

Make Space for Girls

the research background 2023



Susannah Walker & Imogen Clark

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***“Why would I go to the park?
there’s nothing there for me.”*** Lily, 14

When we produced our first summary of the research on girls in parks in 2020, we opened it with Lily’s comment, which summed up the problem very concisely. Facilities provided in parks ‘for teenagers’ are almost universally dominated by teenage boys. Teenage girls have nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Three years later, Lily would still find that there are few parks and public spaces designed with her in mind – although this is changing. But there are two bits of good news. One is that awareness of the issue is considerably higher and with this comes an increasing demand for better provision for girls.

The other is that research is being done in the UK: on what the barriers are which prevent girls going to parks, on what they would like to have provided for them, and on the health and other benefits of making parks more inclusive and accessible for them.

Along with this we have more examples of what good practice might look like. Some are small, some large, but they all show the way forward in creating public spaces which are no longer designed for the default male teenager alone.

One thing that hasn’t changed is the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty. These place a duty on all public bodies not just to consider equality in their decision making but also to proactively consider how they can advance equality of opportunity. It’s clear that many parks and public spaces aren’t doing this right now, but the law means that the current situation can’t be ignored.

All of this is positive. Let’s hope that by the time we have written the next research report, some places have changed and welcome teenage girls as well.

What's the problem?

Make Space for Girls exists to campaign for parks and public spaces which are designed with teenage girls in mind.

Currently provision for young people consists almost entirely of facilities such as skate parks, MUGA (aka fenced pitches) and BMX tracks. These are seen as meeting the needs of all young people when in fact they are places dominated by boys. Girls feel that parks are unsafe, and offer nothing for them, yet these issues are seldom acknowledged, never mind addressed. But girls have a right to play and to be provided with facilities which respond to their needs as well as those of teenage boys, and which can be used in a much more equitable fashion.

There are obviously many other issues at stake here as well. Race and national heritage, religion, culture, relative deprivation and disability all affect girls' access to public spaces. It's also true that many boys are also not interested in the facilities which are on offer or don't feel they can access them. Furthermore, improving parks, in particular lighting and toilets, could have benefits for many other groups too, such as older people, women and other marginalised genders, and the disabled.

And the basic discrimination still remains. Britain has at least 1,600 skate parks and countless MUGAs but – as far as we know – not one outdoor facility used predominantly by girls or designed with them in mind. This is a clear inequality, and this is what we are campaigning to redress.

Parks

Small children tend to use parks equally. Parents and carers are enforcers of fairness and no one group dominates. The problems start when children get older and start to go to parks on their own.

Once this happens, parks are used much more by boys than girls¹, and girls use them with less confidence.² At the moment there is very little research from the UK about how parks are used, but work has been done elsewhere. Recent work in Belgium found that boys were more than twice as likely to play outside than girls³, while a Swedish architectural firm's research in 2015 showed that from the age of 8, the imbalance between boys and girls was 80/20 in parks, and that teenage girls felt ten times more insecure in public spaces.⁴ American research also shows that while all teens use parks less the older they get, the drop off is much more pronounced in girls⁵.

This doesn't happen by accident. It has been shown that boys tend to dominate the space in existing teen play areas, and that this is often done by deliberately excluding girls.⁶ Probably as a result of this, girls are less active when there are groups of boys present⁷.

“What is stopping me from having fun is the boys, I think they take too much space for sport, activities etc.”

Girls themselves are aware of the issue – 72% of older girls think that boys use outdoor spaces the most⁸. Girls will often avoid using spaces when boys are present, only going to some spaces at times of day when they know they will be empty.⁹ Their use of space is determined and regulated by the presence of boys¹⁰.

Another study found that the single biggest barrier stopping teenage girls exercising was boys taunting and shaming the girls, and the boys, when interviewed, confirmed this.¹¹ The researchers suggest that public playgrounds need to provide several smaller areas to prevent girls becoming marginalised in big open spaces.¹²

Other work shows that girls are much more likely to use well-kept play areas which supply the kind of experiences they want, and they are more likely to linger in this kind of play area.¹³

This is perhaps the key to why older girls don't use parks. There's nothing there for them¹⁴. Where we create facilities for teenagers in the public realm, these appeal to a minority of boys and give that minority space for the sports and activities which they are interested in. These facilities consist, almost entirely, of three main types: skate parks, BMX and pump tracks and multi-use games areas, or MUGAs.

1 This is found by many studies including Baran et al., 2013.

2 Cohen et al, 2021.

3 Kind und Samleving, Girls and Public Space, 2020.

4 White Arkitekter. LFA: Flickrum – Places for girls. 2018

5 Baran et al., 2013.

6 'We cannot use girls. Girls do girl things and girls are stupid'. Karsten, 2003.

7 Akpınar 2020; Cohen et al, 2021

8 Girl Guiding Research Briefing 2020.

9 Tucker and Matthews, 2001.

10 Lloyd, Burden, and Kiewa 2008.

11 Maihan Vu et al., 2006.

12 Reimers et al, 2018.

13 Karsten, 2003.

14 Yorkshire Sport 2022 – 68% of girls think there is nothing for them to do in parks; space and equipment tends to be for boys.
Girlguiding 2019 – 35% of girls between 11 and 21 said that they didn't go outside because there was nothing for them to do.

Skate Parks

Gender issues have been studied most fully in skate parks.

Academic research is consistently clear that skate parks are highly male places.

Skateboarding has long been recognized as reflecting and reproducing patriarchal norms with skateparks often criticized as only serving young men.¹⁵

...we came to realise that none of us had ever witnessed more than one woman in any group of skaters in our work in the USA; we certainly had never seen a group of women skating in urban spaces. From our near daily experience of watching young men use urban spaces such as streets, curbs and public parks to skateboard, we had taken it for granted that men occupied these spaces and marked (i.e. 'grinded' or 'carved') them as their own¹⁶.

In Britain, Skateboard GB estimates that 85% of skateboarders are male, even after female skateboarding had grown by 24%¹⁷. In Australia, 95% of those who attended a skate park were male, and those females which did were either spectators or parents¹⁸. Not one of them brought a skateboard¹⁹. Even in a relatively egalitarian society like Sweden, skateboarding is seen as 'coded male'²⁰.

As a result, skateparks often become 'exclusionary', working to keep out women and girls²¹. Work in York reported that 90% of girls who liked skateboarding didn't feel comfortable in the skate park, while 68% of girls who responded to our own online survey said that some boys made them feel they shouldn't be in the skate park. And it's not only the physical space which excludes girls and young women, the virtual space is sexist and exclusionary as well²². Skateboarding overall is not welcoming to girls.

“Take the skate park out, I hate it. It's scary to walk past, you get shouted at by boys.”

This active discrimination, and the way that skateparks tend to attract large group of boys, means that they not only deter girls from skateboarding, they can also make the whole space feel hostile to girls. This was demonstrated by US research, which proved that parks overall were beneficial to teenage girls – the closer they lived to one, the more active they were likely to be. However if that park was a skatepark, this actually lowered the amount of exercise taken²³. Other research has also found that skateparks make some boys less likely to visit a park²⁴.

15 Carr, 2017

16 Atencio et al., 2009

17 Data from Cognosis which Skateboard GB shared with us in early 2021.

18 Bradley 2010 "None of the females was riding a skateboard; most were spectators; ten were parenting."

19 Bradley, 2010.

20 Backström, 2013

21 Barker et al, 2022

22 McCarthy, 2021

23 Cohen et al, 2006.

24 Veitch et al 2016

Researchers concluded that ‘investments in skate parks favour young men and boys’²⁵, and the statistics in the UK suggest that even these are a minority, with just 8.8% of all teenagers participating²⁶.

MUGAs

MUGAs, or fenced pitches or cages are the facility most frequently provided for older children and teenagers. But no one knows how many there are in the UK, never mind how they are used, or by whom.

In the absence of any other data, we counted the users of one MUGA, in a park in a market town and found that of 60 users, only 5 were girls²⁷.

This fits with the common perception, which is that these fenced pitches are predominantly used by boys²⁸, and are ‘places for young men to engage in active and exuberant forms of play’²⁹. Studies elsewhere have shown that hard surfaced play areas generally are more used by boys than girls,³⁰ and that where one is provided, it seemed to deter girls, who played more actively in playgrounds which did not have such an area.³¹

Girls report that boys territorialise the MUGAs in the same way as the skateparks, and in research in Yorkshire described them as male-dominated and exclusionary³².

“The [Multi-Use Games Area] is mostly boys that are there. If you go up, they’ll just start shouting at you.”

A big reason for this is the way they are designed. The high fencing, combined with narrow entrances make them feel intrinsically unsafe for teenage girls wary of being trapped³³. When this space also contains a group of teenage boys, girls are not keen to enter the space at all. As a result, MUGAs tend to be perceived as male spaces, unavailable to teenage girls.

It’s worth noting that MUGAs are not particularly appealing for many teenage boys either. A survey in Yorkshire found that boys, when asked what facilities would encourage them to be active in the park, ranked MUGAs seventh out of eleven options with swings, gym equipment and trampolines all ranking higher.³⁴

25 Cohen et al, 2021

26 Statistics from Skateboard GB compared with ONS population figures.

27 We surveyed use of the park for 8 hours over a weekend in late March 2022. We also got to watch as a group of teenagers defended what they saw as their territory against a group of dads and younger children who wanted a game of football.

28 GLA, 2020; City of Vienna, 2013.

29 Billingham, 2020.

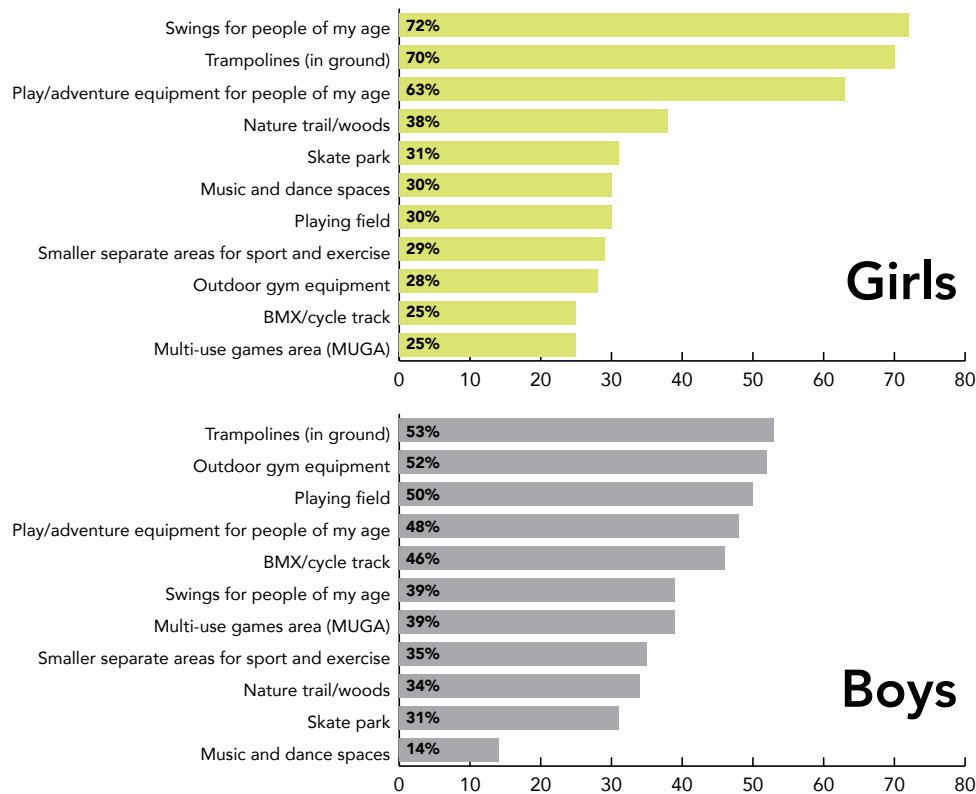
30 Riemers and Knapp, 2017; In America, where fenced courts are more likely to be used for basketball, these areas are heavily dominated by boys. Oliveira Alberico, C, 2021

31 Riemers and Knapp, 2017.

32 Barker et al, 2022

33 Barker et al, 2022

34 Yorkshire Sport, 2022



Yorkshire Sport asked 456 teenagers what would help them be more active in a park

BMX / pump tracks

There seems to have been no research undertaken into how BMX and pump tracks function or who their main users are. However anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that they operate in very similar ways to a skate park, with boys dominating the space, and girls and younger children only using it when they know the older boys will be absent. Similar sports like mountain biking also tend to be male dominated³⁵.

Parkour

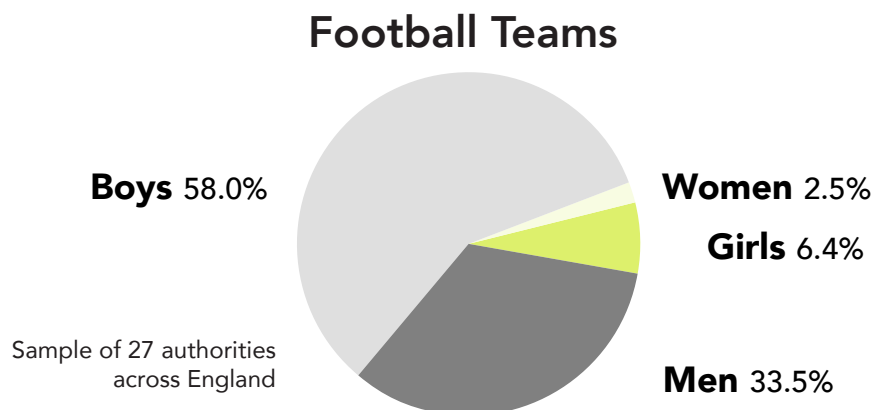
Some providers are now suggesting parkour as a more inclusive form of teenage provision in comparison with skate or wheeled sports parks. However, research in the US suggests that this is also a very male dominated sport³⁶ and so further UK based data would be needed before anyone can conclude that Parkour will be an effective tool to increase the inclusion of teenage girls in parks.

35 Lewis, 2020.

36 Popejoy, 2017.

Pitches

Another significant part of provision in parks and public spaces are pitches. Although used by all ages, there are more youth teams than adult teams, and they are also spaces dominated by men and boys. Our research suggests that there are at least eight times as many organised boys' teams as there are for girls³⁷.



Proportion of male and female teams from sample of 27 local authorities.

Research also suggests that boys are likely to exclude girls from informal kickabouts³⁸ and work in Belgium found that sports fields were 92% used by boys³⁹.

“If you do football or something, they might say a comment about how football’s for boys and stuff like that and you can’t play it”.

All these factors combine to produce a landscape in parks and other public spaces which at best has nothing to offer teenage girls, and which in some places can feel off-puttingly male. This is understood by teenage girls. In one survey, 59% of teenage girls said they didn't feel welcome in parks because the spaces were dominated by boys⁴⁰ while in another girls agreed that one reason they did not use parks and their facilities was because outdoor spaces were more aligned with boys' interests⁴¹.

37 Data aggregated from a number of Playing Pitch Strategies.

38 Mayeza, 2017. Clark and Paechter, 2007.

39 Helleman 2021.

40 Yorkshire Sport, 2022

41 Girl Guiding 2020

Sport vs Play

What's also notable is that almost all facilities provided for teenagers provide opportunities for sport rather than play. This in itself is a problem because research shows that four times as many boys as girls play organised sports in parks (29% compared with 7%).⁴²

But the absence of opportunities for play is itself a problem. All teenagers need to play as part of their development, and when they are asked what they want to find in parks "play and adventure equipment for people my age" is often high up the list for both sexes⁴³. One project in Wales asked teenage girls what would make them become more active and a leading answer to provide teenage girls with the kind of activities they want, which were 'fun, sociable and not competitive sport'.⁴⁴ A similar project in Oxfordshire found that while only a limited number of girls were interested in organised sport, there was an evident desire for activity through play⁴⁵.

Part of the problem is that teenage play is social and quite free, and so looks unproductive to adults.

As children get older, this incidental outdoor activity [...] becomes less bumptious, physically and entails more loitering with others, sizing people up, flirting, talking, pushing, shoving and horseplay. Adolescents are always being criticized for this kind of loitering, but they can hardly grow up without it.⁴⁶

As a result there is a tendency to categorise this as anti-social behaviour rather than play, but under the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child, teenagers have a right to play up to the age of 18 and public spaces and strategies need to facilitate this.

42 Yorkshire Sport, 2022

43 Yorkshire Sport, 2022.

44 Todd et al, 2018.

45 Moore, et al., forthcoming.

46 Jacobs, 1961.

Why this matters

Belonging in the Public Realm

This situation creates a fundamental inequality. Girls are designed out of public spaces like parks at a crucial stage in their development, when they should be increasing their autonomy and developing an independent life. But these spaces tell them that they, unlike the boys, are not welcome and should be at home. Yet the ability to use public space is a basic right.

“I feel like everything’s really tailored for boys, and that you need things really for girls.”

Parks and public spaces are also crucial in establishing a sense of belonging and community⁴⁷. The less women and girls use them, the less they are involved in public life, and the more insecure this makes them feel.

The absence of girls’ voices in the planning process for all public spaces also affects their sense of worth⁴⁸. It’s notable that when girls are consulted, the experience itself often seems to be as valuable as the outcome⁴⁹.

Health

The lack of park facilities for girls, and the barriers excluding them from current provision do not just raise issues about equality and public space. It also has an impact on their health - something which already concerns public health authorities.

From age 10, activity levels drop significantly in girls, until by 13-15, only 8% of girls are meeting activity guidelines⁵⁰ and sedentary time increases⁵¹. By age 16, the pattern of exercise in adult years has usually been set, so this decline has lifetime impact⁵². This results in significant costs for the health services as well as the individuals concerned. A study in Gothenberg concluded that if 18% of the city’s sports budget was ring-fenced to encourage girls to do more sport, the reduction in osteoporosis and fractures in later life would more than repay the investment⁵³.

But the connection is rarely made between girls’ lower activity levels and their lack of opportunities to be active outside. Twice as many boys as girls enjoy doing sport and exercise in parks⁵⁴. Girls themselves are aware of the situation, and don’t like it. Girlguiding surveyed 76,000 of their

47 Vargas, D., and Merino, M., 2012.

48 Plan 2020

49 Arup, 2022

50 Women in Sport, 2018; Corder et al., 2016.

51 Scientists are increasingly concerned that it is not just low activity levels which are a problem for young people but increasing sedentary time. For example: Biddle, S. J et al., 2018.

52 Telema, 2005, Tammelin 2003.

53 Criado Perez, 2019

54 Yorkshire Sport, 2022

members and parks and the lack of opportunity for physical activity came up as one of their main concerns⁵⁵. Girls also increasingly recognise the value of exercise and time spent being active outdoors, with over 80% of girls surveyed by Women in Sport saying that they would put more effort into being active when lockdown ended.

The role of play and playgrounds in meeting this need, however, has not been much studied, but they are a free setting for physical activities which don't have to be competitive. For example, a U.S. study found that swings were the best providers of moderate physical activity for teenage girls in parks⁵⁶, but it's also the case that simply going to the park resulted in increased activity for girls⁵⁷ and reduces sedentary time.

One of Sport England's key principles for getting more women engaged in activities is 'don't expect women to change to fit sport and exercise'.⁵⁸ The same principle must be applied to parks and similar facilities for girls. Don't try to "fix" the girls so they can use the existing facilities; instead provide what girls want so that they can be active on their own terms.

Spending time outdoors also has benefits for mental health.⁵⁹ A recent review by the Wellcome Trust found that access to green spaces improved mental wellbeing and reduced the risk of depressive symptoms⁶⁰. One specific study found that even 30 minutes a week outdoors was associated with a 24% lower rate of 'high psychosomatic symptoms'⁶¹.

Among teenagers, girls have a much higher incidence of psychological distress, anxiety and poor mental well-being than boys, a gap which seems to have increased with the pandemic⁶². Better access to parks and other green spaces has the potential to be a simple intervention with significant impact. but this is definitely an area where more gender disaggregated research is required.

Safety and security

"I don't really like our local park because it is very hidden, and anything could happen."

Not feeling safe is a key barrier which stops girls using parks, and also affects their activity levels when they are there. An increasing amount of research demonstrates what an important influence this has.

A recent Girlguiding survey showed that over 80% of girls and young women feel unsafe when they are out in their own⁶³, while work in Glasgow during the pandemic found that only 20% of girls and young women felt very comfortable in the park that they had chosen to use⁶⁴. Another survey

55 Girlguiding, 2019. 62% of girls did not have access to an outdoor facility which felt safe to use; 35% felt that there was nothing for them to do.

56 Marquet, 2019.

57 Evenson 2018. This remarked that they are an under-used resource

58 Sport England, Go Where Women Are.

59 Perez-Teja et al., 2018; Piccininni et al 2018; Bray, 2022.

60 Bray et al., 2022.

61 Piccininni et al., 2018

62 Parks for London, 2022.

63 Girlguiding UK, 2020.

64 YWCA Scotland, 2021

found that girls and young women under 21 were three times more likely than boys to feel more vulnerable when out in public alone – 86% compared with 28%⁶⁵.

Safety isn't just something which teenage girls worry about; often adults see parks and public spaces as dangerous spaces for girls and so forbid them from going there or move them on. Girls, as one academic described it, are seen as being the 'wrong' gender in the 'wrong' space.⁶⁶

Teenage girls also interpret safety much more widely than adults do. To them, it means more than not being attacked, it also includes not being judged or disapproved of or stared at⁶⁷. This feeling contributes to their absence from parks and other spaces – compared with boys, girls are more likely to give 'other people make me feel uncomfortable' as something which stopped them spending more time outside⁶⁸. In engagement work with Year 9 girls in South East England the subject of being judged in public space came up repeatedly,⁶⁹ while research in Yorkshire revealed that 37% of girls feeling judged for hanging around in parks, compared to 25% of boys.

“I often feel unsafe and judged in public places.”

Their preferred activities can also result in disapproval from both bystanders and those who provide the spaces.

they are judged for wanting to talk to their friends, this is seen as superficial and passive in contrast to 'active' male activities such as skateboarding and playing football⁷⁰.

The lack of appropriate facilities can also contribute to this – if they try to use what play equipment there is, for example swings provided for younger children, they are often made to feel unwelcome by the parents.

“If I go in a park for little kids, all the parents just look at you, they think that you're doing something...they're like, 'Why are you here? It's a child's park.'”

Other park users can also be a significant safety issue for teenage girls, most of all groups of boys or men⁷¹. Sexual harassment is endemic, particularly for teenagers⁷². 78% of girls aged 17-18 have felt intimidated by a group of boys, and 50% say that this happens regularly⁷³. The same number say that harassment stops them going where they want to. A recent Scottish survey found that

65 Marshalls, 2022

66 Tucker and Matthews, 2001

67 Shaikly and Lira, 2022

68 Natural England 2022

69 LSE Cities / Countryside, 2022

70 R.E.s.P.I.R.E., 2022.

71 Barker, 2022.

72 According to a 2021 UN Women survey, 71% of all women in the UK have experienced sexual harassment in a public space, rising to 86% of 18–24-year-olds.

73 Girl Guiding, 2020.

for 27% of young women, their enjoyment of nature had been impacted by actual experiences of sexual harassment⁷⁴.

Worryingly, this issue does not seem to be understood by those who make the decisions. In recent work on parks in West Yorkshire, 89% of park professionals felt that their local parks were safe – but only 22% of teenage girls thought the same⁷⁵.

74 Scottish Mental Health Foundation, 2021

75 Barker, 2022.

A rights based approach

By ensuring that the work of Make Space for Girls includes a right based approach we recognise that the goal of gender equality does not need to be justified by reference to other factors, any more than equality based on race, nationality or religion has to be. The goal of achieving equality between boys and girls is sufficient in and of itself to require action.

A rights based approach is founded on the following:

- Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (right to play);
- The obligations with regard to direct and indirect discrimination in the Equality Act 2010;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty.

The child's right to play:

Article 31 of the UNCRC requires the recognition of the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child; and to encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities. It also covers children up to the age of 18, something which is rarely considered in facilities, guidance or play strategies.

Article 31 does not however create directly enforceable rights for children. This requires UK legislation. The effective implementation of Article 31 varies across the UK, with the Scottish and Welsh devolved governments going to greater lengths to enshrine the rights of the child to play when compared to the Westminster Government. In Wales and Scotland "Play Sufficiency" legislation forms a key part of this. There is no play sufficiency legislation in England. The view appears to be taken that for England the Article 31 right to play is sufficiently supported in relation to teenagers by section 507B Education Act 1996, which imposes on Local Authorities obligations to provide "recreational leisure-time activities" for young people aged 13-19

The focus of our work at Make Space for Girls is on the right of girls and young women to parks and similar facilities that provide equal opportunities appropriate to their age.

Discrimination contrary to the Equality Act 2010

It is important to understand that the discrimination that girls and young women face in parks and public spaces is a mix of direct and indirect discrimination (as those terms are used in the Equality Act 2010). Where the disadvantage occurs because of the actions of boys and young men using the facilities, the action is frequently directly discriminatory. For example, the minority of boys and young men who indulge in taunting and shaming behaviour towards girls in parks do so because their targets are girls.

But discrimination can also manifest itself in more subtle and invidious ways, and the concept of indirect discrimination in the Equality Act 2010 calls out and renders unlawful this more subtle discrimination. Indirect discrimination on grounds of sex arises if an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice in fact disadvantages one sex more than the other and the public authority cannot show that the provision, criterion or practice is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. This is the situation with the relevant play facilities. The provision of a skate park, MUGA and BMX or pump track is apparently "neutral": there is no sign attached saying "GIRLS

KEEP OUT". But it is clear from the evidence cited above that these facilities in fact disadvantage girls and young women. Girls and young women are put off from using them.

The Public Sector Equality Duty

Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities have a suite of specific legal obligations (usually referred to by the umbrella term as "the Public Sector Equality Duty" or "PSED") intended to create a culture in which promoting equality becomes part of the authority's core business. The broad aim of the PSED is to integrate consideration of the advancement of equality into the day-to-day business of authorities⁷⁶.

The PSED requires all public authorities when exercising key functions (including the commissioning and development of public areas such as parks and leisure facilities) to have "due regard" to the need to eliminate discrimination and to advance equality of opportunity between girls on the one hand and boys on the other.

The concept of having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between boys and girls is fleshed out in a little more detail in the Equality Act 2010. Most relevant in the context of park and other public space facilities for boys and girls are the following obligations imposed by the PSED⁷⁷:

- The need to take steps so that facilities meet the needs of girls where these are different from the need of boys;
- The need to encourage girls to take part in activities provided via those facilities.

Currently, very few decisions relating to park provision for teenagers use the PSED. As a result, this kind of discrimination often ends up being built into policy. There are still very many council play strategies which define teenage provision almost entirely in terms of skate parks, MUGA and BMX or pump tracks, with perhaps a teenage shelter as well⁷⁸.

For example one council's aspiration is to:

*Provide activity zones for young adults of 12+ years in all the major settlements (e.g. MUGA, skatepark, BMX track etc.)*⁷⁹

Sex, gender and equality are rarely referred to.

However, change is happening, and some councils are now creating much more inclusive policies for young people and play, for example Hackney Council's new Supplementary Planning Document⁸⁰ on child-friendly places references the gender-mainstreaming work done in Vienna as an example, and notes the need for more inclusive MUGAs, while Camden and Islington's Parks for Health strategy⁸¹ references our work in terms of inequalities.

Outside the UK, Dublin have produced a play strategy which considers the needs of a wide range of groups, including teenage girls and which is a model of how inclusive policies could look like elsewhere⁸².

76 The government have published a Quick Start Guide to the PSED for public sector organisations which can be found here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85041/equality-duty.pdf

77 MSFG and the law firm Weightmans have produced a Q&A document for councils on how the PSED needs to be considered with regard to parks. <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/OA-on-the-PSED.pdf>

78 See for example: Ards and North Down; Brentwood.

79 East Dunbartonshire, 2020

80 Hackney Council, 2021

81 Islington and Camden Councils

82 Dublin City Council, 2022.

Centring Teenage Girls

It is essential that the voices of teenage girls are at the heart of any process if changes are to be successful.

There is only a limited amount of academic research in this area⁸³, but a number of successful schemes have been documented, both in the UK and abroad⁸⁴. There are a number of toolkits and suggested methodologies for engaging with young people, although nothing which is specifically designed for use with girls and young women⁸⁵. However, reports on engagement and research both stress its importance and the need for much more work in this area⁸⁶.

“I feel like everything’s really tailored for boys, and that you need things really for girls.”

Teenage girls themselves feel that it is important that people listen to their views.. In a survey by Girlguiding, conducted just before the pandemic, 82% of girls thought they should be more involved in designing parks and open spaces.

Intersectionality

A further reason for engaging locally in every case is that intersectionality has a huge impact on what girls and young women may need in a particular area. The disadvantage they face in public spaces is affected by a range of other factors including ethnic background, religion and socio-economic status among others, and this intersectionality is important for two reasons.

Firstly, these factors affect both access to parks and activity levels in girls – for example white British girls are more active than those from a South Asian background, and use green spaces more⁸⁷, while those from areas of greater deprivation are also less likely to be active or to use parks⁸⁸. Research also suggests that activity levels in girls from minoritized groups are more likely to drop off at adolescence⁸⁹. Research currently underway in Bradford is investigating some of these issues⁹⁰.

“A lot of times your religion or what you are wearing [points at headscarf] that makes me feel vulnerable. It makes people think they can do something.”

83 Seims et al., 2022 has a summary

84 See LSE 2022, Jump and Oxfordshire, both forthcoming.

85 Greenspace Scotland, 2021; Quality of Life Foundation, 2022.

86 LSE, 2022; Seims et al., 2022.

87 Bingham et al, 2021.

88 Love et al., 2019; Sport England, 2022; Corder K, et al. 2016

89 Marquet, 2019

90 JUMP programme, forthcoming. Across the parks allocated for development, several have been assigned to focus on meeting the needs of adolescent girls through a co-design approach.

Girls from non-white backgrounds are also more likely to be the targets of sexual harassment and of race discrimination in general⁹¹ which again impacts their ability to use public spaces⁹².

It is also worth noting that park design and provision often conforms to the tastes of the white, middle-class males who are the main designers and maintainers of public spaces, and as a result, parks and public spaces may not fit the requirements of members of other ethnic and religious groups⁹³ - for example by not recognising their wish to be segregated from dogs.

91 Scottish Mental Health Foundatin, 2021. 23% of those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups said race discrimination limited their ability to enjoy nature, compared to 1% of white British respondents and they were six times as likely to experience hate crime. Also Barker, 2022.

92 Girlguiding, Research Briefing, 2020. A quarter (24%) of girls aged 13 to 16 and 53% aged 17 and 18 say harassment stops them from feeling free to go where they want, or they take less convenient routes to feel safer. This was significantly higher for girls of colour – 50% compared to 30%.

93 Snaith, 2015.

What do teenage girls want?

Research over the last twenty years has identified the kinds of features and interventions which make parks and public spaces more attractive to teenage girls. Specific projects in Vienna and Sweden are referenced below, but it is also possible to draw some more general conclusions from research in both the UK and elsewhere.

The key requirement for teenage girls is play equipment or facilities designed with them in mind. They don't feel that MUGAs or skateparks are 'for them', but at the same time they feel that they have been 'aged out' of the play equipment they'd like to use, such as swings⁹⁴.

This kind of equipment is important not just for the opportunities it provides for play and activity, but also because it provides them with 'permission' to occupy the space, just as skate parks and MUGAs do for teenage boys⁹⁵. A good example of an installation which does this is the Frizon in Umeå (see case studies page on our website for details)

Within this general requirement, there are some particular facilities which have been demonstrated to be popular and effective.

Social seating and shelter

Girls specifically want seating which allows them to face one another, which most park benches don't do.

Swings

Regularly among the most requested features in research and consultations, and where they are provided, they are very popular⁹⁶.

“Being a teenager, I like to just hang out on the swings.”

Outdoor gyms

Girls like the opportunities that these provide, but the equipment can not only sometimes be 'coded male' but also weighted for adult men⁹⁷.

More, smaller areas

When one single large area is provided, it can often be territorialised by the most dominant group. A spread of smaller spaces allows several different groups to share the space⁹⁸.

94 Parks for London, 2022; Yorkshire Sport, 2022.

95 Teenage boys in the park are often seen as loitering or having the potential to cause trouble, but not when they are on the skate park or MUGA.

96 Parks for London, 2022; Yorkshire Sport, 2022; Barker, 2022.

97 Barker, 2022.

98 LSE, 2020; Vienna, 2013.

Walking loops

One of the most popular activities in parks for girls and young women is walking⁹⁹, and looped paths, preferably around the perimeter have been demonstrated to feel safer for them and to encourage greater activity levels¹⁰⁰.

“I LOVE the walking path. It is really nice and peaceful. I go there weekly and love it, however, I wish there were more things for teens to do.”

Toilets - important for girls

Public toilets are seen as problematic by many local authorities because of their high cost and the risks of vandalism, but they are important facilities which enable women and girls to use public spaces. 14% of women worry about going outdoors during their period due to the lack of public toilets¹⁰¹, and that figure is much higher for teenage girls who may be struggling with period and bladder issues at this stage in their life – 78% of girls surveyed in Yorkshire said that a lack of toilet and changing facilities was a barrier to them exercising in the park and 67% said that a lack of toilets was a barrier to them using the park altogether¹⁰². Elsewhere, researchers found that a park was fourteen times more likely to be highly used by teenagers if there were public access toilets, and their provision was directly associated with increased activity levels¹⁰³.

Toilets shouldn't be seen as optional extras but essential provision to ensure equal access to public space.

Examples

In Austria (Vienna¹⁰⁴) and Sweden (Malmö and Umeå), parks have been designed for teenage girls, in each case co-created with girls and young women. All these schemes have resulted in an increase in girls using the spaces¹⁰⁵.

Further details on these case studies and others are available on the Make Space for Girls website.

99 Yorkshire Sport, 2022

100 Derose, 2019; Barker, 2022.

101 WaterAid - <https://www.wateraid.org/uk/media/periods-under-lockdown>

102 Yorkshire Sport, 2022

103 Edwards, 2015

104 Vienna, 2013.

105 Chambaudy, 2014; Hellgren, 2019.

Next Steps

So, how to deal with the inequality? There are a few key ways in which the problem can be addressed by councils, planners and designers.

One is to improve the design of existing parks to make them more welcoming to girls, and to prevent boys from dominating the spaces. There are proven ways of doing this, and many interventions are inexpensive. Safety, in particular, is a key barrier and needs to be considered.

Surveillance is an important part of this, and so the presence of play workers and park staff can help – as does the presence of other members of the public. Events and the presence of other women creates parks which are used by girls more equally¹⁰⁶.

It is also possible to design skate parks and MUGAs in such a way as to make them more accessible for girls. Again this often included not creating one large open space which a single group can dominate, and also widening entrances¹⁰⁷.

But what these interventions achieve is allowing girls access to the activities which have been designed for the default male and/or trying to ameliorate the ways in which boys occupy and dominate public spaces and thus exclude girls.

One of the most important actions is to ask girls what they want and provide facilities which they are interested in and will use. Only by doing this can councils, designers and planners find out what girls want from parks, and what the problems are with the current provision. And girls do want to be involved. 82% of girls thought that they should be more involved in designing playgrounds, parks and outdoor facilities in a recent Girlguiding survey¹⁰⁸.

Most of all, when any provision for older children and teenagers is considered, before anything is designed or built, it needs to be considered through the lens of equality and the right to play. Not a single more skate park or MUGA should be built without an equalities assessment, and not one more play strategy written without consideration of what girls might want from public space. Boys have dominated the landscape for too long and it's time we made spaces that work for girls.

106 Sundevall and Jansson 2020.

107 Vienna, 2013. This is reinforced by our own consultations.

108 Girlguiding Attitudes Survey, 2020.

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