



Insight driving innovation and impact

Asian Girls Insight Research



August 2021

Contents

1 – Introduction	3
1.1 Rationale	3
1.2 Context.....	3
1.3 Research Aims.....	3
1.4 Research Approach	4
2 – Key Findings.....	5
3 – Context: what do Asian Girls like?	5
3.1 Hobbies and interests	5
3.2 Attitudes towards football, sport and physical activity	5
4 – Influencers: what are the key areas of influence on Asian Girls’ lives and choices?	6
4.1 Family influence	6
4.2 Society influence	7
4.3 School influence.....	8
5 – Engagement: what are the factors that engage or disengage Asian Girls in sport, physical activity and football?	8
5.1 Safety and access.....	8
5.2 Creating the right environment.....	9
5.3 Enjoyment and fun with friends	10
5.4 Periods.....	11
5.5 Clothing.....	11
6 – Conclusions.....	12
7 – Recommendations	13
8 – References & Further Reading.....	14

1 – Introduction

1.1 Rationale

As reported in Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic year 2019/20, it is widely understood that girls are some of the least active members of society. Within this population further differences can be seen between girls of different ethnicities, ages and abilities. Sport England's 'Active Lives 2019/20' data shows that Asian girls are less likely to meet the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) guidance of participating in 60 minutes of activity a day, compared to White British girls (36.4% vs 45.4%). The percentage of Asian girls participating in less than an average of 30 minutes of physical activity a day is 11.2 percentage points higher than White British girls (39.3% vs 28.1%).

Not only can this difference be seen for young Asian girls, it can also be seen for staff teaching PE, sport and physical activity. A sample of over 1,500 PE staff showed that they are equally represented in terms of gender (49% male and 49% female) but not in terms of ethnicity, as 95% of PE staff are white (Sport England, 2021). This highlights that although there are an equal number of female staff, there are very few Asian female PE staff, potentially meaning Asian girls do not have sporting Asian women to look up to as role models during their education. Further to this, there is a lack of Asian sporting role models and a misrepresentation of British Asians in the media (Kilvington, 2012).

Therefore, this data highlights the need to understand Asian girls needs and lives, if we are to provide better and more accessible opportunities to this group. The following insight-led research attempted to address this gap in knowledge focusing on secondary aged Asian girls.

1.2 Context

There is currently a lack of Asian girls accessing both participation and leadership opportunities through football. This research formed part of the work funded by The Football Association to provide a better understanding of the specific demographic of Asian girls. It was an insight piece of work, using a sample of the target population.

It should be noted that due to the diverse target population, the key themes that have emerged may not be relevant to each individual Asian girl but should be used as a general guide.

1.3 Research Aims

- To better understand Asian girls' perceptions and attitudes towards football and leadership in football.
- To understand why or why not this target group participate in football or leadership in football.
- To understand the barriers to participation for this group of girls.

1.4 Research Approach

- A co-creation session was held with a select group of Youth Sport Trust Youth Board members. Together, the group developed the structure and discussion guide for the sessions. Key elements that were influenced by the group were that;
 - The facilitators were carefully selected as being young, female and where possible from an Asian background.
 - The sessions happened during an informal session in the school day, mostly at lunchtime, to replicate the coming together eating and sharing, and schools were provided with a budget to provide food for the girls attending
 - The session would be simple and focused around 6 core questions.
- 11 focus groups (friendship triads) were held to explore girls' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about football, PE and sport. These were conducted online via Zoom. A total of 39 girls were involved.

Demographics

- A total of 8 schools were recruited for the research. This included four schools based in London and four schools based in the North of England (Sheffield and Leeds)
- A total of 39 Asian female participants
- There was a mixture of girls engaged with and not engaged with sport, football and physical activity.
- Years 8 to 10 (ages 12-15)

2 – Key Findings

The focus groups helped to identify a deeper understanding of what Asian Girls are interested in as well as their attitudes towards sport, physical activity and football. Open and safe discussions resulted in some key influencers over girls' lives to emerge, notably that of their family, society and school. Discussions were also held over what would motivate themselves, or their peers to participate and what the key barriers they experience are. A big motivator for girls to participate was having fun with their friends. Key enablers include having the right environment and being able to access it safely. Girls talked about barriers, including a fear of judgement, being on their period or clothing requirements.

3 – Context: what do Asian Girls like?

3.1 Hobbies and interests

Schools were asked to recruit a mixture of girls for the focus groups, including those who engage with and those who did not engage with sport, physical activity or football. As a result, the girls spoken to had a range of hobbies and interests.

Some girls were involved with sport inside and outside of school, including boxing, basketball, football, swimming and dodgeball. This included doing formal sports clubs and being active informally, for example a *'kick a ball around having fun'* or *'football at the weekend with my family in the park'*.

For some of the girls, much of their spare time was spent with their family, whether this was playing with siblings, doing chores or watching TV. Some girls also mentioned spending time with friends, but this was less prioritised than family.

3.2 Attitudes towards football, sport and physical activity

Girls were generally positive about being active and understood the benefits, for example *'it takes my mind off other things going on'* and *'I feel better about myself when doing sport.'* On a whole, girls were more likely to be involved with informal activity, such as going to the park than formal sports clubs, although some were involved with sports clubs in the community.

Those that were particularly positive about being active often referred to their parents as also being active. This correlation is in line with other research where young people are more likely to be active if their parents and families are¹.

Although girls generally had a positive attitude towards being active, they acknowledged that sport and physical activity was not necessarily a priority over school work or study. For example, a couple of girls mentioned that they used to play football outside of school but stopped playing to make sure they had enough time for other priorities such as preparing for their GCSE exams (this is explored further in section 4.1).

¹ https://www.sportengland.org/campaigns-and-our-work/children-and-young-people?section=working_with_families

'You concentrate on making friends at secondary school and your work so no time to do sport.'

'Good job academically this is what is important, and sport is a second hobby option'

4 – Influencers: what are the key areas of influence on Asian Girls' lives and choices?

4.1 Family influence

The influence of the family was an overarching theme that emerged from the focus groups.

There was a mix of girls from those who felt they had supportive parents, encouraging them to play sport and be active, to those who felt that they experienced barriers to participation as a direct result of their families.

Many girls mentioned the pressure from families to focus on their academic subjects and do well at school to support them to get a respected career. Sometimes sports clubs also were described as clashing with activities that their families would expect them to prioritise such as revision classes or family time at the weekend.

Culture was a theme that emerged within this, with some girls feeling that their community and culture was a barrier to them participating in sport or physical activity. It was felt that this was meant well, with parents wanting the best for their children, *'they dream big for their kids'*. There is also a worry of being judged by others around them, not only by their direct family but grandparents or other families in their community. Girls noted that some parents believe girls should be helping in the house, as this is how they themselves were raised.

Some sports are encouraged from families more than others. In particular it was noted that sports where girls are able to cover their bodies for religious reasons, would be encouraged by parents.

'some sports my parents agree with but other family members don't so I shouldn't be involved with it'

'In the Asian community it is very frowned upon for girls to be going out past certain times.'

'in Asian families it is expected that girls should get a proper job to give them the best future possible to create happiness. They want the best for their kids that their parents have maybe struggled to achieve.'

Some girls expressed the belief that boys in their families are treated differently to them as girls, for lots of different areas of their life but for sport in particular. This was especially the case with playing football, where some of the negative stereotypes around girls' football may influence decisions, with some girls feeling that families believe they cannot be seen as being masculine. Boys were often encouraged to

play sport as it was seen as something that boys do. Despite their families' views, all girls spoken to felt that girls should be able to play football if they wanted to.

'have to honour the family name and so some girls don't play because they can't be seen as masculine and football is seen as a 'boys sport'.

'boys in the Asian community have more freedom and rights than the girls do.'

The girls that do play football talked about how they had managed to normalise girls playing football with their families. These girls talked how they hoped to help other girls in their family and community to see that they could also play football in the future.

An interesting theme that emerged from several focus groups was the role of educating their parents. This in part was likely to have been stimulated by Manisha's video. Girls felt that there was an opportunity to expose their parents more to sport and the benefits that it can have. It was also identified that this could be a role that is played by teachers or school as the girls felt that parents may be more likely to see them as a reputable source. Furthermore, girls suggested that themselves and their families were unaware of the leadership and career opportunities available in football. Bringing their awareness to these 'proper' jobs would potentially help them be seen as viable career options that they wish to pursue.

'show the parents how many people are doing it. tell them about how it isn't just the boys.'

'In particular Asian family's mindset is that sport is not really a thing for girls and will not offer a proper job. We didn't know there were Doctors and Lawyers in the Football world.'

It is important to note that there were varied experiences shared across the focus groups and that every Asian family is different, with some girls not supported by their families to play sport but others who are actively encouraged.

4.2 Society influence

Girls still felt that a main barrier to girls playing football was the wider societies belief that football is a sport for boys.

The girls felt that women's football is not advertised in mainstream media, such as television, as much as men's football. Some girls recognised this difference as gender inequality and felt it needed to change so there could be more female role models, to encourage and inspire more girls to participate in football. Additionally, as well as a lack of female role models some girls highlighted there is an underrepresentation of Asian females in sport, with the same type of people being seen in sport most of the time. When shown Manisha's video, they highlighted that Manisha was a good role model and she was only one of very few they knew in sport.

'There is an underrepresentation in sport in general, not just football.'

Girls had also experienced discrimination from boys, who suggested girls should not play football and prevented them from joining in their football games. It was noted that when boys behaved like this the girls felt angry and wanted to stand up against these wrong attitudes. This feeling of judgement is uncovered further in section 5.2.

4.3 School influence

Girls highlighted the important role PE plays in encouraging and supporting girls to participate in football. Ensuring PE is open and inclusive, as well as promoting the positive work girls are achieving in PE, is something girls felt would improve participation. Additionally, girls felt that within school, they should be given as many opportunities as the boys to be involved in sport whether that be as a coach or participant, as currently they do not feel they get equal opportunities.

‘Teachers should let girls and boys play football and encourage girls to give it a go even if they’re not sure. It should be equal.’

Girls also suggested that parents should be made more aware of the types of sporting opportunities available. If girls only sporting opportunities were advertised to parents, they would be more comfortable with their daughters participating as they could see they would be taking part in sport in girls only spaces.

As indicated in an earlier theme, boys’ behaviours and attitudes towards girls participating in football are often negative. Therefore, girls suggested boys should be educated on girls’ football and why they are just as capable at playing football too.

5 – Engagement: what are the factors that engage or disengage Asian Girls in sport, physical activity and football?

5.1 Safety and access

Asian girls’ safety can often be a barrier to them participating in sport, with some girls highlighting that in the winter after school clubs can finish in the dark and so parents worry about them getting home safely.

Furthermore, if they go home later than the standard finishing time, there are not as many other young people in the vicinity and parents feel this is not as safe. Therefore, girls are less likely to access after school clubs unless a parent is able to pick them up, which can be difficult if they have other responsibilities such as work or childcare.

‘My parents struggle to pick me up after school due to picking up other siblings and they worry about crime in local area, with walking home on my own later when it is dark.’

In addition to safety, some girls felt either them or their friends could not access football as they were concerned about the judgement from other people. When

these opinions come from boys, it can make girls feel insecure and if boys do not let the girls join in when playing football, then it can stop them from wanting to play.

“Some people say girls can’t do football. If there is a team of boys and one girl playing, they will sometimes cut the girl out and don’t pass to the girl and say you can’t play. This stops them from wanting to play.”

5.2 Creating the right environment

Girls were asked what environment they would feel most comfortable playing football in, which included a discussion on different components such as who would lead the session and who would participate in the session. The following section, *creating the right environment*, reveals the girls’ thoughts on these different aspects and what the ideal football session would look like to them.

Understanding, and listening to the needs of Asian girls was highlighted by the girls as the one of the most important aspects.

Safe Space

One of those needs is ensuring the space used is private so boys cannot watch them participating in sport. A lot of the girls felt judged by boys, as they laugh if girls make a mistake and tell girls that boys are more skilled at sport than them. Therefore, having a girls-only private space would allow girls to feel comfortable and be themselves which encourages them to participate in sport.

‘It’s awkward to play football in school, would prefer to play in the park.’

Despite the majority of girls highlighting the importance of a girls-only space, some of the girls felt it was important for them to play mixed sports, in order to educate the boys that girls are just as skilled as them.

Female Coach

To add to this, some felt that having a female coach was important as again this would ensure the space was female-only. Ideally, girls would like the coach to be a teacher, as they felt like some students do not take the session seriously if it was led by their peers and their male peers sometimes make comments about the girls’ participation in sport.

Supportive Environment

The girls highlighted the importance of creating a supportive environment that would allow other girls to ‘come out of their shell’ and find enjoyment in football.

Creating a supportive environment in a girls-only space was also important to the girls because they felt either themselves or their peers can lack confidence in sports. Often when people watch them participate in physical activity girls fear getting something wrong, failing or losing as they believe they will be judged for it, similar to why they do not like participating in front of boys. The girls explained that to them, being judged by others meant what others think of them and how those opinions can lead into bullying or rumors which can make them feel negatively about themselves.

This fear of judgement was noted by many girls and so could be regarded as a main theme of the focus groups.

'Boys play football in school and girls don't. I think it's because they don't want to be judged by other people.'

Increased Opportunities

It was highlighted it is important to give girls opportunities to play sports so they can put themselves in the position where they can realise their talents as *"most girls don't even realise how good they are"*. Furthermore, encouragement to participate in sport would allow girls to get to know each other better and improve their skills together.

The right environment for PE

In regards to PE and other sports clubs, girls suggested they would like to be given a variety of sports that they could choose to participate in, including ones that they have not tried before as well as activities that they already enjoy. There were mixed opinions on where they would like sports activities to take place, with some suggesting outside, some inside and others not having a preference. However, all suggested that the space needed to be private, again highlighting the need for girls to feel comfortable and not judged by others when participating in sport.

Participating in sport with those of the same ability, was another factor highlighted by the girls in the focus groups. It could be suggested that this factor relates to their feelings of being judged by others, as if they are in a group with those of the same ability, others are less likely to judge them if they do something wrong or do not perform in a certain way. This was indicated by one girl who stated that being in similar ability groups makes them feel safer. Another girl suggested that this environment allows the girls to learn from one another too.

5.3 Enjoyment and fun with friends

A main driver to encourage girls to play sport, be active and play football was the opportunity to have fun and be with their friends.

Firstly, girls acknowledged that they needed to enjoy the sport they were doing. A few girls openly said that they were active and participated in sports, but just felt that football was not their type of sport. Making the activity fun was a key motivator for encouraging participation.

'Liking the sport I do is important. I don't want to do sport that it is not right for me.'

Girls acknowledged that they would be much more likely to participate if they were with people they know and liked and playing with people they did not know was perceived a barrier. Girls are more likely to feel comfortable and have a more enjoyable experience with their friends.

'doing it with friends encourages you to take part and do your best'

Peer influence emerged as a key theme. One girl described how she encouraged her friends to come along to the football club, which they did for her, but then ended up enjoying it and wanting to join. Similarly, a few girls described that when their

friends stopped playing, they were then more likely to stop playing. A drop off from primary to secondary was identified, with interests and priorities changing as they get older.

5.4 Periods

Although often a taboo subject, some of the girls spoke about how periods affect their participation in sport openly and honestly. Feeling uncomfortable and suffering from stomach aches were some of the experiences shared by the girls, that they felt stopped them participating in sport. Similar findings, on how periods prevent girls from participating in sport, have been found in other research too (e.g. Girls Active). Some girls felt being on their period was not a barrier to them but recognised it may be for their peers, who often refused to participate in PE due to their period.

5.5 Clothing

Clothing was another emerging theme from the focus groups. This theme was really important to the girls for three reasons: personal, religious and cultural.

Some girls highlighted that as part of their religion they have to cover their body and therefore have to wear jogging bottoms and/or long sleeve tops to play sports. Similarly, one cultural impact identified by the girls was that some sports require more revealing clothing to be worn, such as swimming costumes or leotards, and some families do not view this as appropriate and worry it will bring shame to the family. If these are the outfits needed in these sports, it could potentially be a barrier to participation for some Asian girls.

Another finding captured under 'religion' was that some girls find headscarves a barrier because it may make some people view them differently in the team and cause them to be judged for their beliefs. Additionally, they may be one of the only girls on the team wearing a headscarf, which the girls felt would cause embarrassment and cause people to stare at them.

The personal reasons wearing certain clothing is important, that were identified by the girls, again relates to their fear of being judged. Many suggested they did not want to wear shorts and instead cover their legs when playing sport as they felt people would judge them, as they may have hair or scars. Wearing baggy, comfortable clothing was preferred by most girls but it was highlighted it was important to be given different options to choose from. As well as being given kit options in school, girls suggested it was just as important to have these options outside of school, as only having the option to wear shorts and a t-shirt at football club was a barrier to some girls participating in extra-curricular football.

6 – Conclusions

This piece of insight research aimed to better understand Asian girls perceptions and attitudes towards physical activity, sport and football. Generally it was found that girls' have positive attitudes towards being active and understand the benefits it can have. These attitudes were heavily influenced by the families beliefs and attitudes towards being active. In addition, sport and physical activity, although understood to be valuable was not necessarily seen as a priority.

As seen for other young people, Asian girls participate in physical activity, sport and football because they enjoy it and it provides them with an opportunity to have fun with their family or friends. The family influence emerged more strongly for this target group.

The research also aimed to understand what the barriers were for participation for this group of girls.

Gender was the first barrier most frequently identified by girls, before their background or culture. This was especially the case for football. However, delving deeper into this as part of the discussion identified key aspects that were likely to influence the gender. For example, the perception and role of girls in Asian culture, clothing and periods.

Many of the themes identified relate to the fear of being judged, which we know from other research (e.g. Women in Sport, Girls Active) is one of the main barriers girls have to participating in sport. This fear of being judged also had religious and cultural elements, as some girls felt worried they may be judged by their families for participating in certain sports and being seen to be acting in 'like a boy'.

Overall these findings provide a picture of how sports organisations can better address Asian girl's needs, thus improving their access to physical activity.

7 – Recommendations

From the insight gathered as part of this research, the following recommendations have been developed.

1. Raise awareness of the importance of physical activity on health and wellbeing to Asian girls and their parents.
2. Deliver teacher-led education sessions to boys who play football to address negative attitudes towards girls who play football.
3. Raise Asian girls' and families' awareness of the leadership and career opportunities that exist in football (and sport), both on and off the pitch.
4. Create case studies of Asian women who are current sport and football industry role models, to raise Asian girls' and their families' awareness of successful sporting role models.
5. Ensure teachers create a safe space to build confidence levels in both curriculum and extra-curriculum football. By engaging all girls in conversations about what matters to them including what they wear to be active.

8 – References & Further Reading

References

Kilvington, D. (2012) The “Asian Frame”, Football and the Sport Media, *Networking Knowledge*, 5 (1). Available from:
<file:///C:/Users/jessica.johnson/Downloads/admin,+Journal+manager,+kilvington.pdf>.

Sport England (2021) Sport England Secondary Teacher Training Programme, Inclusion and Inequalities – Staff. Available from: YST R&I Team

Sport England (2021) Active Lives 19/20. Available from: <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2021-01/Active%20Lives%20Children%20Survey%20Academic%20Year%2019-20%20report.pdf?VersionId=4Ti_0V0m9sYy5HwQjSiJN7Xj.VInpjV6>.

Further Reading

Ratna, A. (2013) Intersectional Plays of Identity: The Experiences of British Asian Female Footballers, *Sociological Research Online*, 18 (1), Available from:
<<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.5153/sro.2824>>.

Sporting Equals (2018) Research Report Into South Asian Women and Inactivity. Available from: <
file:///C:/Users/jessica.johnson/Downloads/South_Asian_Women_and_Inactivity_Executive_Summary_Report_Dec_2018.pdf>.

South Asian Heritage Month (2021) [South Asian Women in Sport: Where Are They?](#)

BBC (2021) [British Asian Women Tackle the Taboo of Football](#)

This research was part of the wider Barclays Girls’ Football School Partnerships network by England Football. For more information please see <https://girlsfootballinschools.org/>

YST RESEARCH

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. YST Research offers research, analysis, insight and evaluation services to organisations with an interest in the wider children and young people's sector. Our research expertise is focussed on improving the wellbeing of children and young people through sport and physical activity.

Our specialisms include:

- Education, PE and school sport
- Community sport / clubs
- Early years settings
- Life skills and employability
- Activism and volunteering
- Health (physical, social and emotional)

For our latest research findings, visit

<https://www.youthsporttrust.org/news-insight/research>

By working with us, you are supporting us to achieve our mission to improve children's lives and their future.



Youth Sport Trust
SportPark
Loughborough University
3 Oakwood Drive
Loughborough
Leicestershire
LE11 3QF

01509 226600
research@youthsporttrust.org
www.youthsporttrust.org



Registered Charity Number 1086915
Registered Company Number 4180163