⁶, as has also been intimated in previous sessions of the current Inquiry. CCES report that “Policies that impact trans women’s participation in elite sport are the continuation of a long history of exclusion of women from competitive sport – an exclusion that resulted in the introduction of a ‘women’s’ category of sport in the first place”. LEAP Sports is acutely aware of the negative impact that current policy changes are having on not only trans women, but on all women. There is an increase in reported incidents of abuse and harassment from the community sports groups in our network. There is also a particularly worrying uptick in the number of such incidents related to women’s gender expression within sports settings where we are seeing that the restrictions and scrutiny directed at the physical bodies and performance levels of some (trans) women can cause further scrutiny of the bodies and performances of all women in sports (both cis and trans). We are also hearing increasingly regular reports from women’s sports clubs about the abuse they get when trans women are part of their clubs or teams. This point was illustrated by a participant in a focus group held as part of a women’s peer research project: "It used to be that inclusion was a good thing and something we wanted to shout about [...] We're not going to stop having trans women playing in the team but celebrating that just leads to abuse and accusations of being [abusive names]".

Concerns about trans women being a threat to women’s sport are often based on an undue conflation of trans women with men, where the concerns are often driven by fears of men taking part in women’s sports. Trans women, however, are women, and the celebration and protection of women’s sports should entail the celebration and protection of all women in sports, including trans as well as cis women athletes.

LEAP Sports believe that sport is for everyone, and that sport should be organised with a grounding in respect for equality and human rights. We look forward to continuing work with the sports sector to further improve inclusion and participation of all LGBTIQ+ people, to take a thoughtful and considered evidence-based approach to inclusion, and to tackle the persistent health and social inequalities through the power of sport and physical activity.

Sincerely,

Heidi Vistisen,



Policy Manager, LEAP Sports Scotland

⁶ ILGA-Europe, TGEU, Organisation Intersex International Europe, and European Gay & Lesbian Sport Federation. (2021) LBTI Women in Sport: violence, discrimination and lived experiences. <https://tgeu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-violence-and-discrimination-against-LBTI-women-in-sport.pdf>