

# GOOD SPORTS: WHY SPORTS NEED TO ENGAGE FEMALE VOLUNTEERS



## BACKGROUND

Many people across the UK choose to volunteer their time to a range of causes and activities; and sport comes high on the list. Not only does volunteering in sport provide an enriching experience for the volunteer, it is also the lifeblood of grassroots sport in the UK. Many sports clubs and groups simply would not exist without the dedication and commitment of local people giving up their time. With this in mind, Women in Sport wanted to learn more about the numbers and experiences of female volunteers in sport.

Between 2014 and 2015, over **14.2 million people volunteered in the UK**, with those volunteering regularly contributing over 11 hours per month<sup>1</sup>. NCVO data published in 2016 shows that 41% of men and 43% of women volunteered formally\* at a group, club or organisation (including but not exclusively limited to sports) in the previous twelve months; a figure which has been relatively stable over the last eight years<sup>3</sup>.

**Sports organisations and groups attract the most volunteers** with 54% of those who have formally volunteered at least once in the last 12 months, doing so in sport and exercise<sup>4</sup>. However, **whilst women make up the majority of volunteers across all volunteering activities in society, they are less likely to volunteer in sport than men**. Data from 2015 indicate that **men are more than twice as likely to volunteer in sport (30%) than women (14%)**<sup>5</sup>.

\*Formal volunteering, in this context, means giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment rather than volunteering informally giving unpaid help to individual people who are not relatives<sup>2</sup>.

Sport volunteering attracts a less diverse population generally, with volunteers more likely to be male, white and from a higher socioeconomic background<sup>6</sup>.



With funding from **Sport England**, Women in Sport commissioned **Leeds Beckett University** to undertake exploratory research to find out more about the experiences of women as sports volunteers, with a view to understanding, and ultimately correcting, the gender imbalance. There is a growing body of research into sports volunteering generally, but we know very little about female volunteers specifically. Our research seeks to fill the gaps and increase understanding of why women volunteer in sport and to compare how women experience volunteering both within and outside of sport.

<sup>1</sup> NCVO (2016) UK Civil Society Almanac.

<sup>2</sup> Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007) Helping Out. A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving. Cabinet Office

<sup>3</sup> NCVO (2016) UK Civil Society Almanac.

<sup>4</sup> NCVO (2016) UK Civil Society Almanac

<sup>5</sup> DCMS (2015) Taking Part 2014/15 Quarter 4 Statistical Release.

<sup>6</sup> Sport England (2016) Towards an Active Nation. Strategy 2016-2021.

## METHODOLOGY

We reviewed existing research before speaking to 54 volunteers between December 2016 and January 2017. This included both men and women, to find out about their motivations and aspirations as volunteers, as well as the benefits and challenges they face.

We aimed to speak to as wide a range of volunteers as possible, but were only able to speak to six volunteers from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, the rest being white British. This lack of diversity creates limitations to the analysis of the research – but is also indicative of the general lack of diversity of the volunteering population in sport. It is important to acknowledge that the experiences of women will vary depending on their background and characteristics, including ethnicity. Volunteers in this study came from a range of geographical locations and reflected different patterns of volunteering. These locations were; the Midlands, Yorkshire, London and the South East.

### Volunteers were involved in:

**Sports clubs (sometimes referred to as the Core Market):** tennis, boxing, rugby, netball, cycling and some disability sports.

**Mass Market sports:** parkrun.

**Non-sport groups:** youth organisations, charity shops, mentoring organisations and women's groups.

# KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

## GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND STEREOTYPING

*“How dare they say that women can’t do this. I think that definitely made me a lot more determined to get involved and do things.”*



Courtesy of parkrun

- Gender stereotyping occurs across a range of organisations. Within core market sports organisations, men are more likely than women to be coaches and to undertake decision making roles such as Chair of the board. Women are more likely to undertake ‘support’ roles, often ‘behind the scenes’ such as catering or supporting children. This reflects patterns in volunteering more generally, where men are twice as likely as women to take on public facing roles, such as representing others<sup>7</sup>.
- Lack of confidence to undertake leadership roles, such as the Run Director role at parkrun, is cited by women.

- Gender discrimination based on unequal and discriminatory expectations of women appear to be at their strongest within core sports, particularly those associated with male participation such as boxing and rugby.
- There are less visible volunteering role models for women in sport than in non-sport organisations. Women attempting to exist and progress within sport, report feeling isolated, disconnected and less valued as volunteers than men.
- Female sport coaches report experiencing challenges in their volunteer roles. As coaches, demands and expectations are high, but women perceive their value to be low. They often feel that they have to negotiate their right to be in their role and prove their leadership and coaching abilities more than men do.



## MOTIVATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERING

*“It is the friendship thing as well. It is the getting to know more people and setting something up that is so welcoming to everybody.”*

- Intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, value is the main hook for women to start and continue volunteering. Men are motivated by their interest in sport, ‘perks’ associated with volunteering and the opportunity to support their community. Women report that they volunteer for reasons relating to personal or career development, the opportunity to develop social networks and to support their children.
- Mass Market volunteer events in particular offer opportunities to make and reaffirm social connections, which women told us they valued.
- There is greater alignment between organisational and personal values for women in Mass Market events than in Core Market sport settings.

<sup>7</sup> Low, N., Butt, S., Ellis Paine, A. and Davis Smith, J. (2007). Helping Out: A National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving. London: Cabinet Office.

# KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

## FLEXIBLE AND INCLUSIVE VOLUNTEERING

*'This works on a Saturday... because it's only an hour and then if I want to go off and do something with the children I can do, or go shopping and that'.*

- Women value flexible volunteering that can fit around their lives. Mass Market volunteering offers the most flexibility, enabling women to combine their volunteer role with work and family life.
- Volunteer roles in Core Market sports clubs are least flexible with volunteers reporting feeling more pressure, due to the greater diversity of role demands and expectations. Some volunteers said they were asked to take on extra responsibilities because of poor organisational procedures, as well as governance and management demands and constraints.
- Family can act as both an enabling factor and as a barrier to women's involvement in sport volunteering. Having children who play sport often provides a 'route in' to volunteering for both men and women, but having children also presents challenges in how women manage competing priorities. Coaching roles are seen as being inflexible and present challenges to women with children who may not be able to meet the demands of these roles.
- Mass Market events are seen to be more welcoming of children, allowing women to bring them along when they volunteer. Women who leave their children at home, feel able to take the time away from their family due to the relatively short time commitment required at these type of events.
- Women report that supportive partners are hugely important to enable them to volunteer. Across core sport volunteering and Mass Market events, women often volunteered alongside their partners and other family members.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ORGANISATIONS SHOULD CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING WHEN RECRUITING AND MANAGING FEMALE VOLUNTEERS:

### Improve your internal practices

- 1** Audit your volunteer roles to see how much they reflect traditional gender stereotypes and make changes where necessary.
- 2** Find out the motivations and needs of the female volunteers and how these differ from men; then provide training for staff and volunteers to meet these needs.
- 3** Ensure procedures for challenging gender discrimination and stereotyping are clear within your organisation and that volunteers have access to these procedures.
- 4** Make volunteering a social experience, which matters most to women.

### Improve your external communications

- 5** Introduce changes to make volunteering roles 'family friendly' such as; opportunities for parents to volunteer and spend time with their children simultaneously. When promoting opportunities use positive images of women with their families.
- 6** Avoid gender stereotypes in your communications, showcase both men and women across all volunteer roles.

### Improve flexibility

- 7** Look at new ways of working, including; changing meeting times to suit people with families, sharing roles and consider shorter term volunteer roles to support parents.

### Encourage progression

- 8** Encourage women to apply for roles with more responsibility. Women are more likely to take the next move if asked to do so, while men tend to be more proactive in putting themselves forward.

## GET IN TOUCH

[womeninsport.org](http://womeninsport.org)

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