

# Many girls quit sports due to clothing concerns, shows new study

April 6 2023

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New research, showing gendered school sports uniforms play a "major role" in high dropout rates of teenage girls in sport, has already broken boundaries to help remove rigid policies. This means that skirts no

longer need to be worn in women's English domestic hockey matches.

Published today in *Sport, Education and Society*, the study, which looked at a range of women across the UK aged 18 and over, found 70% reported incidents of girls dropping [sports](#) at school due to [clothing](#) and related body image concerns.

The research was led by England Hockey star Tess Howard, whose strike secured the country's first-ever Commonwealth Games gold medal, in a 2-1 win against Australia, last summer.

The 24-year-old's study was carried out while she was studying human geography at Durham University. Her early promotion of her dissertation paper within hockey (known as field hockey in the U.S.) circles has already led to new inclusive playing kit (outfit) regulations being launched at the start of England Hockey's domestic league 2022/23.

Now Howard—a forward for East Grinstead Hockey Club—is balancing her playing career with becoming a sports activist. She is on a mission to change the face of hockey internationally, enabling choice for athletes to wear shorts or skorts. Long-term, she aims to tackle the issue of gendered uniform across all sports.

"It's all about choice; choice is being rigorously inclusive," states Tess, who also stars for Great Britain but missed out on the Tokyo 2020 Olympics due to an anterior cruciate ligament injury.

"My dream is to go to the Olympics, but my dream is also an Olympics with the option to wear shorts or skorts. That is a powerful statement of inclusion, belonging and evolution in women's sport. No person should be put off participating in any sport based purely on what the uniform requires them to wear. We must put the purpose of sport first and enable

individuals to enjoy being active for all the clear benefits.

"If people want to wear shorts or leggings, playing basketball or tennis or gymnastics, it does not matter. The findings I discovered, in terms of the number of girls this is putting off sport, is truly alarming. It's the most underrated cause of low female sport numbers."

Howard, who is now studying for a master's at the London School of Economics, adds, "The legacy of gendered and sexualized uniforms is historic, dating back to Victorian times when women and girls in sport had to find ways to emphasize their femininity to be accepted in a masculine world—whether through playing tennis, cricket and hockey in long skirts or sexualization of beach volleyball and gymnastics uniforms. The legacy still exists.

"My research shows it taints a view of women's sport from a very young age, and it puts focus on what girls' bodies look like, rather than what they can do on the sports field or in the gym. Women's sport is on the rise—we are so proud of our successful female sporting teams; but think of all the girls we have lost to kit problems. It's not a girl issue, it's systemic in society and it's a simple fix: choice."

Historic data shows the gender play gap starts at age 5. By age 14, only 10% of girls meet physical activity health standards.

The question Howard wanted to investigate—outside of society norms, social media and class—was "What are the main barriers?"

Her hypothesis was school sports uniforms impact female sporting experiences and participation in physical activity. She wanted to uncover, too, how a uniform policy could be changed to promote greater female sports participation.

To uncover more, she carried out an extensive analytical online survey, promoted through [social media](#), which 404 women across the UK completed. This was followed up by eight interviews with a selection of those who had most recently left school.

The findings demonstrate participation and enjoyment of sports was severely impacted by uniform. In total, three-quarters of survey respondents replied "often," many" and "sometimes," when asked if participants ever saw girls stop playing sports because of sports kit or body image concerns.

The results of the paper also showed:

- Many women felt sexualized by what they are being forced to wear in sports, contributing to the internalization of the unattainable 'feminine body ideal.'
- Gendered uniforms "influence the development of a fear of 'masculinization' and 'butch/lesbian' perceptions in sport, and signal the ways uniform can contribute to harmful athletic-feminine identity tensions in teenage girls."
- Gender-split uniforms create behavioral gender role stereotypes, and "undoing cis-normative clothing practices could foster a more inclusive space for all," especially gender diverse students.
- Creating choice is also about supporting physical sporting performance.

Quotes taken from respondents of the study further highlight the issue.

"My friends with larger breasts tended to stop playing sports due to the style of our tops," said one respondent.

Another said, "From Year 7-9, girls in my PE classes felt uncomfortable in the fit of some kit and their self-confidence decreased in kit if they

perceived to not have the 'ideal female body.'"

Further, another respondent explained, "I felt watched when playing sports with boys and felt uncomfortable wearing clothes that showed off my figure."

Following early results of the study, Howard was able to use her influence within the sport to make a positive change, but she is determined to not stop there.

She is now launching Inclusive Sportswear CIC, a community-interest company specializing in the development of rigorously inclusive sportswear policies and guidance for schools, clubs, sports organizations and brands. Inclusive Sportswear CIC, and its partnerships with Youth Sport Trust and Sporting Equals, will be launched on 3 May at the Include Summit in Manchester, the UK's No.1 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Summit For Sport.

Howard explains, "I continually ask myself: If not now, when? If not us, who? That is what drives me. The momentum has been building; now we must connect sports clothing to inclusion and participation in sport. But it's so much more than that: This connects to a greater global movement for individual choice over how we clothe and treat our bodies."

**More information:** Practical, Professional or Patriarchal? An investigation into the socio-cultural impacts of gendered school sports uniform and the role uniform plays in shaping female experiences of school sport., *Sport Education and Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2023.2189232](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2023.2189232)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Many girls quit sports due to clothing concerns, shows new study (2023, April 6)  
retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-04-girls-sports-due.html>

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