

Clare Haughey MSP
Convenor, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
Scottish Parliament

By email: hscs.committee@parliament.scot

21 June 2023

Dear Ms Haughey,

Inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity

I am writing regarding the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's ongoing inquiry into female participation in sport and physical activity. University of the West of Scotland (UWS) has conducted research on menstrual health and its impact on exercise for health and performance. I believe this research could be valuable to the Committee in informing its recommendations and final report.

As Senior Lecturer at UWS, I have published three key studies in this area and have a number of ongoing research projects. The key findings of these peer-reviewed published studies are summarised below. The research aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically goals three (Good Health and Wellbeing), four (Quality Education), and five (Gender Equality).

How the menstrual cycle and menstruation affect sporting performance: experiences and perception of elite female rugby players

This [study](#) provided the first in-depth insight into athlete's experiences of the menstrual cycle and the impact on training and competition. The findings highlighted that 93 per cent of the international female rugby players interviewed reported menstrual cycle-related symptoms, with 67 per cent considering these to be detrimental to their performance. These symptoms encompassed a wide range of issues, including painful menstruation, heavy bleeding, anxiety, reduced energy levels, fear of leaking leading to distraction, and reduced motivation.

As a result of this research, several recommendations were suggested and changes in practice evidenced in sporting organisations. The study strongly emphasised the need for clinicians and support staff to undertake menstrual cycle profiling, monitoring menstrual cycle factors and continue to develop education to raise awareness, knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle and openness, for both athletes and support staff. By implementing these recommendations, organisations can provide better support for athletes' participation in sport, recognising the significant impact that the menstrual cycle can have on performance and wellbeing.

Elite female athletes' experiences and perceptions of the menstrual cycle on training and sport performance

This [study](#) extended our understanding of female athletes' experiences of the menstrual cycle in the context of sport, with a focus on exploring these experiences with athletes across multiple sports. Additionally, it examined the extent of openness in discussions surrounding the menstrual cycle with coaching and support staff.

In support of our findings with rugby players, all participants reported menstrual cycle symptoms. Many felt these symptoms impacted on their ability to train and perform optimally. While athletes expressed a willingness to discuss the menstrual cycle with other female athletes, they displayed varying levels of comfort when engaging in such conversations with male coaches. Given coaching in sport is often male-dominated, this raises further barriers to health and wellbeing within sport.

The research also emphasises a need for further education, targeting both elite athletes and coaches on the topic of the menstrual cycle. It highlights the significance of considering menstruation on par with other physiological functions in sports (such as nutritional strategies), aiming to enhance health, wellbeing, and overall performance. To advance knowledge and understanding around the impact of menstruation on elite performance, educational initiatives should provide individuals with the appropriate terminology and confidence to foster positive and constructive discussions about the menstrual cycle. By doing so, we can enable an environment where athletes and coaches are equipped to address this essential aspect of women's health.

Teachers' perceptions and experiences of menstrual cycle education and support in UK schools

Menstruation is frequently cited as a barrier to adolescent girls' involvement in physical education (PE) and sport, and it is one of the factors contributing to girls dropping out of these activities. It has been recognised that increased education on the menstrual cycle is required, specifically education that focuses on supporting young menstruating individuals to participate in PE.

This [study](#) therefore aimed to gain insight into teachers' experiences in delivering menstrual health education and assess the support they receive in teaching about the menstrual cycle. A survey was conducted among 789 teachers from various educational stages across the UK, with 24 per cent of participants based in Scotland. The findings revealed that 88 per cent of teachers perceived the menstrual cycle to have an impact on participation in PE, as well as other areas such as school attendance, attitude and behaviour. Moreover, 80 per cent of teachers expressed the belief that receiving training would be beneficial in improving menstrual education.

The research underlines the importance of education that focuses on managing menstrual-related symptoms and acknowledges the lived experiences of individuals. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to address the quality of menstrual education provided in schools throughout the UK. By providing comprehensive menstrual education, we can empower young women to effectively manage their menstrual cycle, preventing negative impacts on health and school performance.

Ongoing work

We are actively conducting several research projects to further expand on this topic, the results of which are due to be published soon. These projects encompass various aspects such as gaining a deeper understanding of adolescent menstrual experiences in sport, as well as exploring coaches' awareness of menstrual health and their experiences of working with menstruating athletes. Additionally, I have been awarded funding for a Research Fellowship by the Royal Society of Edinburgh to develop educational resources on menstrual health for coaches and educators in school.

I hope that the Committee will find the information in this letter helpful, and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the findings further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Forrest". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Dr Laura Forrest, Senior Lecturer, University of the West of Scotland