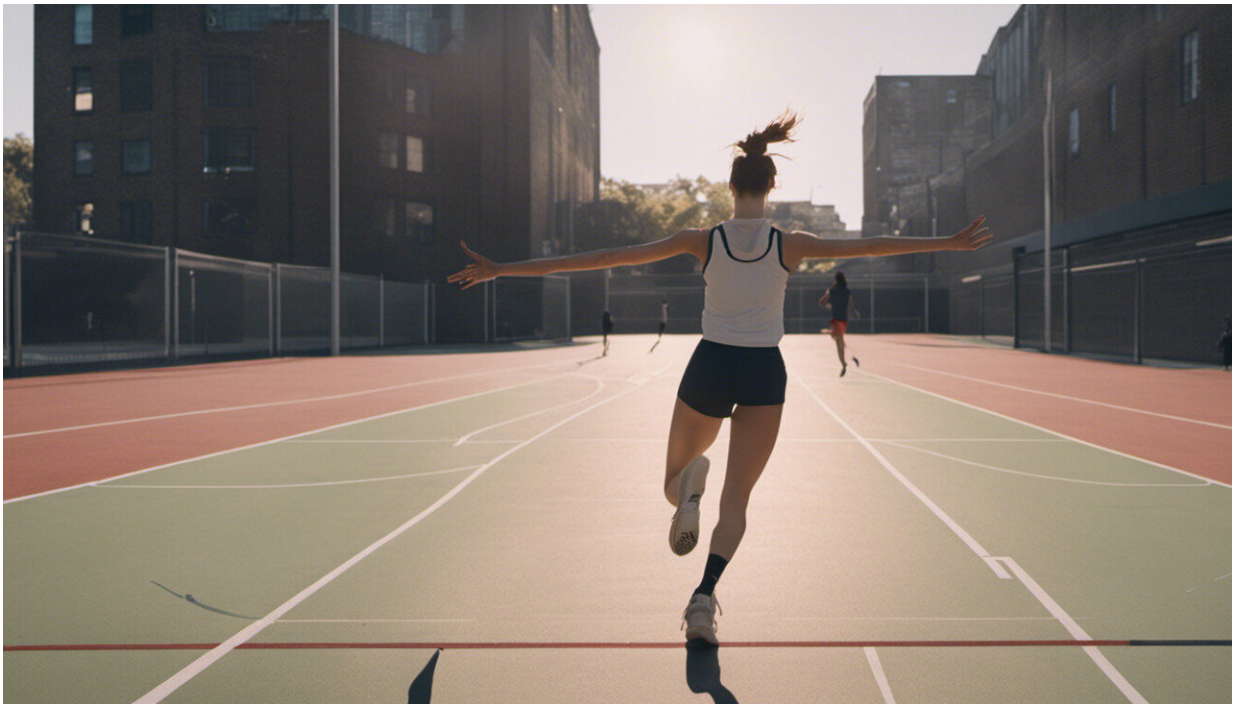


# Girls are being denied access to certain sports in PE simply because of their gender

November 9 2018, by Hannah L Spacey

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Girls in the UK are often told that they can do whatever they want. That nothing can stop them. If they can dream it, they can achieve it. And yet, when it comes to accessing and becoming proficient in sports and activities in PE lessons, they are being stopped before they can even begin.

Recently, a teenage girl from Cwmbran, south Wales, has [spoken of how](#) she has been called a "lesbian" for playing the "boy's sport" of football. 13-year-old Darcie has also been told by PE teachers at her [school](#) that she cannot play the game, and that hockey and netball are recommended for [girls](#) instead.

Darcie and her classmates are not the only ones facing this restriction. It is [a regular occurrence](#). During the course of my own research, with 13-15 year old girls who were not at that time attending PE, I was repeatedly told the same story. The girls wanted to take part in the same activities as their male classmates but their teachers said they couldn't because they were "male sports" or "because they are girls" or "because it's not on their timetable".

Most of the girls didn't want to take part in the "female" activities offered, which included netball, hockey, dance, swimming and circuits. They instead wanted alternatives such as obstacle courses, rugby, football and basketball. But even when these sports were allowed, they were restricted. In one case where a school offered rugby for girls, it was tag rugby instead of the contact rugby made available to boys.

So why are girls and young women stopped from playing the sports and activities that their male counterparts take part in during PE lessons? Well, because they are female, of course.

## **PE: the perfect environment**

Physical activity is good for [health and well-being](#) and many countries have [well-trodden initiatives](#) for promoting physical [activity](#) and sport to try to improve health. But it is [repeatedly reported](#) that females are less engaged with sports and [physical activity](#) compared to males – and there is plenty of work being done by researchers and public health initiatives to try and [increase participation](#).



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

But, despite these efforts, [girls and women report](#) a wide range of gendered, socio-cultural barriers that stop them taking part in certain activities. These range from [self-consciousness and worries about ability](#) to [restrictive cultural beliefs and safety concerns](#).

Schools are an important place for fostering the [healthy development of children](#) – sensible considering they spend more than 30 hours there each week. It is in school that we hope our children develop into healthy, active members of society – but it's also where [social norms](#) are laid bare and reinforced. Schools can play a crucial role in destroying or maintaining the [norms that serve to naturalise](#) gender inequality, sexism, sexual harassment and bullying.

As girls face extended barriers in their quest to become and stay physically active, it should seem reasonable to assume that PE lessons would prioritise offering children multiple opportunities to try lots of different activities. Especially as PE is an environment where lack of time, instruction, equipment and transport is not an issue. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

## **Harmless or oppressive?**

Bad experiences in PE are a shared phenomenon which [unites women and girls across generations](#). An overwhelming number share the same stories of being made to feel uncomfortable, of being the last person picked for teams, of not being allowed to try the same activities as boys, of being bullied and teased, of being made to feel lesser, of being made to feel like there's no point in trying.

It may be easier and more palatable to view this as a procedural oversight in the classroom – but look deeper and you'll see that this is part of a larger, [cultural phenomenon that disadvantages females](#). Like Darcie, many girls all over the country are limited in their [opportunities for physical movement](#) and improving their health by [negative female stereotypes and sexist commentary](#).

Gender norms are not limited to schools, they follow girls in their quest to play [sports in the community](#) too, with many receiving negative social attention for playing "male" [sports](#) and others being teased, bullied and harassed while being physically active outdoors.

The role of schools as both gatekeepers to physical opportunities and as promoters of oppressive gender norms [can't be ignored](#). To move toward change, schools and teachers need to critically analyse what they are reinforcing, what type of environment they are creating and what lessons children are learning about what [girls](#) and boys are permitted to do.

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