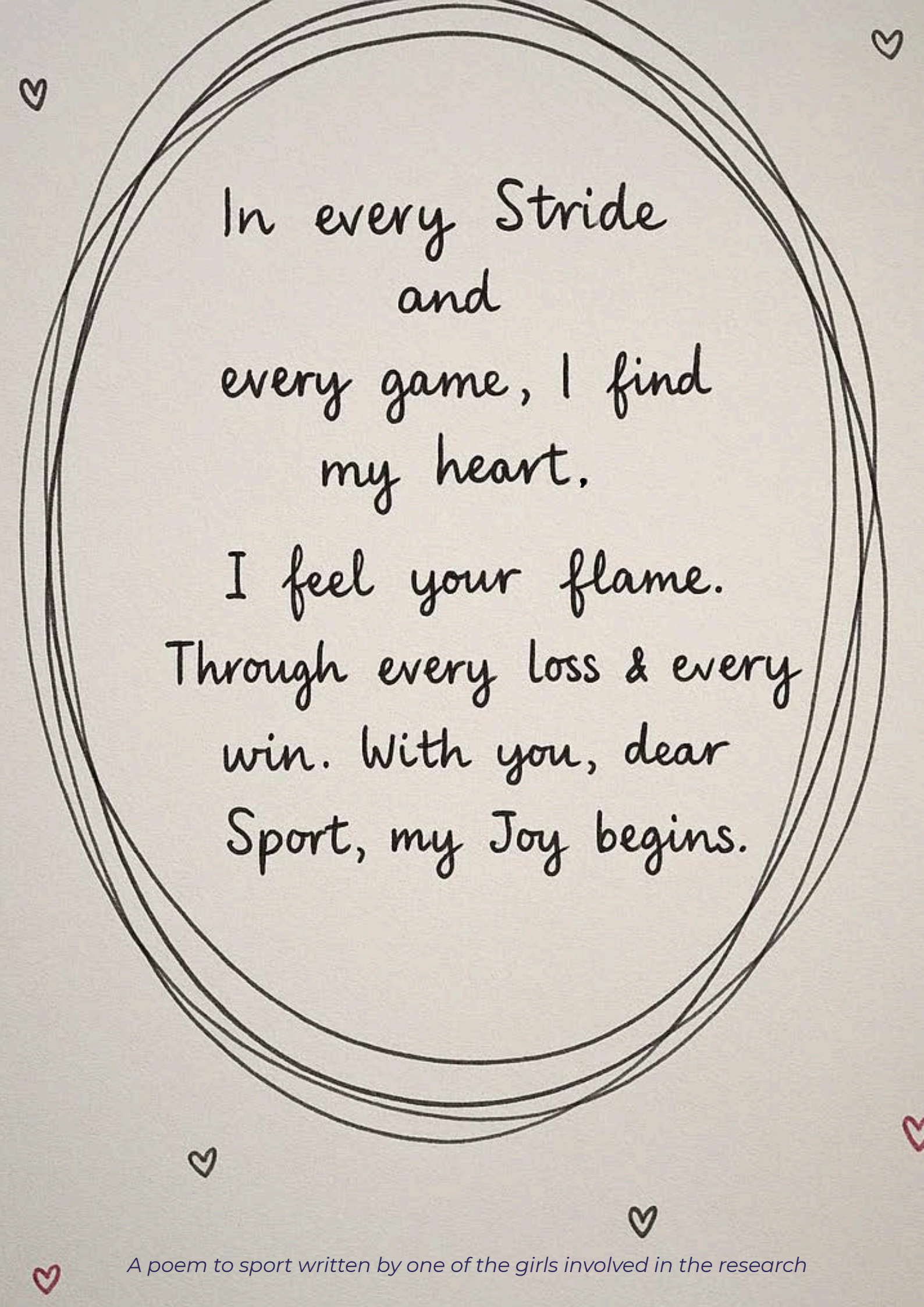
BLACK GIRLS & SPORT: A Breakup Story

MAY 2025

WOMEN IN SPORT

womeninsport.org



A poem to sport written by one of the girls involved in the research

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most Black girls love sport: twice as many Black girls as White British girls dream of becoming a top athlete or sportsperson [1]. Black girls are the most likely to describe themselves as sporty, with over seven in ten Black girls feeling good at both team and individual sports. Black girls are also much more likely than other groups to value sport for their mental and physical health.

Despite this, **Black girls are the least active** of any group [2], something which is not true for Black boys who also dream big [1]. In fact, only one in seven girls are active outside school [2]. This is simply wrong, and we wanted to understand how to change the ending of this story.

60%
of Black girls dream of becoming a top athlete compared to 33% of White British girls

85%
of Black girls feel sport is vital for feeling joyful and carefree

Sport is a huge opportunity to improve Black girls' lives, to provide joy and escape, as well as to give more Black girls the chance to find the safe community they seek and chase their dreams. It is not just morally right to seek to change Black girls' lives for the better: sport can benefit too. The sporting system has an opportunity to create a richer culture, one that welcomes Black girls for who they are and is lifted up by their passion for sport, their skills and enthusiasm. At elite level, women's sport is currently missing out on a huge amount of talent that might be released if we could improve Black girls' experiences in sport. In many places, the system just doesn't know what it's missing. It needs to.

This story is based on the findings of a major study, working with brilliant researchers, experts and stakeholders from Black communities. Eight sport governing bodies helped to fund this research and were closely involved in this journey.

68%
of Black girls say sport is very important to help keep their body fit and healthy, more than 49% White British, 48% Mixed and 50% Asian girls

No two Black girls are the same, however our research found that Black girls share many experiences in common. We started by looking at the wider lives of Black teenage girls and found a tough space that girls have to navigate: minoritisation, adultification bias, the likelihood of economic hardship, high ambition to succeed and exacerbated fears around safety. This drives a particularly strong need for a safe space where they really feel they belong and fit in. Sport has the potential to be a powerful, uniting force, a place of belonging and celebration of difference that can be a life improving path for Black girls.

But Black teenage girls' sporting experience is a story of loss and churn – all too often ending in a break-up. All teenage girls are having to manage female puberty and push back on stereotyping. Black teenage girls carry this too, and they face not only misogyny but the bias of racist stereotypes. They go to sport looking for joy and release but often they don't feel they can bring their full selves. They may be singled out or typecast into certain roles or sports and face the unnecessary pressure of an inflexible culture. Black girls also have unique needs around their cultural and physical reality, demonstrated by the issues of hair coverage, management and protection. In any relationship, ongoing misunderstanding erodes trust.

Time will be needed to rebuild trust if we are to restore Black girls' relationship with sport. First and foremost, people in sport need to read and reflect on this story and use it to inspire greater acknowledgement and respect for the unique needs of Black girls in sport.

32%

of Black girls say they are frequently penalised or get in trouble when they express themselves in sports and physical activity

We are calling on sports leaders to show leadership and commit to change, to be proactive in addressing misogynoir (racism combined with misogyny) with robust policies, to ensure ensure better representation of Black women and to review provision and talent pathways with Black girls front of mind.

We are calling on coaches and programme leaders to make sport joyful again, to value Black girls for who they are and to embrace their unique identities and needs, giving them space to bring their whole selves. To build trust with Black girls and their families, to create safe places, to be flexible and to actively support Black girls. Also, to be aware of the biases and stereotypes that we all carry.

For a Black girl this love story should have a happy ending. Now we understand more about the unique experiences many Black girls face in life, and sport, the sector has a responsibility to do all it can to make the story an uplifting one. For a life-long happy relationship with sport Black girls from every background and culture will need to feel a true sense of belonging in sport and be able to pursue their dreams.

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Our Aims

Women in Sport set out to gain a deep understanding of the wider lives of Black teenage girls in the UK and their unique sporting experiences and challenges. By raising awareness of their needs and understanding what drives them, our aim is to help the sport sector to foster a greater sense of belonging for Black teenage girls.

Methodology

1 Insight gathering and harnessing existing knowledge

- Literature review of academic and organisational research
- In depth interviews and roundtables with 16 experts by profession or experience, working within Black communities and/or with Black teenage girls

2 Digging deeper to understand girls wider lives and experiences in sport

- Online ethnography with 32 girls aged 13-24
- Online focus groups with all girls from the ethnography

3 Exploring attitudes to sport and physical activity for children and young people

- Nationally representative survey of 2,255 girls and boys aged 13-24, with a sample boost of 500 Black girls and boys

4 Examining implications and ideating solutions

- Insight immersion and solutions workshop with 6 National Governing Bodies of sport and experts working within Black communities

We adopted an iterative mixed-method approach to this research beginning with harnessing insight through an extensive literature review and depth interviews with Black experts and stakeholders.

An in-depth qualitative, mobile ethnography with 32 Black teenage girls and young women sat at the heart of this research. Here, we explored the everyday lives of Black teenage girls, capturing rich, real-time insights into life as a Black teenager in the UK today. Follow-up focus groups were carried out with the same participants to delve deeper into emerging themes. Insights from the qualitative research were then explored via a nationally representative survey of over 2,000 children and young people, to understand their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of sport and physical activity [i].

To ensure a diverse range of experiences across Black communities in the qualitative research, girls were recruited from various locations, socioeconomic groups, Black ethnicities (Black African, Black Caribbean, Black British or other Black ethnicity), school types, religious beliefs, family structures, and levels of sports engagement. As girls from Mixed backgrounds have significantly higher activity levels than Black girls, a small subset of four Mixed girls [2] (Black and other ethnicity) were included in the qualitative stage. Whilst these girls shared many similar experiences to Black girls, further research is needed with a larger sample of Mixed girls to explore their needs and experiences in more depth, which is beyond the scope of this report.

The quantitative research design and interpretation were supported by Statistics Without Borders, while HumanKind research agency collaborated with us to design, implement, and interpret the qualitative findings. The research was conducted between September 2024 and January 2025.

[i] All statistics presented in the report are from this survey, unless otherwise stated or referenced. All names are pseudonyms to protect girls' confidentiality.

BLACK GIRLS AND SPORT

Black girls have positive attitudes and high aspirations when it comes to sport

Most Black girls love sport. Of all teenage girls, it is Black girls who have the most positive attitudes to sport and physical activity. 60% of Black girls dream of becoming an elite athlete [1] and Black girls place high value on its contribution to good mental and physical health.

Sport England data shows that positive attitudes to sport and physical activity such as enjoyment, competence, confidence, knowledge or understanding are strong indicators of physical activity levels. And Black and Mixed girls are most likely to have three or more positive attitudes, in particular enjoyment, confidence, competence and knowledge [2].

Even more striking, is Black high girls' aspirations in sport, with 60% dreaming of becoming a top athlete or sportsperson compared to 33% of White British girls. 43% of Black girls consider themselves 'sporty', also substantially more than any other group of girls (Figs. 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Girls who dream about becoming a top athlete or sportsperson [1]

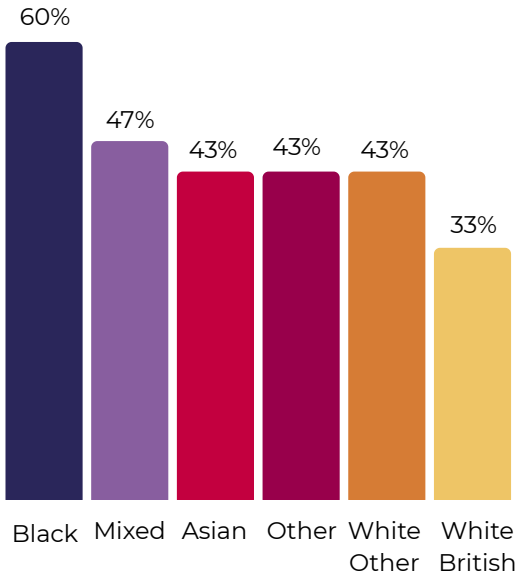
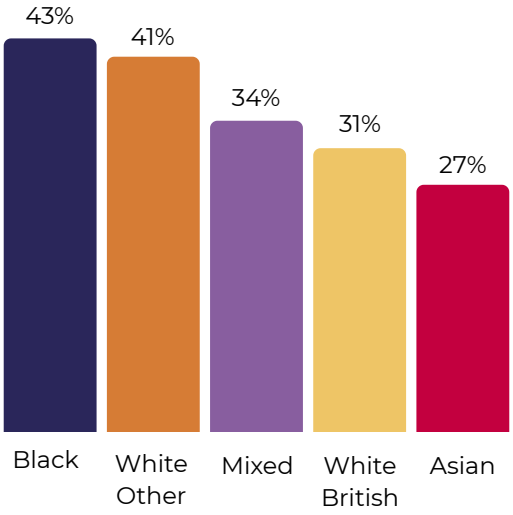
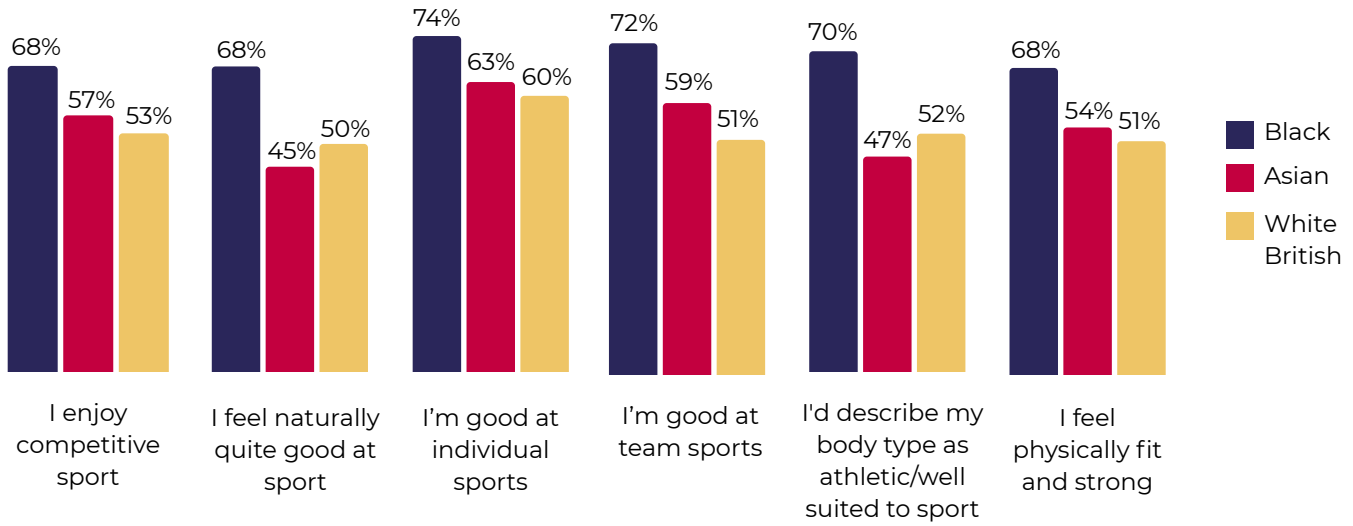


Figure 2: Girls who describe themselves as 'sporty' [2]



Our survey also showed that Black girls are the most likely of any ethnic group to say that they are good at both individual and team sports, that they enjoy competitive sports, and feel positive about their bodies and ability in sport (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: How Black girls feel about sport compared to Asian and White British girls



We also found that 70% of school-aged Black girls trust their PE teachers, more than White British (61%), Asian (52%), or Mixed girls (44%). Our data shows that trust helps keep girls engaged and those who feel uncertain or unsupported are more likely to avoid PE. This trust shows a real opportunity to improve the lives of Black girls, if more schools would prioritise time and investment in PE.

Black girls place higher value on sport for their physical and mental health

The majority of teenage girls understand the value of sport, it supports health, boosts confidence, and improves their wellbeing [3]. But for Black girls, these benefits often carry even greater weight. Black girls are significantly more likely to say that many of the benefits sport can bring are very important, highlighting a strong awareness for what sport can offer. This emphasis is likely shaped by the wider inequalities they navigate, making sport feel like a key route to agency, health, and happiness.

67%
of Black girls say sport is *very important* for their mental health, more than 56% White British and 54% Mixed and Asian girls

68%
say sport is *very important* to help keep their body fit and healthy, more than 49% White British, 48% Mixed and 50% Asian girls

59%
feel sport is *very important* for building their confidence, more than 45% White British, 49% Mixed and 46% Asian girls

64%
believe it is *very important* for good health when they are older, more than 50% White British, 58% Mixed and 52% Asian girls

"The best benefit is the feeling you get from yourself... it always gives you a level of confidence. I don't think I'd be where I am today and be the person I am today without physical activity. Playing sports, it's not just about building a community, it's about building your own identity and finding yourself free."
– Toni, 17

"Sports is a way for me to clear my head to just get a bit of a break from life. It's just so calming and so easy and when people ask me why do I like basketball... it's like everything else in the world is silent except you, the ball, your team."
– Sasha, 19

The attitude - participation gap: an opportunity for sport

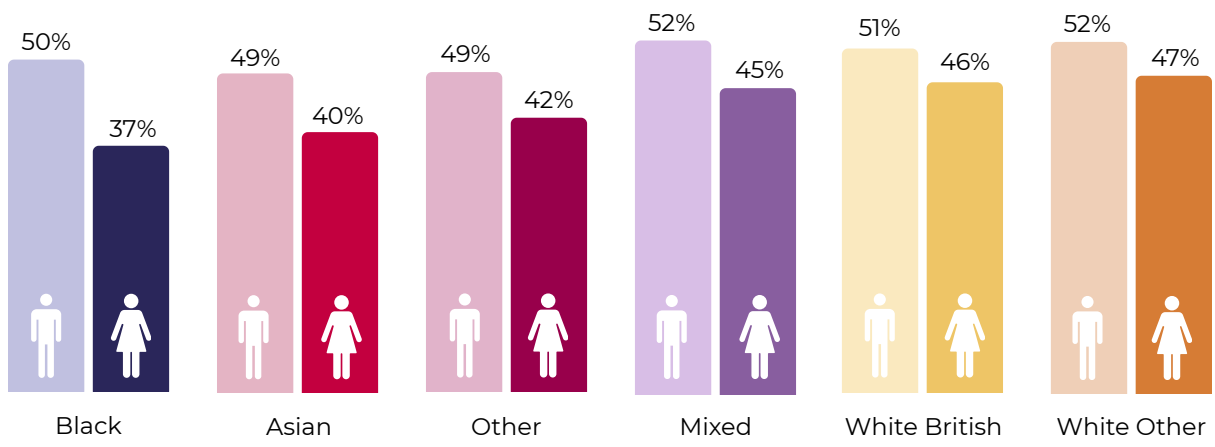
This love of sport, and the high-value Black girls place on it, makes it all the more heart-breaking that only 37% of Black girls meet physical activity guidelines, less than all other groups of girls (Fig. 4). The gender gap in activity levels is also widest between Black girls and boys (37% girls vs 50% boys). Outside of school, only 14% of Black girls are active for 30 minutes or more on average. Significantly less than any other group of girls (22% White Other, 21% White British, 21% Mixed, 21% Other and 19% Asian) [2].

This contradiction between high aspirations and positive attitudes and actual participation sits at the heart of Black girls' sporting journeys, and our research. The problem is not a lack of desire or motivation. It must be the case that the sporting needs of Black girls are simply not being met.

This is clearly a significant opportunity for sports funders and policy leaders to increase girls' participation in sport. If awareness was raised as to the challenges Black girls face, and if sport was able to adapt to meet Black girls' needs, participation could rise sharply. In other words: Black girls are not a 'hard-to-reach' group as they are often described. They're a 'ready-to-reach' group. The system just isn't reaching them where they are at.

We have a huge opportunity to change the lives of Black girls for the better with long-term benefits for health, wellbeing, and community inclusion. To do so, we need to understand the social, cultural, and personal factors going on in Black girls' lives and how the sporting environment is, or is not, working for them.

Figure 4: Boys and girls in school years 3-11 who meet Chief Medical Officer's guidelines for physical activity [2]



1. THE WIDER LIVES OF BLACK TEENAGE GIRLS
The Context That Shapes Her World

To truly comprehend Black teenage girls' experiences in sport, it is essential to first understand the broader context of their lives. Daily realities are shaped by a unique blend of cultural expectations, societal pressures, and systemic inequalities that set Black girls apart from their peers, profoundly influencing their priorities, opportunities, and sense of belonging. We must also recognise that there is no single story of what it means to be a Black girl in the UK today.

Despite this diversity, there are shared cultural experiences and barriers that shape the lives and sporting experiences of many Black girls in the UK. Six core themes emerged from the research with the experts and most importantly, the girls.

Anthony Mckissic

"There are many things to consider... personal individual preferences, cultural influences from your background; heritage... the difference from maybe the Caribbean communities compared to the Black African communities and then your Somali predominantly Muslim communities and Black African girls have very, very different issues." – *Expert stakeholder*

1.1 Life as part of a minority community

Black people are very much a minority group in the UK making up only 4% of the population of England and Wales, the greatest majority being Black African (1.5 million people), followed by Black Caribbean (600,000). Black communities are strongest in some parts of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, and Bristol [4]. For girls living outside of these hubs, the experience of being the only Black girl in any setting can be particularly isolating.

"Racism is honestly the foundation for the difference of the way we feel, how we feel and opportunities presented to us. That is the foundations for everything, unfortunately." – *Leyla, 22*

"When you go to a coaching course... there is nothing in there about understanding your bias [or] your cultural reference... about your racial understanding or racism. Therefore, you've come in as this expert coach... from a Eurocentric outlook to support/implement this onto young Black girls. So you have not even prepared that space for the athlete as a whole." – *Expert stakeholder*

Minoritisation is not just about numbers, but about culture and power. Representation, cultural understanding, and tailored provision can be limited, even in cities with strong Black populations. The structures around Black girls everywhere, from education and sport to the workplace and media, mostly centre White Eurocentric norms. This can create an exhausting dynamic where Black girls continually feel the need to adjust and adapt to fit into environments not designed for them.

Being physically present in a place doesn't guarantee a sense of belonging. Cultural exclusion means Black girls often find themselves in a constant state of negotiation: downplaying parts of who they are to avoid being labelled, misjudged, or left out. The girls we worked with described a landscape that rarely affirmed who they were. The pressure to conform is inhibiting Black teenage girls from building their identity and self-worth at a pivotal, formative time in their lives.

These dynamics shape how safe, supported, and visible Black girls feel in wider society, as well as sport. Even in multicultural cities, girls often find themselves navigating systems that fail to reflect their realities, limiting their ability to participate fully and show up authentically.

"It might be that the girls in one area are only going to the Black groups because that's where they feel comfortable." – *Expert stakeholder*

50%
of Black girls have seen or experienced sexism in school

48%
of Black girls have seen or experienced racism in school

What this means for sport: Black girls want spaces where they can be their full selves and as a minority community may find these harder to access. Too often, Black girls can feel hyper-visible and yet their needs often feel invisible and unsupported. Rather than expecting Black girls to shrink or adapt, sporting cultures should embrace difference and build trust. If it does, it can offer something rare for Black girls: the freedom to show up fully and joyfully.

1 in 2

Black girls feel they have to downplay or limit aspects of their cultural identity in sport and physical activity environments, compared to 1 in 3 White British girls (48% compared to 32%)

"I think it takes a lot of self-preparation [sport], so to understand what you're going into and what possibly could be said or could happen... do I want to put myself through that?" – *Ruth, 16*

1.2 Poverty and deepening economic inequality

Not all of the girls we spoke to were living in poverty but Black communities are among the most economically disadvantaged in the UK. Women of colour are 2.3 times more likely to be living in relative poverty than White British women [5] with racial inequalities most pronounced in Yorkshire and the Humber, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland [6]. In London, 32% of Black residents live in poverty, nearly double the rate of White residents [7].

Black Caribbeans are among the least likely to be in professional or managerial roles (19% vs. 26% of Black Africans) and are more likely to work in lower-paid sectors such as care and leisure. This creates economic precarity that is structural, not just situational [8]. For example, more than half (52%) of Black and minority ethnic families are now experiencing fuel poverty compared to a third (32%) of White families [9].

Changes to tax and welfare support has worsened poverty in the UK over the last ten years and since late 2021 a cost-of-living crisis has compounded this (caused by the economic impact of Brexit, the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine). During these years, discrimination towards Black people has increased by nearly 4%, and the general health of Black communities has declined by 4.5%, mental health by 5.6% [10].

This provides the backdrop to what many Black children see and feel every day in their homes and communities.

Many see their parents working tirelessly with no time, money, or mental space for leisure so can internalise the belief that enjoyment is a luxury, not a normal part of life.

Those Black families under less financial and time pressure are engaged in a wider range of activities. Research shows Black middle-class parents in the UK engage actively with schools, invest in mentorship and enrichment opportunities, and work to ensure their children see positive representations of Black achievement in extracurricular activities, creative outlets, and sport [11].

"There is a big class divide when it comes to sport. The richest people get into the best teams because they have the best facilities and the best coaches, and I think that has a big effect on encouraging Black women to get into sport."
– Doyin, 23

"A lot of the [sports activities my family have] been free, making use of the opportunities around you."
– Expert stakeholder

"When you've got children who want to do [sports], you might be saying to them, I can't afford that."
– Expert stakeholder

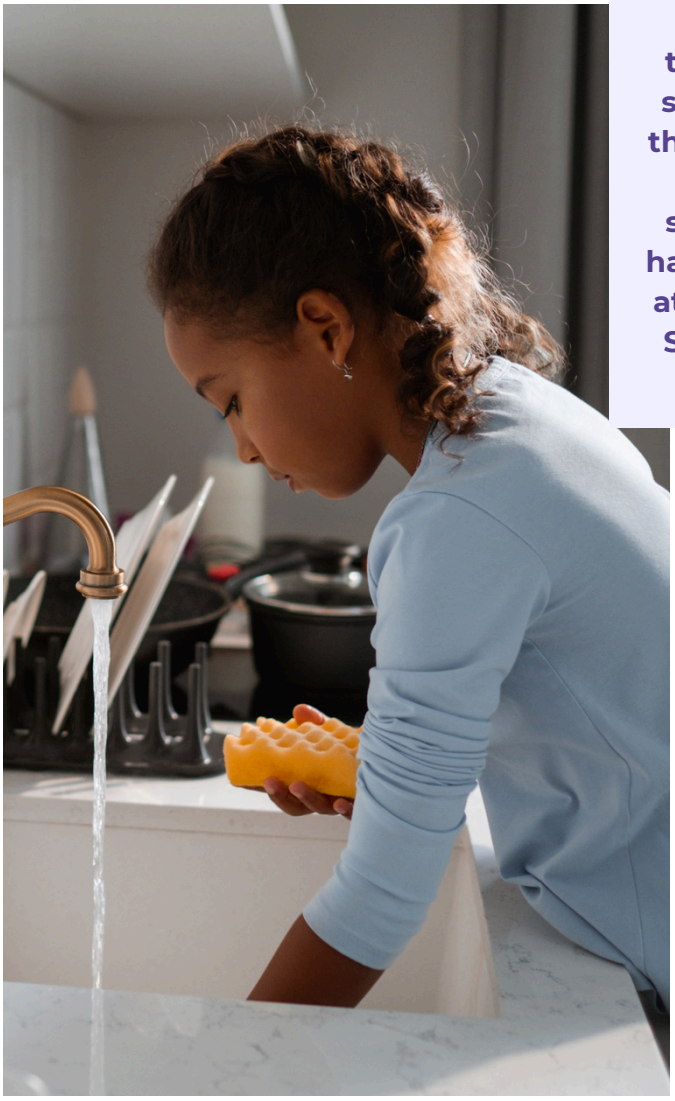
What this means for sport: For many Black girls, money is in very short supply. Where community sport is an option, it means paying club fees, buying kit, and finding transport which is often unaffordable. Gym memberships also reflect this economic divide: 39% of Black girls use gyms, rising to 47% among those from higher-income backgrounds. Free school-based sports activities have declined in quality and quantity over the last decade, but school sport has a vital role to play in redressing these economic inequalities for girls, and Black girls in particular.

1.3 Home responsibilities

Gender stereotyping means girls of all backgrounds are often expected to take responsibility for the needs of others, and as a result to carry more emotional as well as practical responsibilities such as caring duties and housework [12]. Structural inequalities mean parentification (taking on the role of a supportive adult within their family) is more likely for Black children, and from a young age [13]. Black girls are more likely to:

- **Live in households facing socioeconomic hardship**: where parents may be working multiple jobs or long and anti-social hours [14].
- **Grow up in single-parent households**: this is true for 57% of Black Caribbean families and 44% of Black African families (vs 22% of White British households) [15].
- **Live in extended or multigenerational households**: particularly for Black African and Caribbean communities [16] so girls can be expected to support both young and old.
- **Take on caring responsibilities linked to poor family health**: long-term health conditions such as hypertension and diabetes are more prevalent in Black communities [17].
- **Live with relatives with higher life expectancy but long-term illness or disability:** [18,19] reducing the number of healthy adult caregivers in the home.

In this context the "right to simply be a child" is often lost. This is termed socialised adultification [12] and while it can teach resilience and maturity, it comes at a cost: sacrificing rest and, critically, play. 53% of Black girls say they look after their siblings a lot at home compared to 35% of White British girls. These responsibilities, whether supporting younger siblings or elders often fall heaviest on the oldest siblings, and often go unnoticed or misinterpreted by outsiders. When unacknowledged, it adds to the emotional burden Black girls carry.



"Coming from a family with both parents, there was still that responsibility of making sure you had cooked, or you had cleaned by the time your parents had got home... it's just me and my sister, but of the two of us, her sports was prioritised more than mine. So, I had the responsibility of making sure she was at her sports and picking her up from sports. So that left no time for me to do anything."
– Jayda, 21

The girls in our research led exceptionally busy and demanding lives, juggling schoolwork, part-time jobs, significant family and household responsibilities and often religious or community obligations [20]. 72% of Black girls feel they need to act as a role model for younger siblings when less than half of White British girls (49%) feel this.

Experts working within Black communities described these responsibilities aligning with values of respect and care, with cultural heritage as well as economic necessity. But when these duties replace rather than complement childhood, they become barriers to leisure, wellbeing, and personal development.

While 81% of both Black girls and Black boys say they are expected to help with household chores, girls are more likely to actually do them (49% vs. 30%). The findings suggest that while Black boys may be asked, girls are expected to do, with their responsibilities embedded in their daily routines.

51%

of Black girls feel their family expects them to prioritise home responsibilities over sport

"[Black communities'] religious beliefs and their cultural values take precedence over what they can and what they can't do."
– Expert stakeholder

"I have a lot of responsibilities which don't leave me time to just play. I have a brother that's disabled...so I feel like my parents put a little bit more pressure on me...I also have a part time job and school, so it's really hard to balance things...the one thing that I always have to sacrifice is training."
– Sade, 18

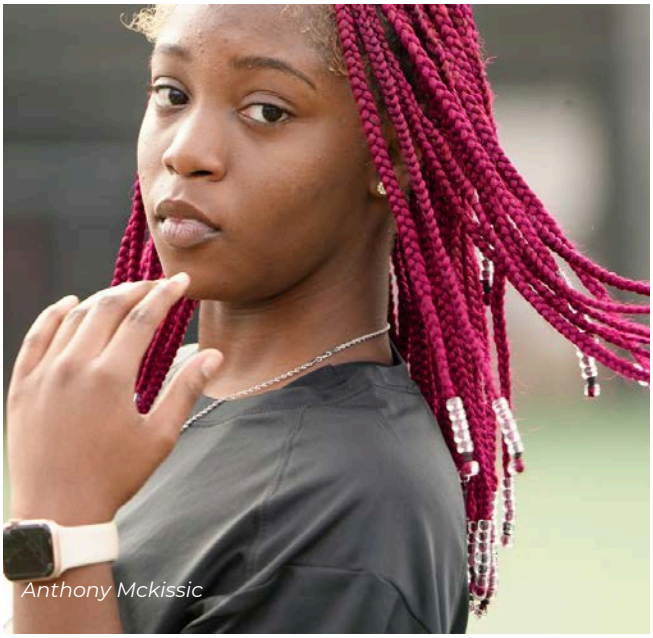
What this means for sport: Black girls want to be active but often have less time and flexibility because they may be caring for siblings, studying, or have cultural commitments. For many Black girls, the sporting environment is too rigid and inflexible, feeling more like "work" and just another job to juggle. To keep Black girls engaged, sport must be flexible, and feel enjoyable and liberating. It must meet them where they are.

1.4 Adultification bias

Adultification is where children are perceived and treated as if they are more mature than they are and assigned adult responsibilities and roles. It is also recognised as a form of bias amongst adults and professionals who can perceive certain groups, in particular ethnic minorities, as being more "grown up". Adultification bias underpins the experience of many Black teenage girls, leading to unrealistic expectations and lack of support and protection typically afforded to children [21]. Long before adolescence, adultification plays out across different spheres of Black girls' lives: at school [22], in healthcare [23] and in broader society. It is a systemic problem rooted in racism and gender stereotypes.

Adultification bias is often compounded by harmful stereotypes of Black women, projected onto Black girls as young as five. These include the "angry Black woman" (or "Sapphire") caricature [24] which can mean that Black girls who speak up are perceived as aggressive or disrespectful; and the hypersexualised "Jezebel" trope, which can strip Black girls of their childhood innocence [25].

When combined with *misogynoir* (a specific blend of racism and misogyny directed toward Black women and girls) [26], adultification results in harsher punishments in schools [27] higher rates of criminalisation in justice systems [28] and fewer safeguarding protections across public life [29].



Anthony Mckissic

Adultification bias can reshape how Black girls see themselves [30]. When Black girls are punished for being visible, passionate, or expressive, or when they are told, implicitly or explicitly, that they do not need emotional support, they begin to believe they must always be strong, composed and in control. The policing of Black girls' self-expression, the loss of childhood freedom and internalisation of unrealistic expectations [31] also affects self-perceptions as Black girls try to suppress emotion, and "stay small" to avoid judgement. The cost of all this is often silence. Black girls in our research described feeling more responsible and less protected than their White peers, carrying higher emotional burdens. This can be expressed outwardly as resilience, maturity and emotional independence which can be met with less care, less empathy, and less protection.

65% of Black girls say people assume I don't need much emotional support or comfort than I do, and 61% say adults expect me to act more grown up and responsible in ways that feel unfair for my age. While these feelings are shared by other ethnic groups e.g. White British girls (59% and 53%); 13% of Black girls say they don't have an adult they could talk to about their issues or problems, more than double the rate of their White peers (5%) [32].

"[Black girls and women] are usually hyper visible but then yet hyper invisible.... So that's kind of a weird juxtaposition in the sense of like how we are [seen] around in places. But because of the way institutions work, we are usually invisibilized... made invisible because of racism and because of sexism, because we just often go unheard. I think that does seep into sports."
– Expert stakeholder


Jeffrey Lin

What this means for sport: Adults in sporting environments need to be aware of the belief systems that have been instilled in them over time, and how these may lead to often unintended adultification bias, racial and gender stereotyping. All too often Black girls feel they receive less support than their peers and feel misunderstood, unfairly controlled and disciplined, contributing to a negative experience for them in sport. This is all the more keenly felt given the love held for sport itself.

"Even if you don't think you're raising your voice, it's [seen by others as] aggressive... it's just a way that we express ourselves." – *Sasha, 19*

1.5 Ambition for social mobility

The expert stakeholders we worked with reflected on a deep-rooted cultural disconnect between some Black communities and the way sport is often framed in the UK. In Black communities, sport is not often positioned as essential. Instead, it can be seen as a "Western" hobby, a lifestyle choice, an extra associated with having disposable income. Academic attainment, religious commitments, and time with family or community are prioritised. For girls in particular sport can be treated as something optional, short-term, and sometimes even indulgent. In this way, the relatively low value generally placed on girls' participation in sport is amplified for Black girls.

"I must be my ancestors wildest dreams because I do so many different things. A lot of my friends adopted that old way of doing things: 'go to work, go shopping on Saturday, go to church on Sunday and that's it'. I was always really scared to grow up because I thought being an adult was boring... because that's all I ever saw. But when I went to secondary school... all the White children do really fun things... they go on holiday, they go skiing. And I didn't see that. So I just thought it was a White people thing they did, Black people didn't... but it doesn't have to be like that."
– Expert stakeholder

63%

of Black girls say their communities encourage boys more than girls to participate in sport, compared to 55% of White British girls.

Nearly **9 in 10 Black girls** (85%) say their parents expect them to do well academically, significantly more than 66% of White British, 72% of Mixed, and 76% of Asian girls, but similar to 87% of Black boys.

Related to this cultural positioning of sport is a clear and consistent theme of aspiration for social mobility often in the context of economic hardship. In common with other minority ethnic communities, the cultural emphasis on academic success is strong in Black communities. Career ambition is nurtured young and manifests in a strong focus on education. 68% of Black girls feel pressure to succeed in life and help support their family in the future, compared to 57% of White British girls.

The girls in our research aimed to be lawyers, engineers, and doctors from a young age. This results in a careful weighing-up of priorities, with academic goals typically taking precedence over extracurricular activities like sport, especially as girls get older. More than half of Black girls (52%) spend most of their free time studying, significantly more than the 40% of White British girls who say the same. When Black girls are asked what they spend most time doing in a typical week, substantially fewer say they spend that time with friends (32% vs 46% White British girls).

"Taking part in sport just takes a lot of time out of my day... if I focus the exact same amount of time doing something that could further my career it would be more beneficial for me... with sports, I just don't think I'll gain much out of it."
– Crystal, 19

There is support for sport in Black families: 64% of Black girls (and 81% of Black boys) say their family supports them in sport or physical activity. Many of the girls described their mums as key enablers in their early sporting journeys, actively seeking out opportunities, arranging transport, and ensuring they stay engaged.

But parental support often shifts towards education as girls approach GCSEs and beyond. From this point, for girls in particular, sport is often seen as a nice-to-have, not a long-term and financially stable career given so few sportswomen are well paid. In common with other ethnic minorities, over seven in ten Black girls (73% vs 56% of White British girls) say their family values school or academic success more than sport. Even more Black boys (83%) report pressure to prioritise education, reinforcing the broader cultural dynamic at play.

"My mum's one of those people that if I turn around and say... I want to do ballet, she'll go and find the nearest ballet class and talk to the instructor and make sure that I'm getting on well."
– Jayda, 21

"[A friend's] parents didn't really like her playing that much sport. It was all about education, education, education... So that culturally already is putting up a barrier to her playing sport."
– Expert stakeholder

"Black parents would want their child to do extra maths or something other than a club because they think sport isn't going to take you far or it's not going to take you nowhere. You're just doing it for fun."
– Expert stakeholder

What this means for sport: In Black communities social mobility is often paramount and Black girls are under pressure to focus on their academic studies as the clearest path to success in life, especially with so few lucrative career opportunities in female sport. Sport is not viewed as a viable route for social mobility and is often sidelined.

To retain Black girls, sport should be reframed as a contribution towards academic and career success given its contribution to cognitive development, to developing skills in leadership and communication, and to emotional wellbeing and resilience. Sporting cultures should also recognise the wider pressures, including academic achievement, that Black girls are under and offer meaningful respite from this.

1.6 Safety and trust

All girls are aware of the risk of harassment and physical or sexual violence. According to GirlGuiding, 59% of girls aged 13–21 reported experiencing sexual harassment in public, online, or at school; and 47% of girls aged 11–21 now say sexism makes them feel less safe, almost three times higher than a decade ago [33]. Long held fears about girls' and women's safety on the street and after dark have intensified recently.

"Knife crime against women has doubled in five years... the 11–20 age group is most at risk."
– Expert stakeholder

This threat isn't just physical, it's logistical and emotional. Over half of girls and young women now pay a "safety tax": spending money or time to avoid walking along particular routes or using public transport after dark [34]. Nearly two-thirds (62%) take taxis home at least once a month, and 74% say they regularly take longer routes for safety [35]. Carrying keys in their hands, avoiding eye contact, sharing live locations are everyday acts of self-protection, shaped by fear, experience, and survival instinct.

For Black girls, safety concerns are amplified further. Many described the heightened anxieties their parents felt about their whereabouts due to racism, community violence, and feeling like an outsider in certain spaces.

These fears are not unfounded. In Summer 2024, violent riots and far-right extremism dominated headlines, reinforcing the reality that public spaces are not equally safe or welcoming for everyone [36,37].

Trust in the Police is generally low in Black communities so instead of providing reassurance, for Black girls enhanced security and police patrols can make them feel less safe [38], evoking feelings of exclusion and heightened surveillance.

"Were you worried about who was going to pay your subs? Were you worried about whether coach was going to treat you fairly? Was mum and dad going to allow you out because it's safe? Who is, or how are you going to make sure you get back home? There are so many other things... even before the sport itself."
– Expert stakeholder

"As much as I enjoy the sport, sometimes I think to myself... is it worth my mental health going through something like racism?"
– Camille, 17

"We engage with parents because culturally, [Black] girls and parents don't really trust the environments outside our houses... so you have to engage parents and get their trust as well, to let their daughters out and participate and put a system in for constant communication."
– Expert stakeholder

Psychological safety is just as important and often just as fragile. Racism, exclusion, and surveillance compound girls' sense of vulnerability in public, educational, and institutional spaces. There is a persistent threat to the emotional wellbeing of the Black women around them: 75% of women of colour have experienced racism in the workplace, with 27% subjected to racial slurs [39]. As a result of misogynoir, Black women in public life are 84% more likely to receive abusive tweets than their White peers [40], and Black women are four times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than White women [41] Black women in the UK are also more likely to experience gender-based violence and domestic abuse than women from other ethnic groups [35] As a result, Black girls can have a heightened awareness of the suffering of the Black women in their community. For Black girls, the overarching sense is that many spaces, especially predominantly White or unfamiliar ones, aren't truly safe for them.

"[For] the smaller girls, it's very much about parental consent, where they're allowed to go, what after school activities they allow, who's running it. Cultural norms across different religious groups are important and that needs to be recognised." – *Expert stakeholder*

School environments are becoming increasingly fraught spaces too. Recent data shows fewer girls aged 13–14 feel safe in school compared to before the pandemic, with a steeper decline than among boys [42]. Girlguiding found that 67% of girls aged 13–18 have experienced sexual harassment from other students, with Black girls reporting even higher levels [43]. Girls of colour were also more likely to be intimidated in public (18% vs 8% of White girls), and to avoid going out after dark for fear of harassment (68% vs 46% of White girls).

For some families, letting their daughter take part in certain activities, particularly when it is after dark or in unfamiliar, predominantly White environments, requires a risk assessment which is not limited to physical safety, but also trust. That includes whether the adults running an activity will understand their child, whether they might experience racism or exclusion, or whether their daughter will feel she belongs.

"I'm a single parent, so it was a lot for me to finish work to make sure I could pick my daughter up on time to do extracurricular stuff... to be able to know that she's safe."
– Expert stakeholder

What this means for sport: For all girls logistics and fears about journeys, and unfamiliar people and places can be a barrier to participation in sport. There are hidden financial costs of physical safety such as taxi fares and hidden psychological costs such as the stress of unfamiliar settings. For Black girls and their parents these fears are greatly amplified. Safe spaces must be created, logistics thought through and trust built with girls and their families. Girls aren't absent from sport because they're uninterested. But all too often the risks feel too high: the journey and the space are not, or do not feel, safe enough.

Davide Aracri

HER SPORT STORIES

"Sport has historically been a space that was not made for me. I love it, but I always feel like I have to fit into it rather than it fitting into me."

"The sports clubs here are good, but they're too far away and always on school days. By the time I get there, I'd have to come back at 11:00 p.m., and I won't have time to do homework."

"The referee would say to a lot of the Black girls that we were being too aggressive, but we weren't even making any contact. It just felt like discrimination."

"I like having my hair done and my nails, and the sports I have in my school require a lot of movement, and I don't want to have them ruined or break."

"I always wanted to grow up and be Shelly-Ann Fraser-Price... I thought that would be me one day but it just didn't really happen."

"I don't see people like me in sports I might want to do. If I did, I'd feel like I could do it too."

"I used to be very sporty, but recently, because of changes, I feel like I get judged wherever I go."

"Even though I play for a team, I don't always feel part of it."

"I feel like I see more Black girls in athletics or netball, but you don't really see us in things like swimming or gymnastics. It's like there's an expectation of where we belong in sport."

"They [sports clubs] will put Black girls on the website to make it look diverse, but when you get there, it's just not like that at all."

"I feel like this (research) is one of the first things I've seen that actually asks Black girls about how we feel about sport. It makes me happy knowing that people care and are willing to help."

"They [sport] don't understand why some things are harder for us. It's not that we don't want to do it, it's that no one has thought about what we need to do it properly."

2. THE CHALLENGES THAT PUSH BLACK GIRLS OUT OF SPORT

The pressures from their wider lives certainly mean that Black girls, despite their love of sport, face challenges in accessing it, and not just due to economic inequalities. More than three quarters of Black girls (78%) say they want to be more active but over half (51%) feel they don't have the opportunity.

Despite having much more positive attitudes to sport than their peers, just as many Black girls (48%) as other girls (around half) fall out of love with sport in their teens and say they 'used to be sporty'. Nearly twice as many teenage girls as boys say this across all groups (27% of Black boys).

Women in Sport's research has consistently shown that as girls move into adolescence, they encounter a range of pressures related to academic demands, social changes, shifts in confidence and identity, and the physical and emotional effects of puberty [3,44]. These mean that they often drop out of sport, despite having previously enjoyed it. This research found the same pattern among Black girls, who are navigating not only the universal challenges of adolescence, but unique pressures linked to their wider lives and the culture of sport. The reasons behind Black girls dropping out of sport in their teenage years are distinct and amplified.

Context: Structural racism and misogyny in sport

Black girls face deep-rooted and systemic issues when it comes to their participation in sport. Black girls must navigate challenges in sport relating to both their gender and race.

During the 20th Century the association of sport with masculinity became deeply entrenched, as sport became more organised and focused on producing 'real men' [45]. The high value often assigned to sport by men in Britain and the historical White male dominance of the sporting system, lies behind a reluctance by some to include others who they perceive are not 'like them', whether women or people from diverse communities.

The exclusion of women became common at the start of the 21st century, even from sports in which women had previously participated. Although sports have mostly opened their doors to women and girls now, the legacy remains and there is an underlying culture of misogyny (structural sexism) in many sports. Our charity's founder once described sport as "the last bastion of male dominance" [45]. This and deep-rooted gender stereotyping in our society means that girls from all backgrounds face prejudice and bias when it comes to sport. Culture is changing but playing sport is not yet 'the norm' for girls and sexism is rife.

39%
of Black girls say they frequently hear or experience racist comments or stereotypes in sport and physical activity

35%
of Black girls say they frequently hear or experience sexist comments or stereotypes in sport and physical activity

Black girls face all this and an additional layer of discrimination. Racism and racial inequalities persist in various sporting contexts [46,47]. Like misogyny, racism in sport is often subtle and ambient. It may not always be seen or heard to those who aren't directly affected, but it is deeply felt by those who are. Navigating a racialised space is key, and it's in that space where many Black girls describe feeling isolated, judged, or misunderstood, even if no single incident stands out.

Whether through limited access, lack of representation, stereotyping, or bias, the sporting system often expects girls to adapt to it, rather than the other way around. As Black girls adapt to stay in sport, they spend more energy negotiating the space than actually enjoying it. Black girls who do engage in sport face the following challenges, making it harder to stay involved.

"There are some distinct challenges [Black girls face when participating in sport] around body image, perception, feeling stigmatised, around not wanting to stick out in a kind of social setting. So making yourself small rather than inhabiting a space"
– Expert stakeholder

"I've got a 13 year old son and him and his friends, they still go to the park and just play football. There's just not that culture within girls... there's just not that culture [of] let's go and throw a ball, or let's go and skip."
– Expert stakeholder

2.1 The isolation of being the only Black girl

Being the only Black girl leaves her feeling both invisible and hyper-visible

Black girls' engagement in sport is shaped by the barriers that surround them, many of which can be invisible but deeply felt. These show up in who's present, who's missing, and whether the environment signals that she belongs. Many of the girls described arriving at new clubs and not seeing anyone who looks like them, on the pitch, or amongst the coaches or staff. In many sport spaces, Black girls are navigating a delicate, often exhausting balance: how to be themselves without standing out too much. They described often feeling invisible when their needs and identities are overlooked, and hyper-visible when their presence is singled out or scrutinised.

"When you get to [University], there's really not a lot of Black people. If my friends had a game, I would go and support them. So at least they had someone on the sidelines that looked like them because there wasn't many people in the court that did." – *Jayda, 21*

"If I'm playing tennis and I'm around certain people, I feel like I have to act a certain way or speak a certain way to just fit in. I try to not let it affect me too much, but it does make you feel quite alienated." *– Doyin, 23*

"I feel like [for] Black women, our safe space is other Black women. When you're surrounded with people that look like you, act like you, talk like you, you're more likely to enjoy something." – *Jayda, 21*

The paucity of Black female coaches, PE teachers, and media role models reinforces this invisibility. It sends a message about who belongs in sport, not just on the pitch, but on the sidelines, in leadership, and in the media. The daily negotiation of navigating sport spaces where she feels like the only one takes a toll and sport ceases to be a liberating space but another site of surveillance and judgement.

When asked how it feels to be the only person of their race in a sport or physical activity setting:

- **27%** of Black girls say **"like I don't belong"**
- **25%** of Black girls say **"very visible"**
- **28%** of Black girls say **"isolated and lonely"**

In this context of feeling isolated, Black girls often seek spaces and friendship groups with other Black girls, where they can be their full selves without judgement. These friendships are about creativity, community, and the importance of showing up as yourself in a world that rarely reflects or affirms you. Within these spaces, a new set of rules can also form. Often the focus is on beauty standards like eyelashes, nails, and hair which become markers of belonging. The desire to 'belong' is not about vanity, it's about visibility, identity, and solidarity. But there can be negative consequences, particularly when this space extends into social media. While some girls find encouragement and community through online spaces, others feel put down by impossible standards of perceived beauty, femininity, and success. And, of course, sport is not always consistent with beauty ideals or is perceived as 'feminine'. Far from it.

Psychological safety

To feel safe Black girls told us they need to feel seen and be represented, to know there are people around who understand, reflect, and respect them and their identity, not just as a girl, but as a Black girl.

Parents from ethnically diverse communities, can be reluctant to let their children attend sporting events, clubs, or training due to fears of racial bias, name-calling, microaggressions, and emotional harm. This fear for their child's safety directly affects participation [47]. For many Black girls and their families, especially those who are 'the only one' in the room, feeling safe is conditional, not a given.

All girls report feeling unsafe to a degree in sport. 27% of Black girls and the same proportion of White British girls report this, slightly more Asian (30%) and Mixed girls do (31%). Girls from ethnic minorities face an additional layer of discrimination that may contribute to feeling less safe.

Sport needs to be serious about safety and look beyond typical risk assessments. Real safety for Black girls in particular is built through visible representation, single-sex spaces, culturally safe environments, and trusted adult relationships. When she doesn't see herself represented, when her concerns go unheard, or when her identity feels like a liability, safety fades, and when that happens, no amount of passion or talent will be enough to keep a Black girl in sport.

Black girls in sport or physical activity spaces report feeling unsafe due to:

- **26%** say a lack of girls-only spaces/activities
- **25%** say a lack of female staff or coaches
- **23%** say the presence of boys/men
- **21%** say a lack of racial representation

"I didn't [take part in a football programme specifically for Black girls] because it kind of felt like a trap because it was so unusual seeing it... it felt a bit odd because that's exactly what I was looking for, but I turned it down because I've never seen it before."
– Semira, 13

"I'm one of the two Black girls in my lesson. So I sometimes feel more uncomfortable when I'm in a lesson with no black person. So when it comes to sports, [I think] is there going to be someone Black there, too? Because the teacher is White and most people are White too. So I feel like I'm different."
– Destiny, 14

"I feel sometimes you're not listened to... we were playing against a team that kept raising their sticks too high... I got hurt and I kept saying to the referee that it was happening and they were just dismissing it."
– Sanaya, 16

"I wanted to join a ballet club a while ago but a lot of the clubs I saw is literally just a bunch of White females. I want a club that has Black girls, people like me, people my age, so I can be more comfortable and be more myself. But I didn't get to see that. So I didn't go."
– Georgia, 14

Black girls identify with some sports more than others

The activities Black girls identify with reflect the cultural position of sports in our society, and the visibility or otherwise of elite Black athletes within them. Black girls are more likely than other ethnic groups to say that basketball (34% vs. 16% White British), football (27% vs. 17% White British), athletics (31% vs. 24% White British) and tennis (18% vs. 13% White British) are sports for 'people like me'.

"I feel like what can help is seeing more Black females my age being represented online and stuff like that. I feel like it could motivate me because if they can do it, then I can do it."
– Georgia, 14

Sports Black girls identify with

20% or more	Between 10%-20%	10% or less	
Dance	Tennis	Climbing (indoor or outdoor)	Rugby
Basketball	Gymnastics, trampolining or cheerleading	Swimming - for a club	Weightlifting or powerlifting
Athletics	Boxing	Water activities (e.g. diving, water polo)	Snow sports (e.g. skiing, snowboarding)
Football	Volleyball	Cricket	Horseriding
Badminton	Table Tennis	Rounders or baseball	Hockey
Netball	Dodgeball	Cycling (e.g. track, road, cross-country)	Rowing
		Martial Arts	
		CrossFit	

Those sports and activities Black girls least identify with are still culturally read and socially reinforced as White spaces. This can limit how safe, supported, and genuinely welcome she senses she would feel. Where a Black girl steps into White spaces, the emotional cost of being 'the only one' can outweigh the joy of being active.

"I think community and culture have a massive impact... if [Black families] don't see it, they also won't encourage it... so if they don't see young Black girls involved in that sport, they'll say that's not for you. Go to dancing or athletics or one of the ones that are stereotypically 'Black sports'."
– Expert stakeholder

"On my team there's not many girls of colour, like very, very few. Even though it's not intentional, I do just feel sort of separated... it feels like I'm not part of the same group that everyone else is a part of." – *Shawna, 20*

2.2 Hair and aesthetics: when self-expression becomes a barrier

In the Western world, including within sport, afro hair is often labelled 'unruly' or 'unprofessional', or is simply not accommodated [48]. This undermines confidence and signals to Black girls that sport may not be a space for them given Black hair is deeply connected to identity, heritage, and cultural pride.

Cultural practices that help Black girls feel seen, not least haircare, become barriers when misunderstood or dismissed. These are not superficial concerns and must not be trivialised; they're linked to girls' confidence, identity, and belonging. Black girls often invest significant time and money in their appearance not out of vanity, but as a form of self-expression and pride.

Haircare is also a very real practical issue for Black girls in sport. Sweat, chlorine, and heat can all negatively impact Black hair and skin which is more vulnerable to dryness. Black skin is also more prone to post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation which means even minor irritation can leave lasting marks [49]. Girls who use protective styles (such as braids or twists), wear hijabs, or suffer from skin conditions need the right flexibility. When such needs are ignored, Black girls feel unseen and unsupported.

"As a Black girl, hair is very important. I feel like that it does impact people, especially during teenage years, trying to navigate your identity... there's just so much to figure out whilst trying to navigate sports in general."
– Lola, 22

"People love to talk about what a Black girl's hair looks like, and they could be doing bad in the sport or good in the sport, but everyone would brush over that. If her hair's in braids or if her hair's slick back or if it's in a bun, someone will always have something to say about how it looks." – *Semira, 13*

"Even with a swimming cap, water still can seep in sometimes and then you let your hair wear and you get all the chlorine in and you can't get it out."
– Tamara, 13

This is not a niche issue. A Perception Institute study found one in three Black women avoid physical activity due to hair concerns, compared to just one in ten White women [50]. Yet sport environments remain ill-equipped to cater to Black girls' needs, with few inclusive, safe and affordable products, rigid uniform policies, and little understanding of protective styling.

Elite athletes echo these realities. Constant styling, sweat, and friction can lead to lasting damage and distress, as happened for Rugby player Simi Pam whose severe hair loss meant she shaved her head to start over [51]. Track athlete Annie Tagoe and cyclist Llori Sharpe have also shared how haircare issues have affected their routines, confidence, and even sponsorship opportunities. The lack of inclusive helmet designs means that in cycling, some Black women remove helmet padding, sacrificing safety for fit [48,52]. Elite rugby player Reneeqa Bonner often skipped winter training to avoid getting her hair wet or muddy [51].

Anthony Mckissic

Hair will influence when and how a Black girl shows up, which activities they choose, and how confident they feel doing so. In our ethnography and qualitative work hair was raised as an issue frequently by Black girls. In our quantitative survey few Black girls explicitly named hair as a barrier to sport, but this might be because other issues are the primary limiting factors, or that their responsibility for managing their hair is so normalised.

As Simi Pam put it, "Black hair is beautiful but too often, Black girls are made to feel it must be hidden to belong in sport" [51]. The solution isn't asking girls to change. It's building sporting environments that recognise and support their needs and celebrate who they are. Sport can build confidence and freedom—but only if it meets girls where they are. When it doesn't, what empowers her outside of sport can become what pushes her out of it.

"It can be really irritating... getting your braids done knowing when you play sports you're gonna sweat and your hair's gonna get messy and it's just gonna kind of wear out your braids a lot more often. I have to get it done again or I have to figure out when I'm having my natural hair out, how am I going to play, whilst making sure that at least looks somewhat neat and presentable."
– Toni, 17

2.3 Stereotyping and typecasting

Racial stereotyping and adultification play a role in others misreading Black girls' behaviour
Black girls are more likely to be misread than their White peers. Stereotypes and cultural disconnect mean that many adults interfacing with Black girls will perceive confidence as aggression, passion as "attitude", and emotion as immaturity [25]. External evidence shows that Black girls often face harsher discipline in school settings [22], and our research found this is echoed in sport.

Coaches and referees in the U.S. have been found to interpret the behaviour of Black girls through a lens of bias [53,54] labelling them aggressive, too competitive, or difficult, rather than passionate or assertive. Yet adultification bias means that Black girls are expected to be tougher, less emotional, and more resilient than their White peers. Repeated experiences of unfair treatment and being misunderstood are psychologically harmful, can foster understandable resentment, and will shape how Black girls express themselves. Some will learn to shrink, stay quiet, or second-guess their actions to avoid being mis-labelled or mis-judged.

"It can be really challenging playing a sport where you know that people are already going to have, like, a prejudice or... a lack of favouritism towards you simply based on how you look." – *Tamara, 14*

"There's a slight prejudice towards being a Black girl... that you're capable of taking a lot more hardships... there's a really large bias in how female athletes especially women of colour are treated in sports. The referee singling you out because you're too aggressive and too competitive. I realised in sports, the word aggressive is thrown around a lot, especially towards Black women. It can be really insulting because there's this clear difference between being aggressive and being passionate. It ties into the stereotypes we face." – *Toni, 17*

Our findings show that 'so-called' microaggressions such as persistent comments, inaccurate assumptions, and double standards [46] are neither 'micro' nor rare. The girls described being treated more harshly in matches, receiving more yellow cards, being perceived as aggressive for raising complaints, or being expected to 'take it' when fouled. Stakeholders shared that these experiences were especially common when playing sport outside Inner London, where there is often less racial diversity. As one stakeholder described, racism in sport is so normalised that it often goes unaddressed. This aligns with national findings from the Race Review, which reported that ethnically diverse communities often face ignorance, exclusion, and hostility in sporting spaces, compounding their mistrust of providers and making them feel unwelcome [46].

When Black girls feel seen and supported by adults involved in their sport, they're far more likely to stay. Trust can be a protective factor amidst the emotional weight of stereotypes, adultification, and judgement. Without it, even the most passionate Black girls may feel like sport just isn't worth the cost.

32%

of Black girls say they are frequently penalised or get in trouble when they express themselves in sports and physical activity

"It's the microaggressions, right? I did actually say to an umpire once, 'why are you pointing me out?'... he said because you said something before... 'or is it because you only recognise me and not the others who have said multiple things'? You're gonna say something because you're passionate about it, and other people are gonna think you're saying things because that's part of 'your culture'. Lauren James is a very good example of that and the things that she does on the pitch compared to what other people do on the pitch are very similar. She gets the bad, bad press about that."

– Expert stakeholder

Typecasting – assumptions about which sports and which positions

In our research, the girls spoke of frequently being pigeon-holed into so-called 'Black sports', or put in roles or positions based on assumptions that they are naturally fast, strong, or aggressive because they are Black, and regardless of their actual interests or individual abilities. This typecasting, often normalised through the media, shapes how coaches, teachers and teammates treat Black girls [47]. It can discourage exploration and strip joy from sport when girls are not able to define their own path and participate in ways that work for them.

Typecasting of Black people based on assumptions of physicality are deeply ingrained in Western culture and can be difficult to challenge. This is not to say there are not some differences in the physicality of the average Black girl from other girls. For example, there are skeletal differences in average bone mineral density [55] and in skeletal muscle [56]. And although broad assumptions are made about differences in some aspects of physicality other less visible differences are not explored, such as the fact that Black people are three times as likely to suffer from a low foot arch which may require orthotic support [57].

A cultural narrative of Black excellence in sport which celebrates the achievements of Black athletes, can also result in typecasting of Black people [58]. The pressure can start as something positive, but become a 'cage of perfection'. When excellence becomes the baseline, there's no room to just be average, try something new, or fall short without fear of judgement, especially in traditionally White sports.

In the U.S. Simone Biles in gymnastics and the Williams sisters in tennis, 'broke through' against all odds, and while they are fabulous role models this can create unrealistic expectations of Black girls. These assumptions can weigh heavily, turning sport from something joyful, into something performative and pressured [58].

"You still have the pressure and [teachers/coaches are] putting you in positions you don't want to be in just because they think you'd be better at that even if you don't like it... so it's not really enjoyable." – ***Harmony, 15***

"Since I'm Jamaican, people expect me to be a fast runner. It's a really bad stereotype. People expect you to be quite good at athletics if you're Jamaican because of the high rep that it has because of Usain Bolt and other runners. At the end of the day, not everyone is like that." – Katie, 17

"Being a poster girl for Black swimming is exciting, because genuinely I love the sport and I want to see as many people doing it as possible... but it's also terrifying because there's a lot of pressure. I have rationalised it – if not me, then who? And I want this to happen as soon as possible, to break that barrier."
– Alice Dearing, Olympic Marathon swimmer and founder of BSA


David Kissman

50%
of Black girls frequently experience people assuming they will be good at certain sports/activities because of their race

36%
of Black girls frequently experience people making negative assumptions about them or their abilities based on their race

Masculinisation: body scrutiny and racialised beauty standards

Most teenage girls face body image pressures, but these play out differently for Black girls. Success in sport is often related to strength and speed which are seen in Western culture as masculine traits, undesirable for women. All girls in sport therefore face a double bind - how can they excel without compromising their perceived "femininity"? [59] Because of the generally held view that Black people are more muscular than White, Black girls are uniquely affected and particularly scrutinised by strength and athleticism being read as 'masculine' [60]. Although in some cultures strength is seen as desirable and attractive in a woman, Black girls shared hearing negative messages from their family and friendship circles, echoing the societal standards of the UK [47]. Black girls can be described as 'too strong', 'too muscular', or 'too manly'. These stereotypes are formed early and reinforced often [61].

The girls in our research described how these judgements made them feel conflicted: proud of their bodies and what they can do, but conscious of how they're perceived and stereotyped by others. Many adjusted their participation, skipped training, or dropped out to avoid judgement and being labelled. In this way masculinisation can result in shame and self-censorship, and ultimately withdrawal from sport.

"When I was younger, I was swimming and the auntie [a family friend] made a comment of how I was looking a bit bulky. And literally after that, I just kind of dropped it and I never really went back to it because I think as any woman, there's a big pressure to look a certain way and to be viewed a certain way... the idea of [looking bulky] would make me feel uncomfortable. So, it's actually a big part that stops me from, not necessarily just like exercising, but going more heavily into a sport."
– Chioma, 22

"[Masculinisation] was another reason I potentially didn't push myself [in sports]... I never wanted to be viewed as a muscly girl because in my head that's more of a masculine trait... especially as a young teenager, when your body's already growing and changing and you're adjusting to the fact you have hips now and you have boobs. I just didn't want to be the girl that also had muscles." – *Jayda, 21*

"Being a Black dancer, you weren't exactly praised in the highest light. We were too muscular; we needed to stretch more; our abs shouldn't be showing that much; our hair was obviously a lot thicker. So I was told, I wasn't going to make it in this industry made for other people." – *Expert stakeholder*

These judgements are reinforced by the media. Despite record viewership in recent years, women as a whole are massively underrepresented in the sports media, with 8% of all coverage being of women's sport [62]. Until recently the only two sports which gave Black women media visibility in the UK were tennis and athletics. When the Williams sisters started to dominate the world of tennis the media focused as much on how they looked as how they performed [63]. This means that on the rare occasions Black girls see elite athletes who look like them, instead of being celebrated for their skill, strength, or resilience, Black female athletes are often described as too aggressive, too muscular, or not "feminine enough" [52,64].

These descriptions draw on harmful stereotypes, like the "angry Black woman" or "strong Black woman," which downplay talent and paint Black athletes as less emotional or relatable [65].

Black girls rarely see sportswomen who look like them portrayed positively in the media. Although in the UK there are some very positive role models in athletes such as Denise Lewis, Dina-Asher Smith, Alice Dearing and Simi Pam, the media's willingness to typecast athletes like Lioness Lauren James as an 'angry Black girl' and the racist abuse she has received, continues to undermine Black girls' sense of belonging in sport.

"I've seen comments made towards Serena Williams or other [Black] influencers, but I've also seen White women with very similar body structures or figures, and the comments are not as offensive."
– Indiyah, 21

2.4 To do sport you must do it seriously

In contrast to boys, because playing sport is not yet normalised for girls, the sport that is available tends to be more structured, high-pressure, and performance focused. Black girls are not put off by competition: 68% of Black girls say they enjoy competitive sport. But the unique pressures of their wider lives means Black girls may feel a greater need for flexibility, freedom and joy when they engage in it. When training feels rigid and intense, and sports and activities lose their sense of camaraderie and social value, it is especially disappointing, becoming another source of pressure.

Despite the high value placed on sport, only 40% of Black girls say they enjoy sport and physical activity, a figure far lower than Black boys (66%) [2]. The number of Black girls who *always* feel free and joyful when being active declines with age: from 39% at ages 13–18 to 25% at 19–24. Yet enjoyment is a core motivator for Black girls: 60% say fun motivates them to be active, significantly more than White British (45%), White Other (41%) and Asian girls (36%).

"When everyone's taking the rules very seriously it becomes a bit uncomfortable if you just want to do it for fun... it loses the fun aspect and becomes almost more stressful."
– Chioma, 22

"I want [sport] to be something that you can lean back on... to be something that I can always go back to and enjoy every time I go back."
– Selina, 13

For Black girls, creating space for joy, expression, freedom and community is deeply important. To retain Black girls, sport must intentionally protect and nurture factors that make it enjoyable, especially as girls transition into adulthood. Joy in activity is not guaranteed, but it should be.

85%
of Black girls say sport and physical activity is important for having fun and feeling happy and carefree

Structure itself isn't always a barrier, in fact much in line with other girls 26% of Black girls value the routine and stability sport brings. But when that structure feels inflexible or disconnected from the realities of their wider lives, it stops being supportive and starts to feel like strain. Black girls often juggle greater home responsibilities and spend more time studying, so it is harder to embed a fixed routine in their life in the way their brothers might. Black boys are more than twice as likely as Black girls to take part in organised sports most of the week (25% vs 11%). In our survey, the most common forms of physical activity participation for Black girls are gym sessions (39%) and at-home workouts (48%), which offer flexibility and autonomy, reflecting what they need at a key time of competing priorities in their lives.

When sport feels like an "all or nothing" commitment, it turns away many Black girls who love sport and are looking for its joy. To engage Black girls better sport needs to stay flexible and enjoyable while offering suitable performance pathways for those that want to follow these.

"When I was younger, [sport and physical exercise] was kind of fun because it was less competitive... then as I got older, I got a bit tired of it because it was just all the sweat and people take it so serious... to me, it's just never that deep."
– Kay, 17

"Now that I'm doing my GCSEs, I have a lot more homework to do... I also want to maintain athletics and the things I want to pursue later on in life and it's just like really hard [to balance everything]."
– Georgia, 14

2.5 Lack of policy intervention and local provision

Girls as a whole tend to internalise their mental health challenges, whereas boys are more likely to externalise their problems [66,67]. The experts we worked with described how sport is frequently used as a policy intervention to support Black boys and steer them away from crime, but its value to Black girls can be overlooked. Girls may be assumed to be more resilient, and their behaviour is less likely to be putting others at risk, so their participation is seen as "nice to have". In reality, ignoring girls' needs for physical activity is contributing to an unprecedented mental health crisis among young women and teenage girls [68].

Stakeholders pointed to the lack of girl-specific provision, particularly for older teenagers and some poor design and delivery. Those programmes that exist often depend on short-term project funding so may run for a few months to a year, spark interest, start to build trust, give girls a brief glimpse of possibility but then the plug is pulled and there is nothing to fall back on. This stop-start cycle of grant funding is particularly disheartening for girls who are already surrounded by limiting factors.

Another key structural barrier is the lack of genuinely local provision. Reaching regional clubs can be near impossible for those in financial hardship given barriers around transport, safety and the need for adult supervision. Girls as a whole, and Black girls in particular, are disproportionately affected by these issues.

"I feel like a lot more people are trying to do things [programmes geared towards Black girls] asking, what would be better for us? But I feel they do these but they don't carry on."
– Harmony, 15

3. THE CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCE FOR BLACK GIRLS IN SPORT

The strapline for our charity is "because Women and Girls belong". Belonging is central to engaging and retaining anyone in sport. Black girls are significantly more likely than girls from other groups to say the following are important for their sense of belonging in sport:

- Being treated fairly and equally as everyone else there (83%)
- Feeling accepted for who I am (81%)
- Taking part with other people of my gender (75%)
- Having time to get to know others taking part (75%)
- Not being the only person from their cultural background there (74%)

These factors speak clearly to all the challenges they face. But Black girls' love for sport and the value they place in it, means that despite all these challenges 65% say they feel they belong in sport and physical activity spaces, more than White British (53%) and Asian girls (54%), though still significantly less than Black boys (75%).

So why are Black girls the least active of all ethnic groups? The challenges Black girls face in their wider lives and in the sporting environment come together to weigh them down and squeeze them out. Many Black girls can't find or access local opportunities. Too often when a Black girl engages in sport anticipating joy and release from day-to-day pressures at home and school, she finds an inflexible, serious environment set against a backdrop, however subtle, of misogyny and racism.

Every time she walks through the door she has to compromise or sacrifice a part of herself. For many Black girls, sport starts to feel like a space of excessive effort, compromise, and uncertainty that they must navigate which is emotionally and socially taxing.

No single challenge will normally push a girl out - it's the cumulative impact of these challenges, without the right support, that erodes their trust, reduces their experience and eventually drives them out. If Black girls are to have a fair chance in sport, the system must recognise the layered reality of Black girls' lives and focus on providing the right support, removing the risks of disengagement at every level.

For many Black girls their continued engagement is a testament to their resilience and determination to claim space, even when it hasn't been designed for them. However, belonging should not depend on how much effort a girl makes to fit in. It should come from the system meeting her where she is — representing her, trusting her, and supporting her without condition.

Sport has the potential to be a powerful, uniting force, a place of belonging and celebration of difference. But that requires systemic change and a mindset shift. The system must evolve to meet the needs of all girls, understanding the unique needs of different groups. Sport cannot continue to expect Black girls to be grateful for simply being present, or to adapt to spaces that were never built for them.

"We are not going to just change because you want us to change... by doing what you want, you're kind of lowering us to the way you want us to be... you need to find a way to change... so I don't have to change myself."
– Sasha, 19

"You should feel privileged whenever a Black girl walks up and knocks on your door because they are trusting you with their future, despite everything that has come before." – *Expert stakeholder*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Top Tips for Engaging and Retaining Black Girls in your Sport

In contrast to some other teenage girls, many Black girls start with a very positive attitude to sport so it is all the more unforgivable that we are losing them from sport and physical activity. More Black girls love sport and dream of reaching the top than any other group and yet Black girls are the least active of all girls.

Sport needs to change if it is to support Black girls to live their dreams in sport.

Black girls are not a homogenous group, with many varied Black African and Caribbean cultures and backgrounds. Some Black girls' experiences are shared with other girls (particularly from other ethnic minority groups) or Black boys. In our research we focused on the experiences many Black girls had in common.

Currently, at a time of crisis in the mental health of girls and young women, we are depriving some of our most disadvantaged girls of great joy and taking away something that makes their lives better. We are also missing out on a huge pool of talent in our sporting ecosystem.

As an outcome of this research we are calling for sports personnel, sports media and beyond (not putting pressure on the Black women within the system) to take the time to reflect on the issues raised in this report, recognise their seriousness, and grow their self-awareness of misogyny and structural racism. We must focus on educating people in the system and change the narrative.

These recommendations should be read in conjunction with our resources on teenage girls.

Read our recommendations >

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Sports Leaders

Proposals for senior leaders and non-executive directors

We urge leaders to own their part in closing this dream-reality gap for Black girls, to share these findings with Board members and senior leaders, recognise their seriousness and reflect on how to address the issues raised. This culture change will not happen unless it is led from the front.

1. Show leadership and commit to change

- **Celebrate the strong love Black girls have for sport** and commit to your sport's part in making Black girls' sporting dreams come true.
- **Acknowledge this inequality and inspire your people to understand and respect** Black girls' unique needs, have uncomfortable conversations, and seek help from expert partners to close the dream-reality gap.
- **Recognise the lost opportunity** this presents, both for the Black girls and for your sport.

2. Make your sport proactively anti-misogynoir

- **Educate your paid and volunteer workforce to be self-aware** about gender and racial stereotyping and typecasting, recognising we all carry prejudice.
- **Embed and enforce anti-racism and anti-misogyny policies** finding creative ways to ensure they really make a difference on the ground, while being aware of the risk of backlash and safeguarding against this.
- **Collect and use ethnicity and gender data on participation, progression and workforce** to inform investment, such as through gender budgeting.

3. Make sure Black women are represented at all levels

- **Value the Black women already in your sport** and work with them to help change the culture to attract and retain more Black women and girls.
- **Improve Black representation across your sport** (field to boardroom) using flexible recruitment approaches that builds trust and values lived experience.
- **Be proactive in seeking to retain Black women in your sport** making sure to give support, develop trust and have open conversations about their challenges.

4. Review your provision and talent pathways with Black girls in mind

- **Offer exciting recreational opportunities** in your sport which are sustained and valued for the sheer joy they bring.
- **Develop more flexible talent pathways** which have more tailored support, are less rigid, and not based on a single performance pathway.
- **Develop multi-year community initiatives** designed around Black girls' needs, working with trusted community groups and local schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Sport Providers, Coaches and Volunteers

Top practical tips for engaging and retaining Black girls

Coaches and volunteers should be helped to recognise the reality of Black girls' wider lives and understand their need for joy through sport, and their need for psychological as well as physical safety. Use this knowledge practically:

Make sure to:

- **Make sport free and joyful.** Allow room for spontaneity, autonomy and for co-design as Black girls are seeking joy and freedom through sport.
- **Let Black girls express themselves fully** for example through their spoken and body language, their vivacity, the way they wear their hair.
- **Build trust** with Black girls and their families, trust being the foundation, not a by-product, of participation. Go to where girls are.
- **Be flexible** with your activities and policies. For example by subsidising or waiving fees, flexing attendance rules by trying drop-ins or varying kit options.
- **Make your sport feel safe**, with girls-only or multi-generation female sessions, safe or free travel options, sensible session times, accessible and safe venues.

And don't:

- **Don't box Black girls in** by enforcing limiting gender stereotypes of how girls should behave: quiet, compliant and focused on the needs of others.
- **Don't typecast Black girls**, whether as fast, or angry or loud.
- **Don't treat Black girls as older than they are** and place unfair burdens on them.

Throughout this:

- **Value Black girls for who they are** as well as what they can do.
- **Be proactive, don't be passive.** If a Black girl is disengaging, be clear you'd like her to stay, ask her what you can do to support her and seek advice if you're unsure as to how.
- **Look for ways to build camaraderie** for the girls off the field as well as on it.
- **Avoid making assumptions.** Have honest conversations with Black women and girls about their experiences and needs. Listen without judgement.

Because Girls Belong in Sport, and Black Girls Belong in Sport

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- Football Association
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