

This factsheet is one of a series, produced by sports coach UK and Women in Sport, aimed at coaches who coach women or who are interested in coaching them in the future. Each factsheet provides insight into the female athlete and her needs, and guidance as to how better to coach and support her.

Although the information contained within this factsheet has been academically evidenced, sports coach UK recognises that it is a generalisation. All people are individuals and it is for you, the coach, to contextualise the following information to your own coaching environment.

What are the issues?

There is an under-representation of women and girls in sport and physical activity. The lack of participation in a wide variety of sports and physical activities at all levels continues to be a cause for concern. Even though a range of coaching initiatives and governing body of sport policies have been put in place, women's participation in sport still lags some 13% behind that of their male counterparts. Similarly, under-representation by women is also evident in coaching, officiating, administration, management, board and governing body membership, and volunteering. The end result is a distinct lack of female role models to inspire other women and girls to succeed and take part in sport and physical activity.

What barriers are in place?

It is increasingly recognised that key social and cultural barriers influence women's and girls' participation in sport and physical activity. Aside from a lack of suitable opportunities overall, the following barriers can affect women and girls individually:

- body image
- lack of media coverage
- lack of role models
- negative attitudes
- parental influences
- peer pressure
- self-confidence
- sexist behaviour
- stereotyping.

Of course, not all of these social and cultural barriers impact upon every woman in the same way.



What should coaches do with all this information?

It is important to recognise there are a range of practical, social and cultural barriers influencing sports and physical activity participation by women and girls. As well as these barriers, each woman and girl is unique because of her personal identity, which is made up of class, ethnicity, disability, religion, age and sexual orientation. Recognising that each woman and girl's circumstances are unique (which cannot be established on appearance) is essential to developing a good relationship with your participants. Acknowledging that women and girls are not all the same is one small step in making your coaching environment more inclusive for a greater range of women and girls. Using a 'one size fits all' coaching approach may only work with some of your participants. This means that others may not feel included and may not respond well to your coaching. A truly inclusive coach is able to positively influence a variety of women and girls who may have diverse needs and backgrounds.

Think:

- Do you get to know each individual participant?
- What has brought each one to your session?
- What challenges does each participant overcome to get to the session?



Think:

- Are you aware of the differing needs of each participant?
- What does she want to get out of the session?
- How does each participant best learn?



How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

You can contribute to these developments by providing a positive, rewarding and enjoyable session that makes your participants want to return. Getting to know your participants' motives for initially coming to your sessions will help you plan a variety of activities to help them achieve their goals. This first point of contact is often crucial in determining whether participants will return and must be carefully managed. While it is important that newcomers are made to feel welcome, ensuring they are integrated into the session as quickly as possible is essential. Quick introductions to all participants and moving quickly into the coaching session will prevent any newcomers from feeling too exposed and on show. Maintaining open communication channels with each participant will ensure goals are constantly reassessed and needs met. This will create an environment where participants feel valued and everyone feels comfortable enough to express themselves. Using a buddy system; pairing up a newcomer with an experienced/reliable veteran can also ease the transition into a new team or club.

Think:

- Do you check your sessions are meeting all of your participants' needs?
- How often do you discuss this with your participants?
- How regularly do you provide feedback to your participants?



Think:

- Do you critically reflect on your coaching?
- Do you change your delivery style or content as a result of feedback from your participants?
- Do you engage in peer observations and mentoring programmes to help you develop in your coaching?



Ensuring inclusive delivery of your sessions

There are lots of issues to consider in ensuring your sessions will be fully inclusive to all women and girls and, by addressing a variety of factors, you will provide opportunities for many of them. Use the coaching checklist below to think about how inclusive your coaching sessions are for a range of different women and girls.

Coaching checklist

Key Area to Consider	Who Could this Help?
<p>In what ways is your coaching accessible?</p> <p>Think about timing, parking, transport links and physical accessibility.</p>	<p>Women with concerns over personal safety</p> <p>Girls with disabilities</p>
<p>In what ways is the coaching space safe and private?</p> <p>Think about viewing areas, other staff and participants present and single-sex spaces.</p>	<p>Women with religious beliefs that have certain requirements</p> <p>Girls lacking in confidence</p>
<p>In what ways do you ensure skill practices are appropriate for all levels?</p> <p>Think about the variety of practices offered and the progression of skills.</p>	<p>Women who are trying an activity for the first time</p> <p>Girls with learning difficulties</p>
<p>In what ways are you flexible regarding clothing for the session?</p> <p>Think about the religious codes some women and girls wish to observe, whether you discuss clothing with the participants and the types of developments that have occurred by clothing manufacturers.</p>	<p>Women with concerns over body image who wish to feel comfortable while exercising</p> <p>Girls with religious beliefs that have certain requirements</p>
<p>In what ways do you make sure the sessions are fun?</p> <p>Think about your delivery style, the types of activities and the balance of competitive and non-competitive activities.</p>	<p>Women under pressure in other aspects of their lives.</p> <p>Girls who have had negative experiences of sport and physical activity at school</p>
<p>In what ways do you ensure opportunities for social interaction?</p> <p>Think about how social interaction occurs within and outside the coaching sessions and the reasons some women and girls participate in sport and physical activity. Remember that participants are choosing your activity over other things they could be doing in their free time, so it is important to incorporate opportunities to socialise and have fun if you are to retain them.</p>	<p>Women with limited opportunities to socialise away from work and home</p> <p>Girls looking for new friendships</p>
<p>In what ways do you challenge any discrimination that you see occurring between women and girls and ensure a positive, welcoming culture is maintained?</p> <p>Think about the language that is used, attitudes that are expressed and whether cliques form that marginalise or alienate individuals.</p>	<p>Women with disabilities</p> <p>Women who may be subject to racism</p> <p>Girls who identify as gay/lesbian</p>
<p>In what ways do you approach negative self-perceptions?</p> <p>Think about your manner with participants and how you encourage them to attempt activities and the ways you positively reinforce achievement.</p>	<p>Women with low confidence levels</p> <p>Girls who have been bullied</p>
<p>In what ways do you challenge stereotyping?</p> <p>Think of the language you use, the examples you give, the role models you provide and other coaching staff you may use.</p>	<p>Women who may be subject to racism</p> <p>Girls with disabilities</p>
<p>Are the participants' children being looked after appropriately while they train?</p> <p>Is there potential for children's activity sessions to run concurrently with women's training sessions?</p>	<p>Single mothers</p> <p>Mothers with a low disposable income</p>

Final thoughts

Reflect on these two perspectives from women and girls who have experienced both inclusive and non-inclusive coaching. Specifically, think about:

- how these experiences made them feel
- what the repercussions might be for their lifetime involvement in sports and physical activity
- how you might have addressed these issues had you been their coach.

I ended up leaving the club and going to play tennis somewhere else. Basically, they wanted me to wear a skirt and I didn't feel comfortable in one. But no one actually came to talk to me about it; they put a notice up in the changing rooms and I knew it was aimed at me. They didn't even have the guts to say it to my face. The sad thing is, they lost out. I was a good player and their biggest competitors ended up with me playing for them.

My confidence just slowly faded. Too much focus was put on the players who could play, which highlighted those who weren't as good. And that was made worse by some of the players' attitudes and comments, which weren't addressed by the coaches. Now I'm enjoying football again at a new club. The environment is much more supportive and the other participants aren't concerned about how everyone else is playing; they're more concerned with their own performance. And the coaches focus on the positives; there are no consequences for making mistakes.

A call to action

Think about how you could change your approach to your coaching sessions. You don't have to be able to identify with everything on this factsheet, but the differences you will achieve from changing a minor part of your coaching methodology could bring great results.

There are five other factsheets in the series. Each one explores a different area surrounding women in sport, which may help inform your approach to your current coaching practice. The factsheets are:

- Coaching Myth Buster
- Female Physiology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Female Psychology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Developing Female Coaches
- Coaching Female High-performance Athletes.

For further information about the series, please email coaching@sportscoachuk.org

