



# DARING TO DREAM

# THE GENDER DREAM

# DEFICIT IN SPORT

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 2023

#LetHerDream

@WOMENINSPORT\_UK



# CONTEXT

## **The charity Women in Sport exists to create lasting positive change for women and girls in sport and society.**

Sport can bring joy and fulfilment and could be playing a big role in reducing the raft of gendered health inequalities suffered by women and girls, from self-harm to osteoporosis. Yet sport is not yet “the norm” for girls. Less than half of girls aged 5-16 (44%) achieve recommended levels of physical activity and 22% fewer girls than boys play team sport.<sup>1</sup>

We know that gender stereotyping and institutional bias are still holding girls and women back in sport and in life. From an early age girls’ self-belief is stifled by limiting stereotypes and as they move into their teenage years,

far too many feel they don’t belong in sport and disengage. For nearly forty years we have used our deep understanding of women and girls to address these stubborn gender inequalities.

The barriers to progress are complex and interlinked and invisibility has long been a problem. Given the growing visibility of elite women’s sport we have set out to understand the impact this has had on girls’ (and boys) attitudes and aspirations in sport. In 2020, as we began to emerge from lockdowns, we collected baseline data and as life returned to a sense of normal, tracked attitudes after high profile women’s events. Significant developments

in women’s sport happened in this period including England reaching World Cup Netball and Rugby Union finals, a female Brit winning a tennis grand slam and the emergence of the Hundred cricket tournament, alongside a Summer and Winter Olympics and a home Commonwealth Games. We tracked attitudes to the Lionesses Euro win in 2022 and the 2023 Women’s Football World Cup given their particularly high visibility. Although this was less so for the distant World Cup than the home Euros, highlighting the importance of hosting major events.

Our research shows that girls who already love sport have been inspired by this greater visibility of women’s

sport. This is to be celebrated, but it is not yet shifting the fundamental pattern of engagement. Our research found that only one in five girls and young women love sport and take part a lot, for boys and young men this figure is 36%. So there is far more work to do to level the playing field for girls from grassroots to elite, so that all girls can benefit from the joy and freedom of sport.

### **SOURCE:**

<sup>1</sup> Sport England (2023) [Active Lives Children & Young People Survey Academic Year 2022-2023](#)

# SUMMARY

**The 2023 Women's World Cup had a positive impact on girls who watched with 9 in 10 saying it made them feel proud and happy.** But despite the increased visibility and success of women's sport, a very significant dream deficit persists between girls and boys. Girls who love sport and take part a lot now have heroes and can dream of reaching the top, but this group makes up just 19% of all girls.

Far more girls than boys don't enjoy or take part in sport. The success of female athletes has little impact on these girls, who are far less likely to dream or feel inspired to play than boys, or their sporty female peers. These girls are particularly fearful of being watched and judged, and feel the most uncomfortable wearing sports kit and taking part with boys.

Girls and boys both recognise the gender inequalities in sport and the message

from girls in particular is clear: female teams need more support, there must be equal opportunities at grassroots and we need greater visibility, recognition and celebration of female athletes. With this in mind, the impact of the questionable kiss during the Women's World Cup celebrations cannot be underestimated. It opened girls' eyes to the way some women are treated in sport and it is vital such moments do not stifle girls' aspirations.

We must capitalise on the growth of women's sport and invest more (harder) in our girls' futures. We need to understand the needs of different girls and remove the persistent barriers that stop them experiencing the joy and freedom of sport. We must provide equal opportunities in school and grassroots sport to ensure all girls feel able, inspired and encouraged to pursue their sporting dreams as much as boys. Sport should be a normal part of life for girls.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Less than a third of girls (29%) dream of reaching the top in sport compared to half of boys (52%).
- The dream rate for girls who love sport and take part lots rose from 50% in 2020 to 69% after the Lionesses Euro win. This dipped slightly to 64% in 2023 but remains higher than 2020.
- In 2023, 32% of girls agree that 'people think sport is for boys and doesn't matter for girls', down from 49% in 2020.
- Key barriers preventing girls from reaching the top in sport are lack of funding, lack of opportunities to try different sports and not being expected to be good at, nor encouraged to excel in sport.
- 54% of girls compared to 37% of boys fear being watched and judged, and periods are the extra barrier girls face, no matter how sporty they are.
- Girls want better facilities, more support and their needs to be better understood in sport.

# METHODOLOGY – WHAT WE DID

## DECEMBER 2020

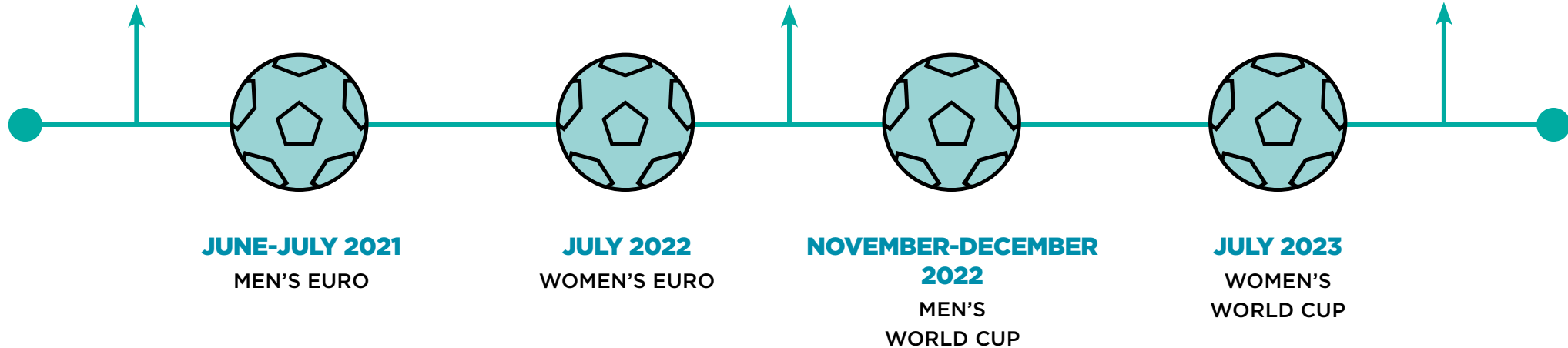
WAVE 1 (BASELINE)  
N=2052 (1556 GIRLS; 496 BOYS)

## AUGUST 2022

WAVE 2  
N=2592 (1545 GIRLS; 1047 BOYS)

## OCTOBER 2023

WAVE 3  
N= 2593 (1577 GIRLS; 1016 BOYS)



### METHODOLOGICAL NOTE:

- All samples are nationally representative of the UK, ages 13-24, carried out by Savanta.
- For ease of reading, we use the terms 'girls' and 'boys' throughout to represent our sample age group.
- Some questions were not asked in every wave and were specific to particular events or points in time.
- Questions asked were specific to the gender of the respondent. Where applicable, statement wording differences are signposted throughout the report.
- Where relevant, significant differences over time, and between genders and engagement/activity levels with sport have been highlighted.

# HALF AS MANY GIRLS THAN BOYS LOVE SPORT AND TAKE PART LOTS

As well as gender differences, we looked at girls' and boys' engagement with sport and physical activity to understand the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of these different groups.

ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION ↑

Q. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN RELATION TO SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?	GIRLS			BOYS		
	2020	2022	2023	2020	2022	2023
I love sport and take part lots already	20%	21%	<b>19%</b>	32%	39%	<b>36%</b>
I love sport but want to do more	28%	30%	<b>28%</b>	31%	29%	<b>29%</b>
I don't take part much but want to do more	37%	37%	<b>36%</b>	26%	21%	<b>23%</b>
I don't take part much and don't want to	15%	13%	<b>17%</b>	11%	10%	<b>12%</b>

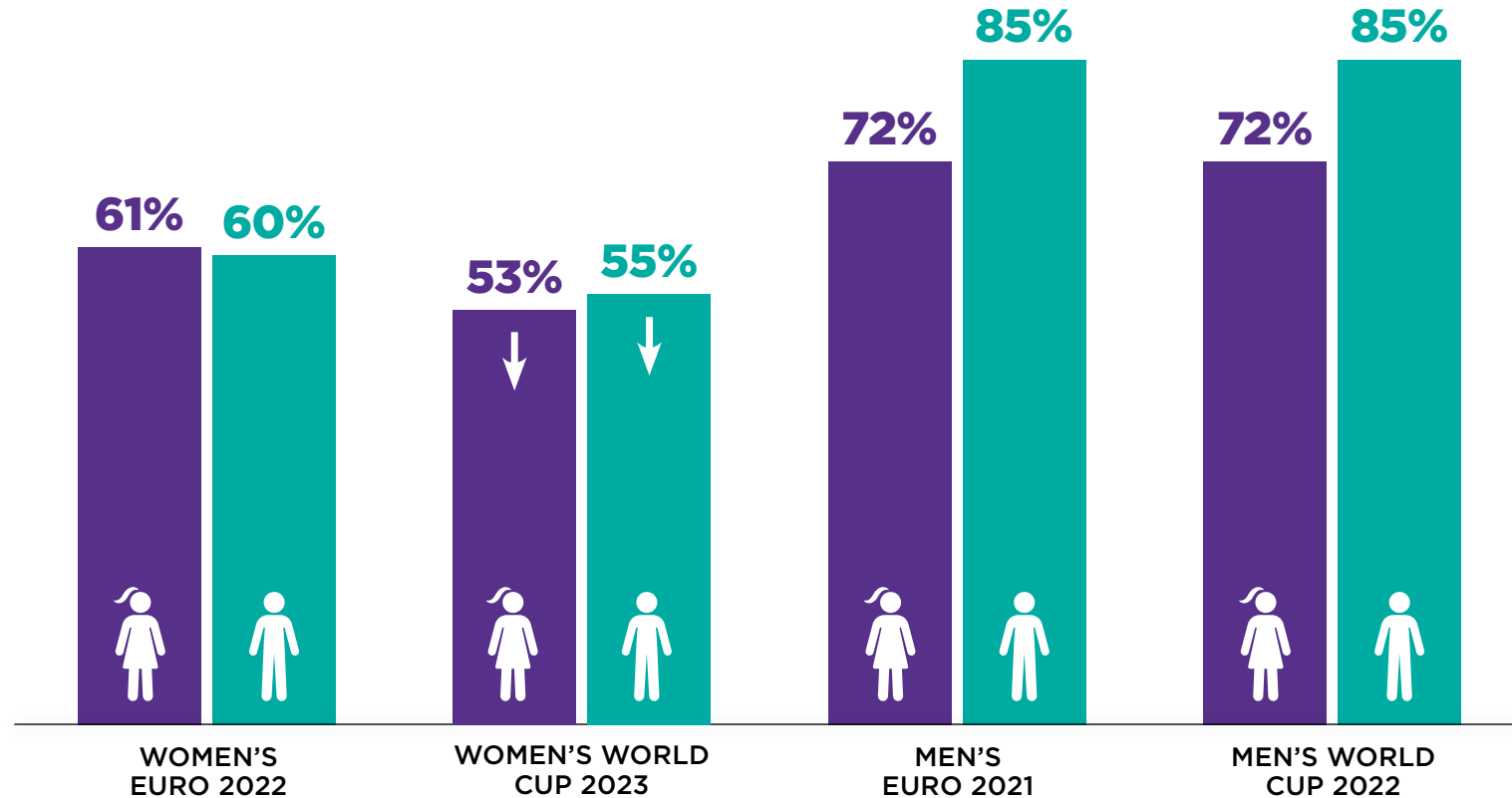


# ENGAGEMENT WITH WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL



# VIEWERSHIP OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IS SIMILAR AMONGST GIRLS AND BOYS BUT HAS DECLINED SINCE THE EUROS

## % WHO WATCHED INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL ON TV/ONLINE



Viewership of the Men's Euro and World Cup was consistent amongst girls and boys, with more boys watching than girls.

“ [I am] Used to watching men's football, women's football is still a new concept to me. ”

(Female, aged 15)

“ [I didn't watch the women's World Cup because I] wasn't as interested as I don't know women teams or any female football player. ”

(Male, aged 20)

# REASONS FOR LESS ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

## MOST STATED REASONS FOR NOT WATCHING THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP (GIRLS AND BOYS)

1. Wasn't interested
2. Don't enjoy/like football and/or find it boring
3. Awareness - lack of coverage and advertisement

Girls were more likely to say they did not watch because they don't like football, were not aware of the World Cup happening, or lack of interest from significant others in their lives.

*“ My dad didn't want to. ”*  
(Female, aged 13)

*“ It doesn't come to mind when I think of football. When I think football it's mainly a -mens sport- that comes to mind. It also wasn't broadcasted and spoken about as much as the mens world cup. ”*  
(Female, aged 23)

*“ I didn't know it was happening as the media didn't have much coverage on it. ”*  
(Female, aged 19)

Boys were more likely to say they did not watch the Women's World Cup because it is not as good quality or standard as men's football.

*“ It's too slow paced not as exciting as the men's game. ”*  
(Male, aged 16)

*“ Not as interested in it and I don't think the quality is as good. ”*  
(Male, aged 23)

*“ The standard isn't as good as the mens so I don't engross myself into their game. ”*  
(Male, aged 21)



# THOSE WHO ENGAGED WITH THE WORLD CUP HAD OVERWHELMINGLY POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF IT

Similar to the Women's Euro, the words used to describe the Women's World Cup were overwhelmingly positive from both girls and boys: 'amazing, exciting, inspiring, fun, pride'.



## MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS OF THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

“ *Getting to the final and seeing the Lionesses grow as a team through the tournament to get to another great place in football and break the barriers again for women's football.* ”  
(Female, aged 23)

“ *England doing well and it unifying English patriots to be proud of their country and support them women overwhelmingly.* ”  
(Male, aged 21)

“ *[The World Cup] was a great unifying moment for English women a proud moment that was felt by the nation.* ”  
(Male, aged 21)

“ *The final, showing the world that women can also excel at same game as them.* ”  
(Female, aged 15)

“ *Players worked so hard and some were even better than the men footballers.* ”  
(Male, aged 18)

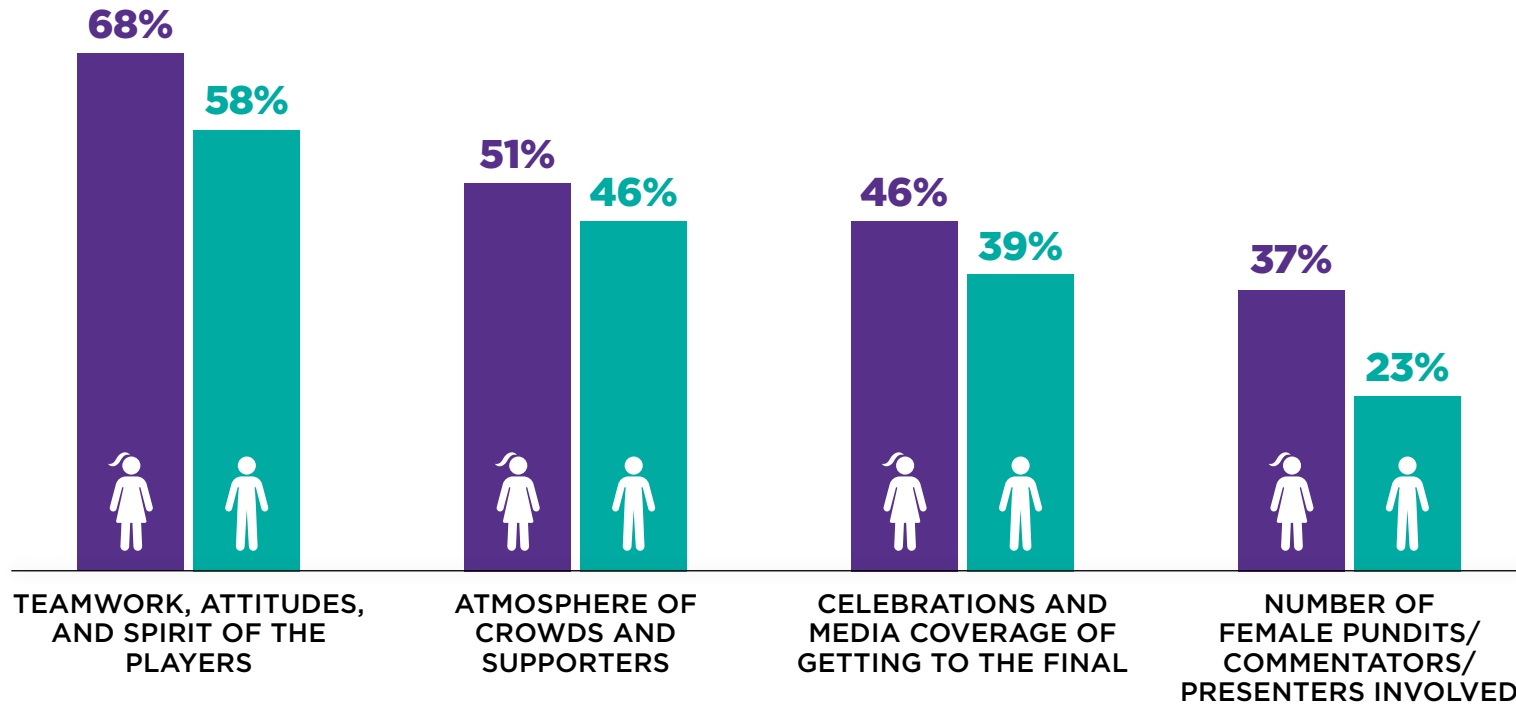
“ *The getting behind women in sport, the togetherness it brought.* ”  
(Female, aged 17)

“ *Getting to the final, the ladies played really well and deserve their achievements.* ”  
(Male, aged 15)

“ *Getting to the final it made me so proud to be English.* ”  
(Female, aged 15)

# GIRLS AND BOYS WERE MOST INSPIRED BY THE PLAYERS' TEAMWORK, ATTITUDES AND SPIRIT

## WHAT INSPIRED GIRLS AND BOYS ABOUT THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP



Watched or attended agree / strongly agree

“ *[The] Players worked so hard and some were even better than the men footballers.* ”

(Male, aged 18)

“ *The getting behind women in sport, the togetherness it brought.* ”

(Female, aged 17)

“ *Just seeing how excited the team are and how proud they are and how hard they played.* ”

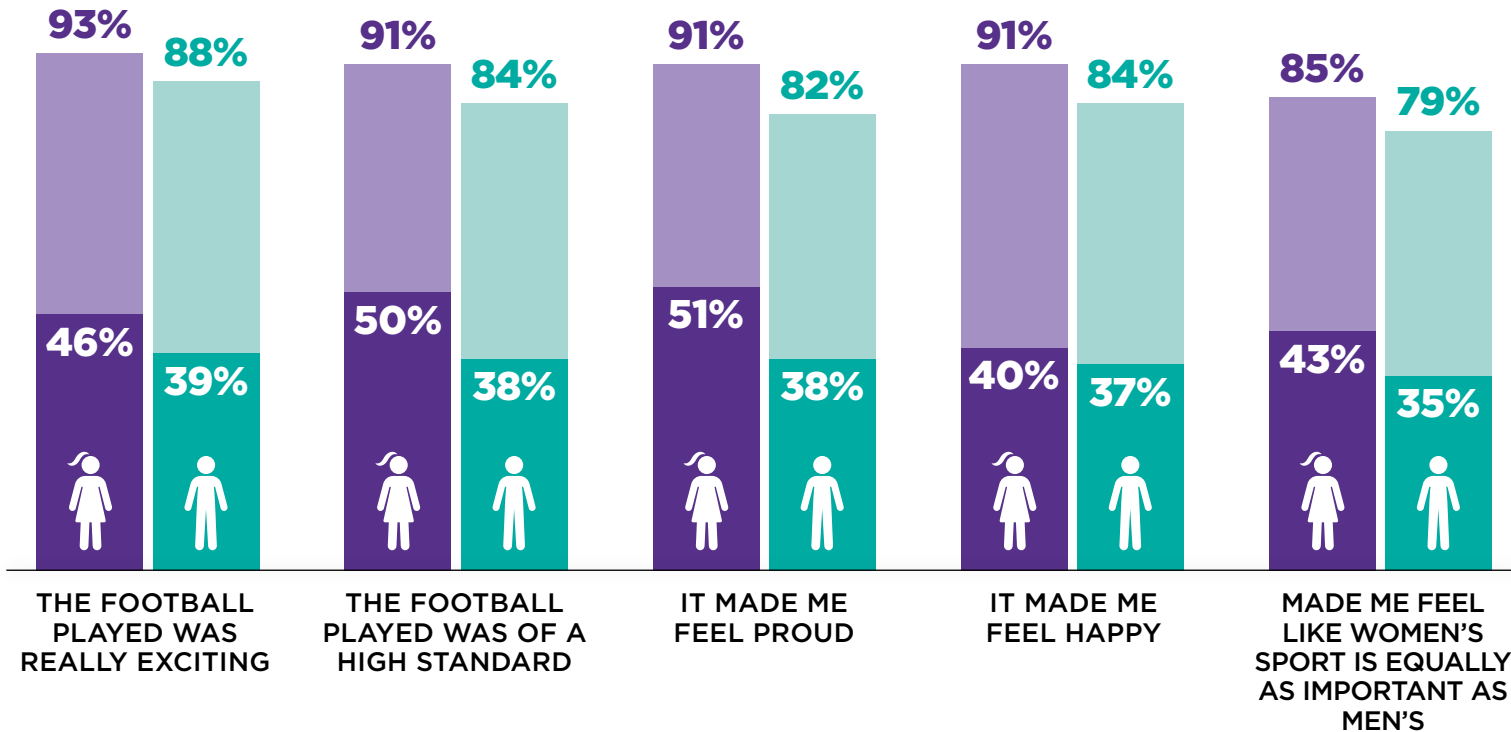
(Male, aged 13)

“ *The true passion and hard work all the women put into every match was just amazing, they really played for their country.* ”

(Female, aged 16)

# THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP HAD A VERY POSITIVE IMPACT ON GIRLS AND BOYS

## HOW GIRLS AND BOYS FEEL ABOUT THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP



Watched or attended    ■ / ■ Strongly agree    ■ / ■ Net agree

Girls were much more likely than boys to feel strongly that the football played was of a high standard and it made them feel proud.

Overall, fewer girls and boys agree it's made them feel women's sport is equally as important as men's.

“ *Getting to the final and seeing the Lionesses grow as a team through the tournament to get to another great place in football and break the barriers again for women's football.* ”

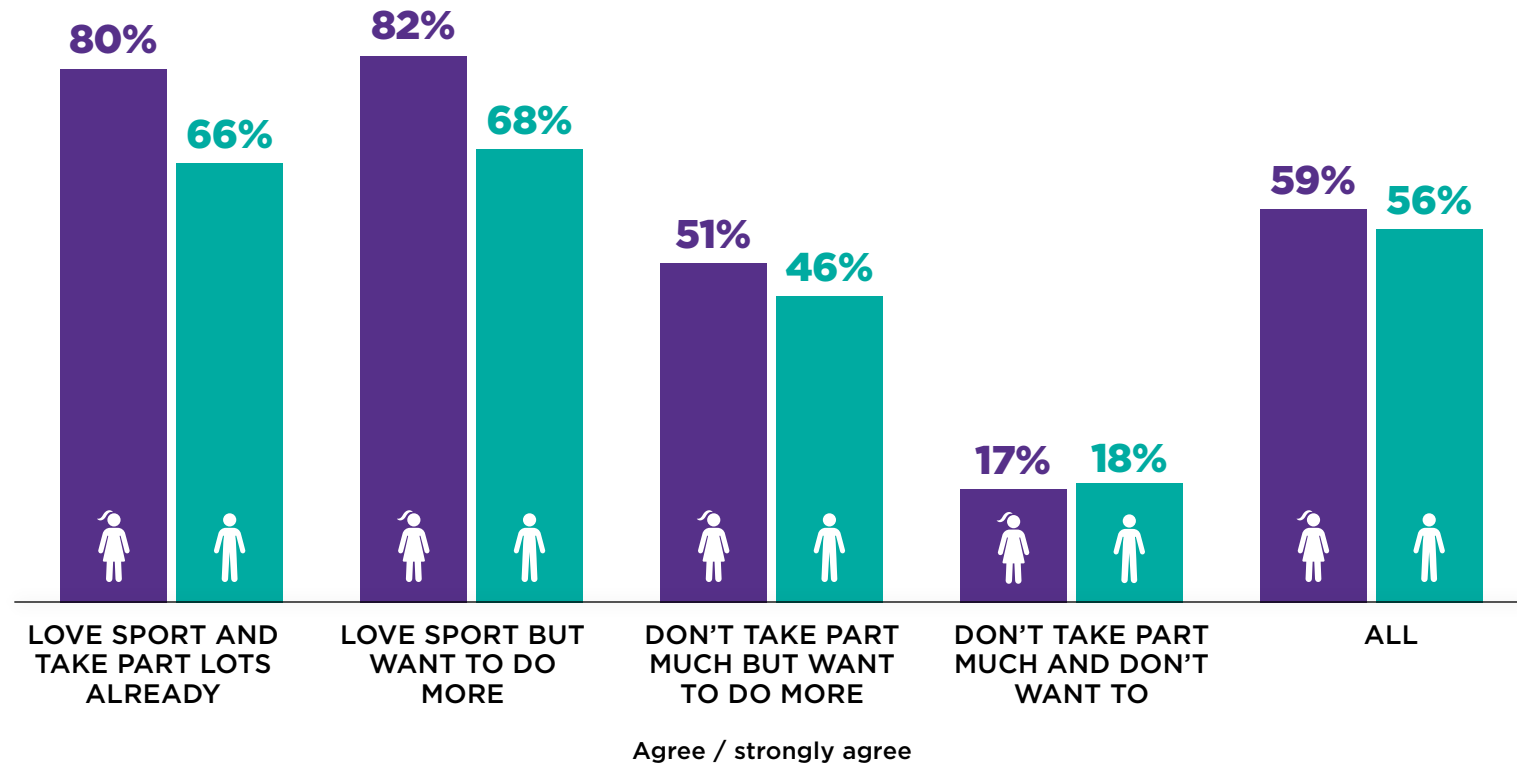
(Female, aged 23)

“ *They were better than I thought they'd be.* ”

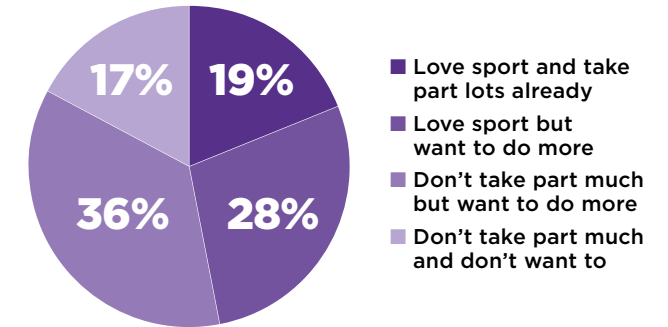
(Male, aged 16)

# 8 IN 10 GIRLS WHO LOVE SPORT FEEL INSPIRED TO PLAY MORE BUT FAR LESS GIRLS ARE IN THIS GROUP THAN BOYS

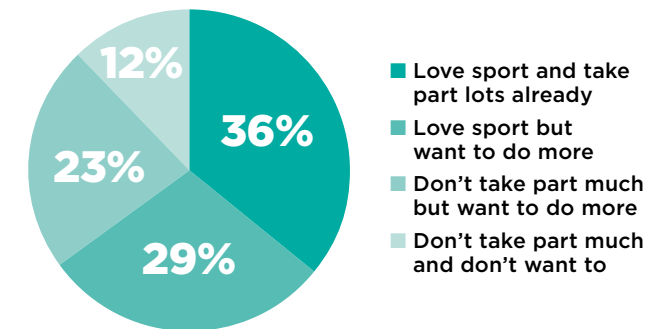
## GIRLS AND BOYS WHO FELT INSPIRED TO PLAY MORE SPORT AND BE MORE ACTIVE DUE TO THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP



% OF GIRLS IN EACH GROUP



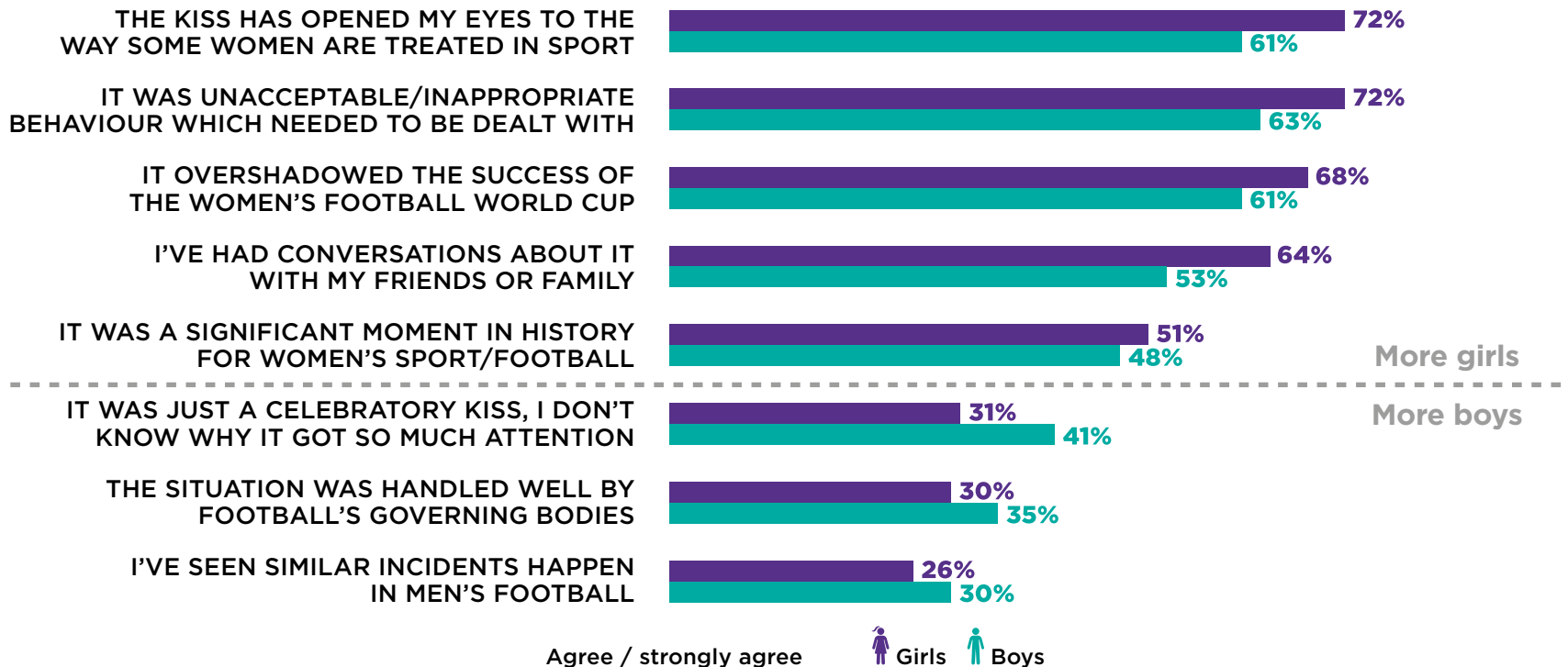
% OF BOYS IN EACH GROUP



# GIRLS RECOGNISE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE WORLD CUP KISS MORE THAN BOYS

We asked girls and boys their opinions about the controversial kiss, which occurred during the women's 2023 World Cup final.

## GIRLS AND BOYS' OPINIONS ABOUT THE WORLD CUP KISS



**50% OF GIRLS WERE AWARE OF THE KISS, COMPARED TO 57% OF BOYS.**

*“It was a massive deal over nothing!! She didn't look awkward when it happened so why the massive fall out after?”*

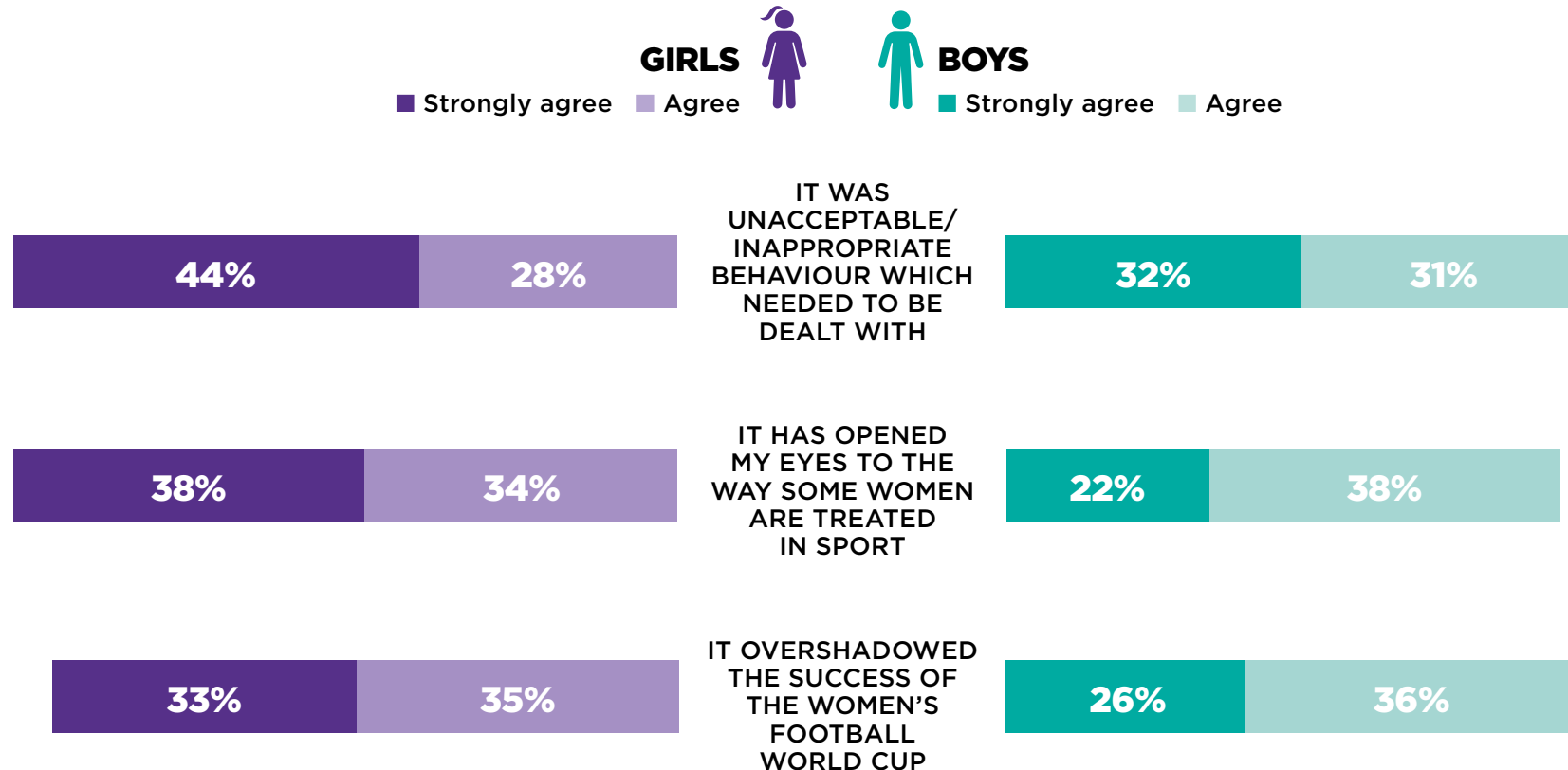
(Male, aged 15)

*“[The kiss] shouldn't have happened and shows the sexism still in women's sports.”*

(Female, aged 21)

# MORE GIRLS THAN BOYS FOUND THE KISS UNACCEPTABLE AND IT OPENED THEIR EYES TO THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN SPORT

## GIRLS' AND BOYS' STRENGTH OF FEELINGS ON THE WORLD CUP KISS



“*[The kiss] was realistic of real life, it shows how women are treated every day.*”

(Female, aged 18)

“*[The kiss] was handled incredibly poorly by the Spanish football association. Astonishingly bad responses from the coach who assaulted her and the head of the association.*”

(Male, aged 23)

# OPINIONS OF THE WORLD CUP KISS

## GIRLS

**“** *I found it disgusting and completely inappropriate. It took away from the players celebration and I don't feel it was handled well. You would never see this in men's football. I feel that some men in these high positions take advantage of women and it should be cracked down on. There should be more woman in these higher up roles.*

(Female, aged 23)

**“** *Typically, a man took all the media attention away from the women's amazing achievements.*

(Female, aged 15)

**“** *It's disgusting and a prime example of how women are treated for speaking about sexual assault!*

(Female, aged 22)

**“** *Unfortunately, the assault of a Spanish player after their win overshadowed the tournament.*

(Female, aged 21)

## BOYS

**“** *It was blown way out of proportion. Spain had just won the world cup! Emotions were running high, do I agree with what he did? No I don't but the witch hunt that followed was way over the top! Come on, if a woman had done that to a man I doubt it would've even made the news.*

(Male, aged 17)

**“** *It was wrong to happen and he should be punished. I felt sorry for her.*

(Male, aged 14)

**“** *It shouldn't have happened but a simple sorry should have been enough.*

(Male, aged 14)

**“** *Disgusting behaviour from the director, although I do truly want to believe he meant it in a friendly way.*

(Male, aged 21)

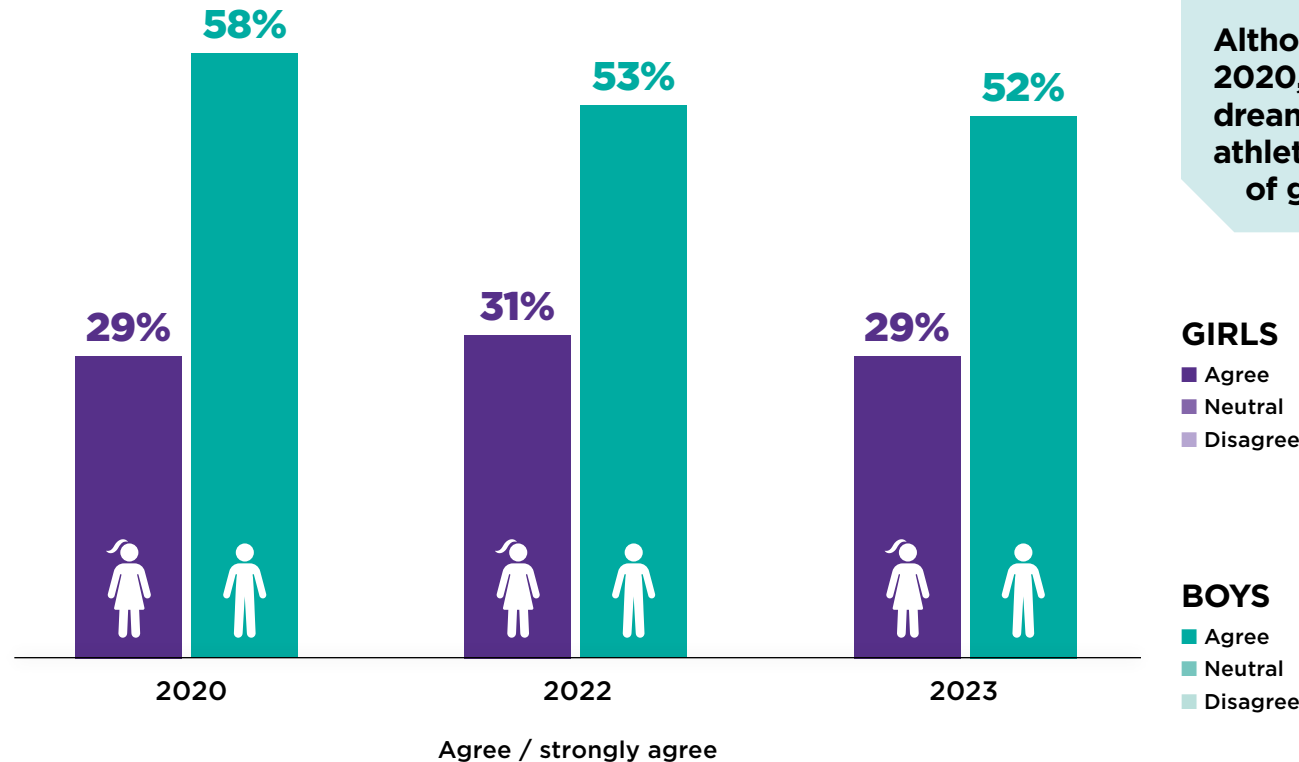
# THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DREAM DEFICIT





# LESS THAN A THIRD OF GIRLS DREAM ABOUT REACHING THE TOP OF SPORT, COMPARED TO HALF OF BOYS

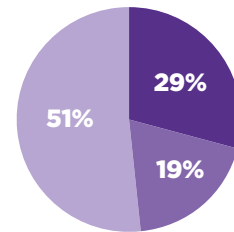
## GIRLS AND BOYS WHO DREAM ABOUT BECOMING A TOP ATHLETE OR SPORTSPERSON



Although in decline since 2020, over half of boys still dream of becoming a top athlete compared to over half of girls who don't.

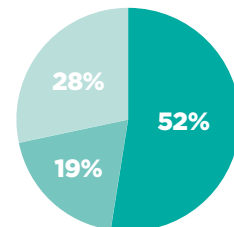
### GIRLS

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree



### BOYS

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree



*Best moment of the Women's World Cup? Getting into the Final, seeing all the players dreams coming true.*

(Female, aged 24)

The dream deficit widens with age:

### AGES 13-18:

**27%** of girls dream compared to **45%** of boys

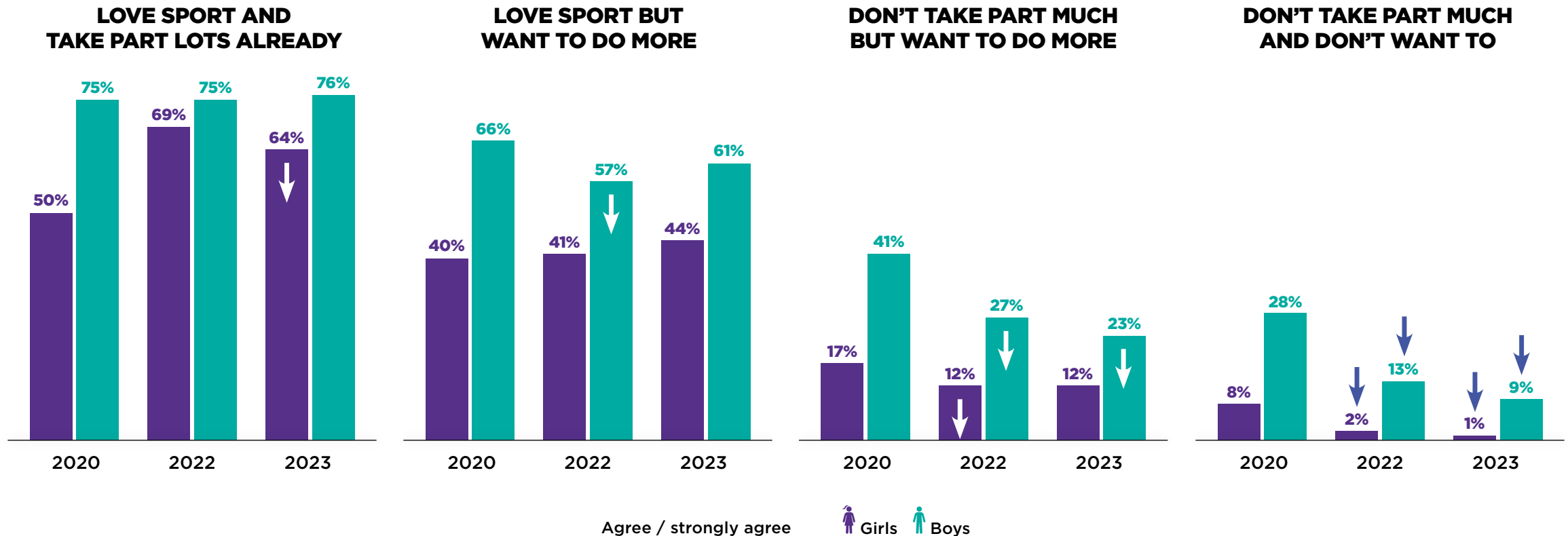
### AGES 19-24:

**31%** of girls dream compared to **61%** of boys

**This has not changed significantly since 2020**

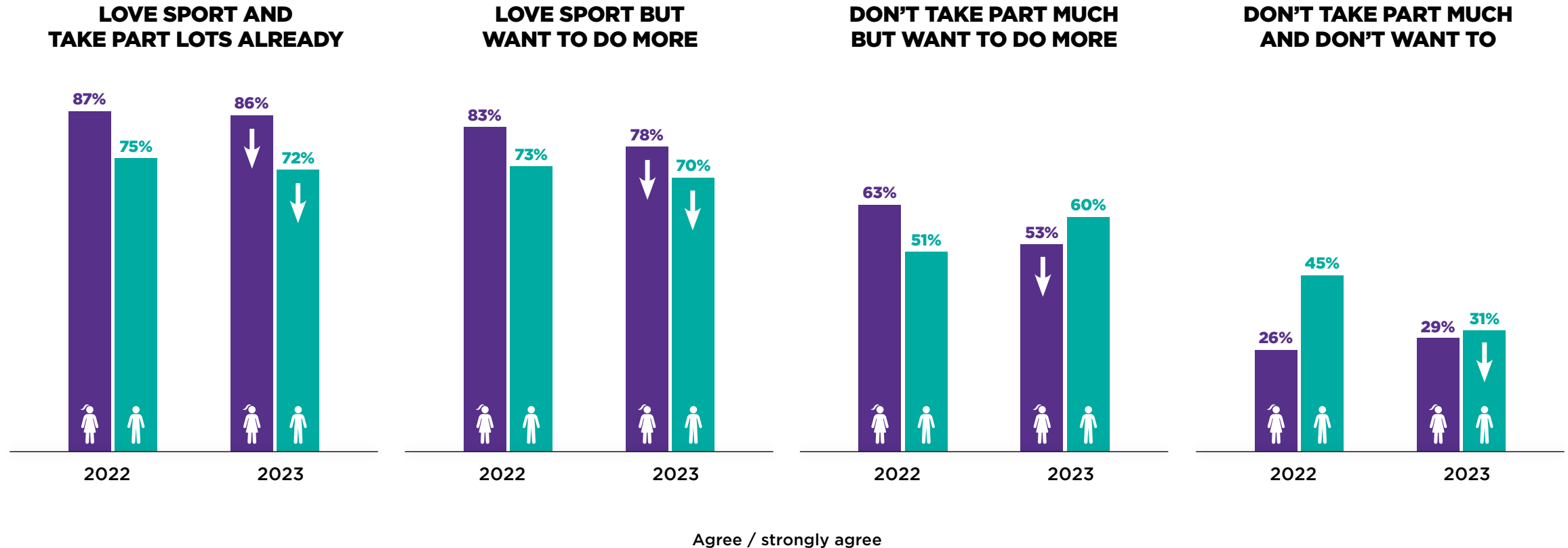
# DREAMING HAS DECLINED FOR THOSE LEAST ENGAGED IN SPORT BUT THE GENDER GAP PERSISTS ACROSS ALL GROUPS

## GIRLS AND BOYS WHO DREAM ABOUT BECOMING A TOP ATHLETE OR SPORTSPERSON



# GIRLS WHO LOVE SPORT ARE MORE LIKELY TO BELIEVE THEY CAN BE LIKE A LIONESS

## SEEING THE WOMEN'S EURO/WORLD CUP MADE ME BELIEVE I CAN BE LIKE THEM



# WHAT IS PREVENTING GIRLS FROM DREAMING?



# LACK OF VALUE PLACED ON WOMEN'S SPORT

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL OR HIGH-LEVEL SPORT

WOMEN ARE NOT AS GOOD AT SPORTS IN TERMS OF PERFORMANCE AND SKILL COMPARED TO MEN

23%



38%



WOMEN'S SPORT IS NOT CONSIDERED AS HIGH QUALITY AS MEN'S

83%



72%



FEMALE ATHLETES AND SPORTS PLAYERS ARE LESS FAMOUS THAN MALE SPORTS PLAYERS OR ATHLETES

79%



71%



PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S SPORT DOES NOT GET TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS THE MEN'S

82%



73%



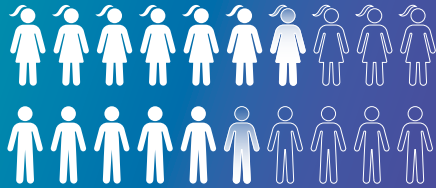
Agree / strongly agree

# LACK OF INVESTMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES IN WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORT

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL OR HIGH-LEVEL SPORT

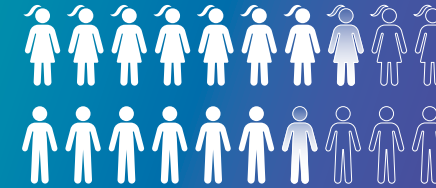
PROFESSIONAL SPORTSWOMEN DON'T EARN ENOUGH MONEY

69%  
57%



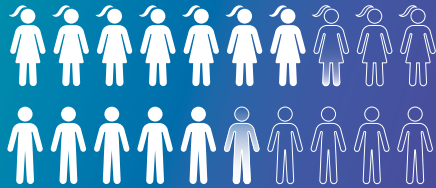
THERE IS LESS FUNDING AND SPONSORSHIP TO  
SUPPORT WOMEN'S TEAMS COMPARED TO MEN

77%  
68%



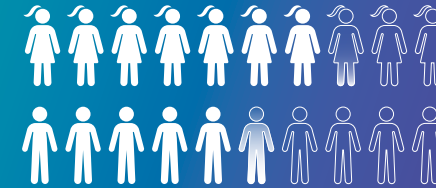
THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH PROFESSIONAL TEAMS FOR WOMEN

71%  
57%



IT'S HARD TO FIND MUCH REPORTING OR  
COVERAGE OF WOMEN'S SPORT IN THE MEDIA

71%  
57%



Agree / strongly agree (%)

# WHAT PREVENTS GIRLS AND BOYS FROM BECOMING A TOP ATHLETE OR SPORTSPERSON?

## TOP 3 BARRIERS PREVENTING GIRLS (2023)

1. Not enough funding for girls' sport
2. Girls aren't encouraged to excel in sport
3. Girls don't have the chance to try enough different sports

## TOP 3 BARRIERS PREVENTING BOYS (2023)

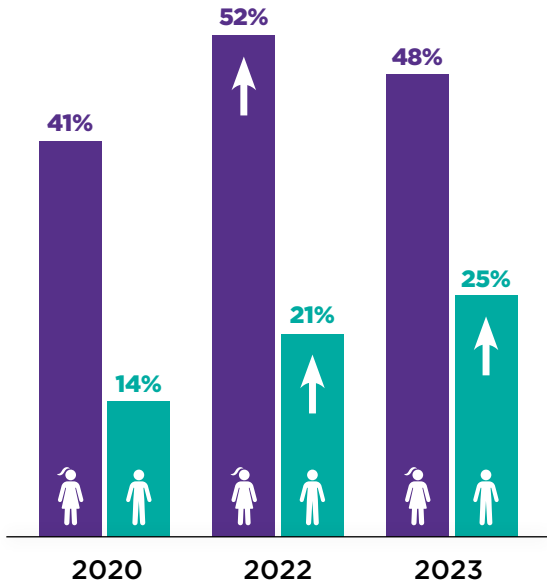
1. Not enough opportunities, clubs and teams to join locally
2. Men can't get the right level of training and coaching
3. Not enough funding for boys' sport



# GIRLS PERCEIVE GREATER BARRIERS AND INEQUALITIES IN GRASSROOTS SPORT THAN BOYS

## WHAT PREVENTS GIRLS AND BOYS FROM BECOMING A TOP ATHLETE OR PROFESSIONAL SPORTSPERSON

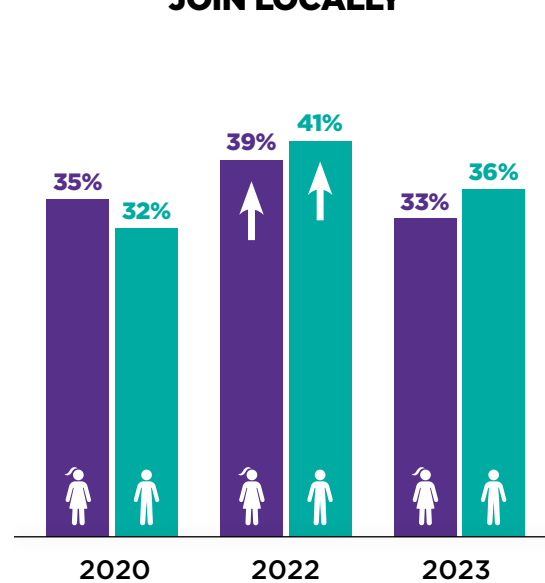
**THERE'S NOT ENOUGH FUNDING FOR GIRLS/BOYS SPORT**



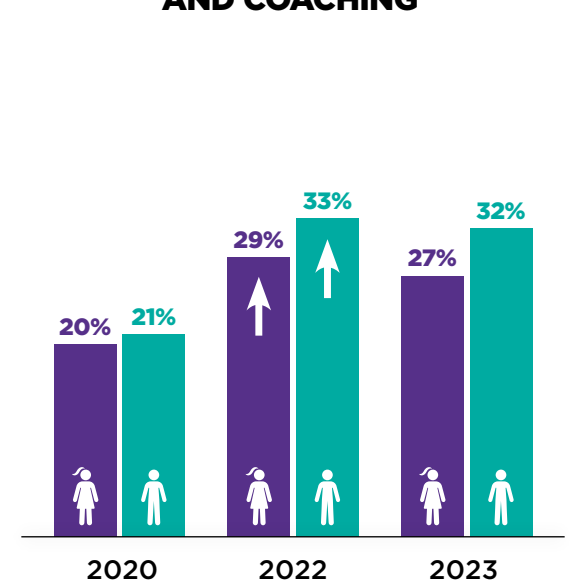
**GIRLS/BOYS DON'T HAVE THE CHANCE TO TRY ENOUGH DIFFERENT SPORTS**



**NOT ENOUGH OPPORTUNITIES, CLUBS AND TEAMS TO JOIN LOCALLY**



**WOMEN/MEN CAN'T GET THE RIGHT LEVEL OF TRAINING AND COACHING**



Agree / strongly agree

**NOTE:**

■ Respondents answered statements specific to their gender



# FEWER GIRLS NOW AGREE THAT PEOPLE THINK SPORT IS FOR BOYS, AND NOT GIRLS

## PEOPLE THINK SPORT IS FOR BOYS AND DOESN'T MATTER FOR GIRLS

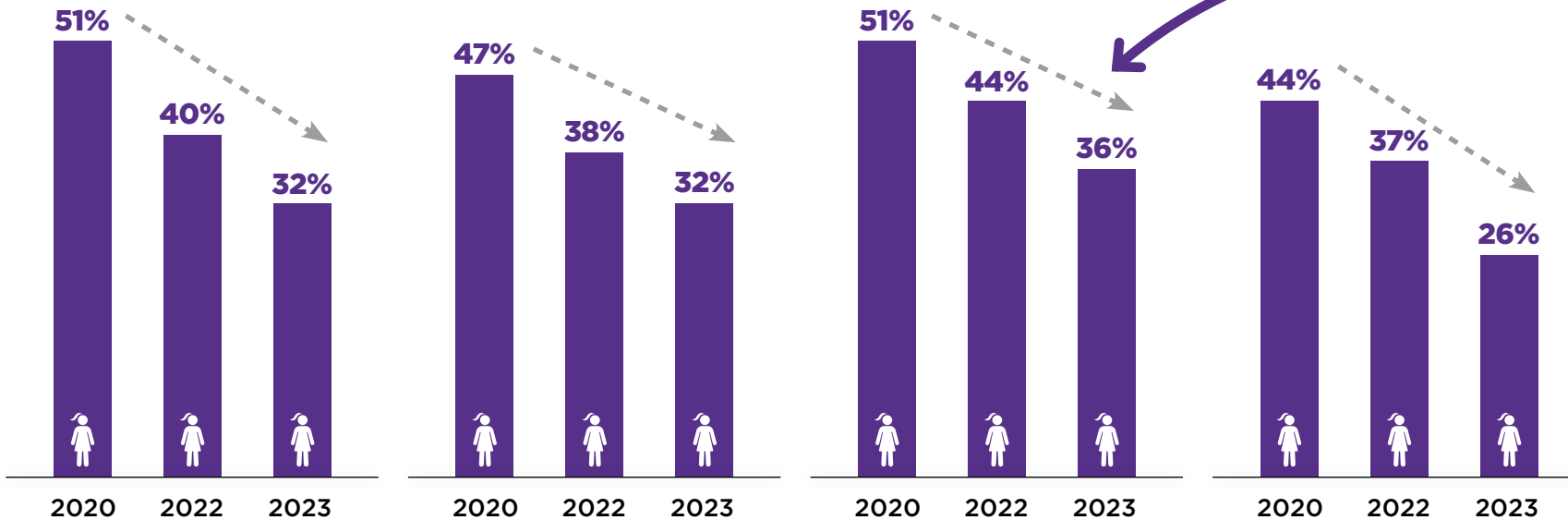
LOVE SPORT AND TAKE PART A LOT ALREADY

LOVE SPORT BUT WANT TO DO MORE

DON'T TAKE PART MUCH BUT WANT TO DO MORE

DON'T TAKE PART MUCH AND DON'T WANT TO

This belief remains a top barrier for this group of girls



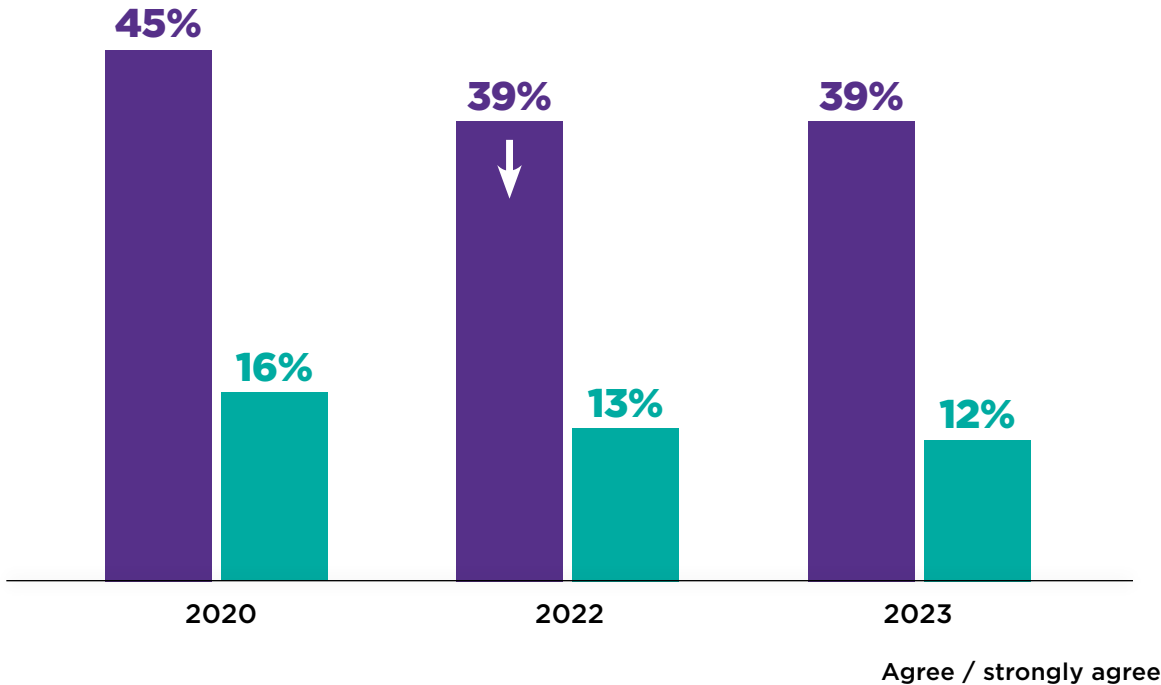
Agree / strongly agree

OVERALL, 32% OF GIRLS AGREE THAT PEOPLE THINK SPORT IS FOR BOYS AND DOESN'T MATTER FOR GIRLS IN 2023, DOWN FROM 49% IN 2020.

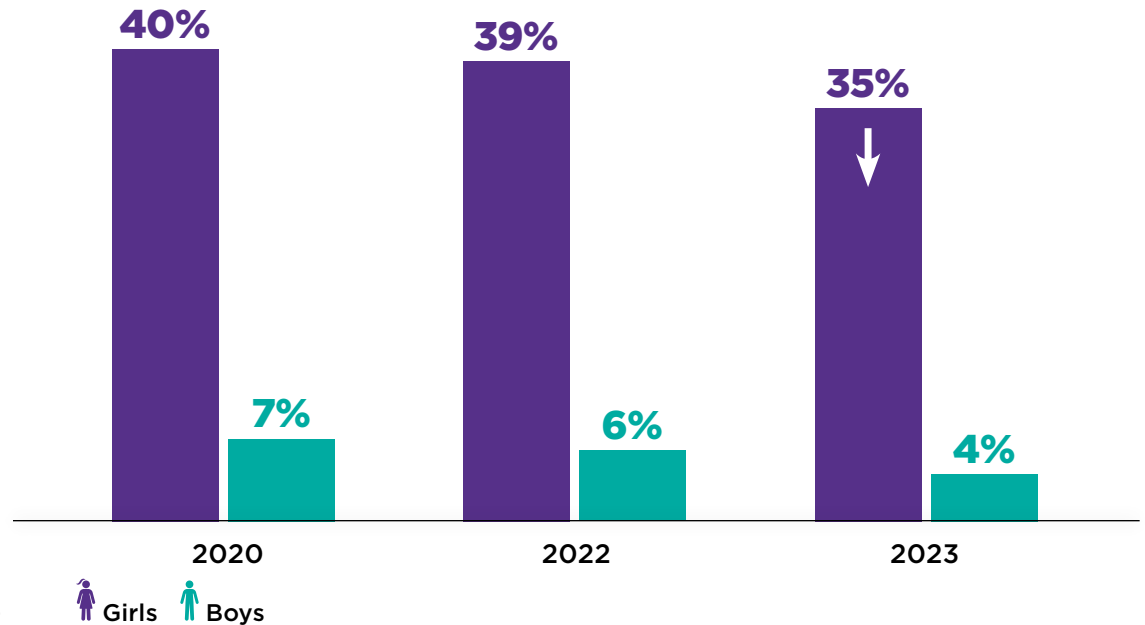
# BUT NEARLY 4 IN 10 GIRLS FEEL THEY'RE NOT EXPECTED TO BE GOOD AT SPORT AND AREN'T ENCOURAGED TO EXCEL

## WHAT PREVENTS GIRLS AND BOYS FROM BECOMING A TOP ATHLETE OR PROFESSIONAL SPORTSPERSON

GIRLS/BOYS ARE NOT ENCOURAGED TO EXCEL AT SPORT



GIRLS/BOYS ARE NOT EXPECTED TO BE GOOD AT SPORT

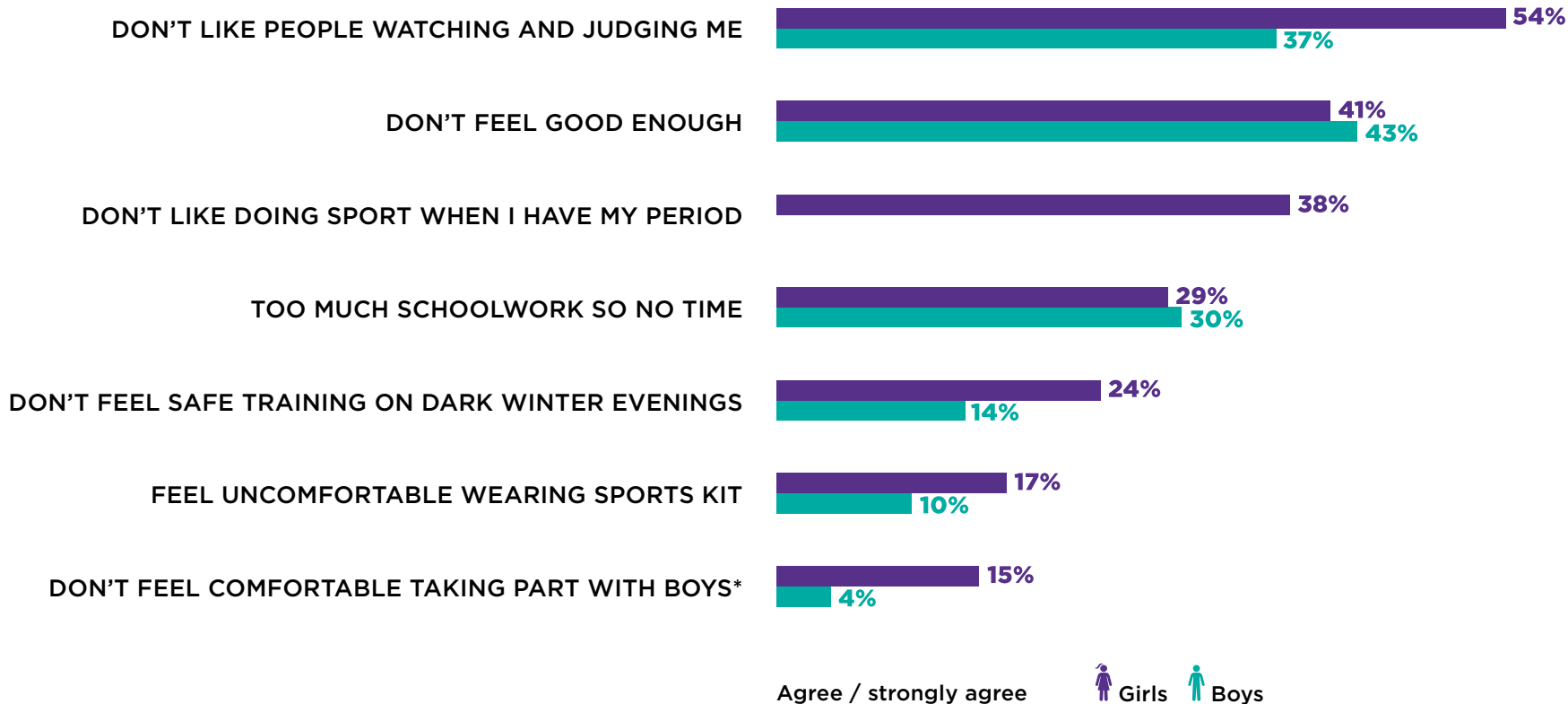


**NOTE:**

■ Respondents answered statements specific to their gender

# FEELING JUDGED AND NOT GOOD ENOUGH REMAIN KEY BARRIERS TO GIRLS ENGAGING IN SPORT

## WHAT DETERS GIRLS AND BOYS FROM TAKING PART IN SPORT AND EXERCISE



**TOP 5 BARRIERS THAT PREVENT GIRLS FROM TAKING PART IN SPORT AND EXERCISE HAVE REMAINED THE SAME FROM 2020, AND FOR GIRLS OF ALL AGES.**

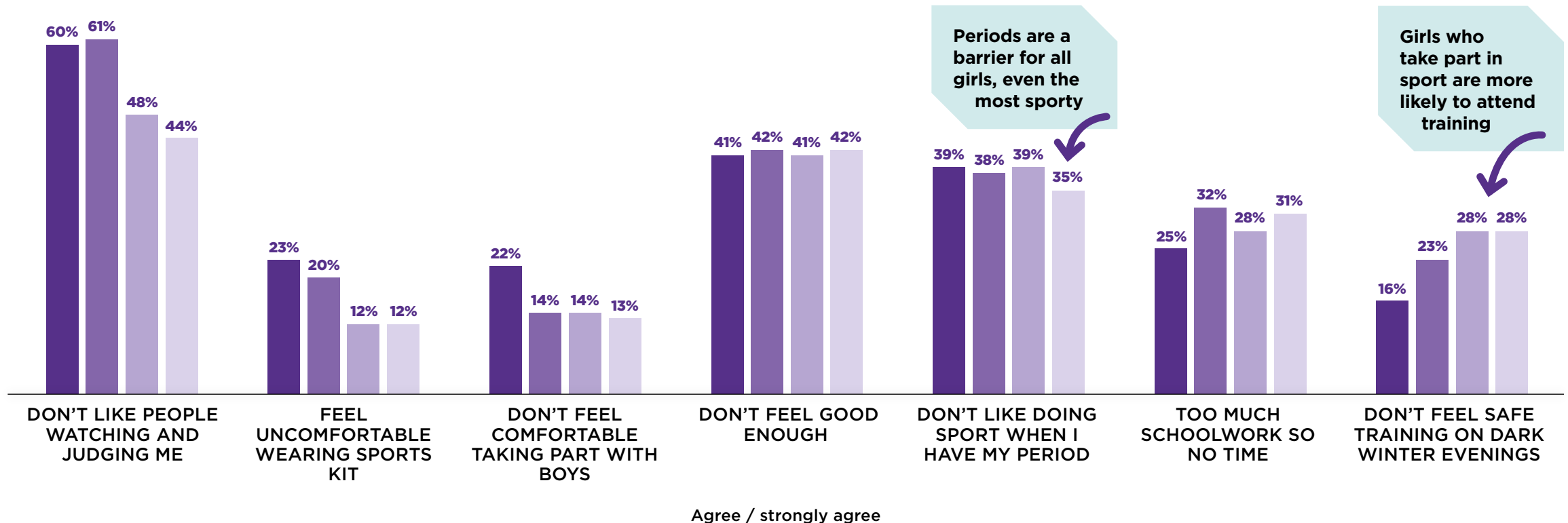
**NOTE:**

■ \*Boys statement 'I don't feel comfortable taking part with girls'

# FEAR OF JUDGEMENT, KIT CONCERNS AND TAKING PART WITH BOYS ARE SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS FOR THE LEAST ENGAGED GIRLS

## WHAT DETERS GIRLS FROM TAKING PART IN SPORT AND EXERCISE

■ Don't take part much and don't want to   ■ Don't take part much but want to do more   ■ Love sport but want to do more   ■ Love sport and take part a lot already

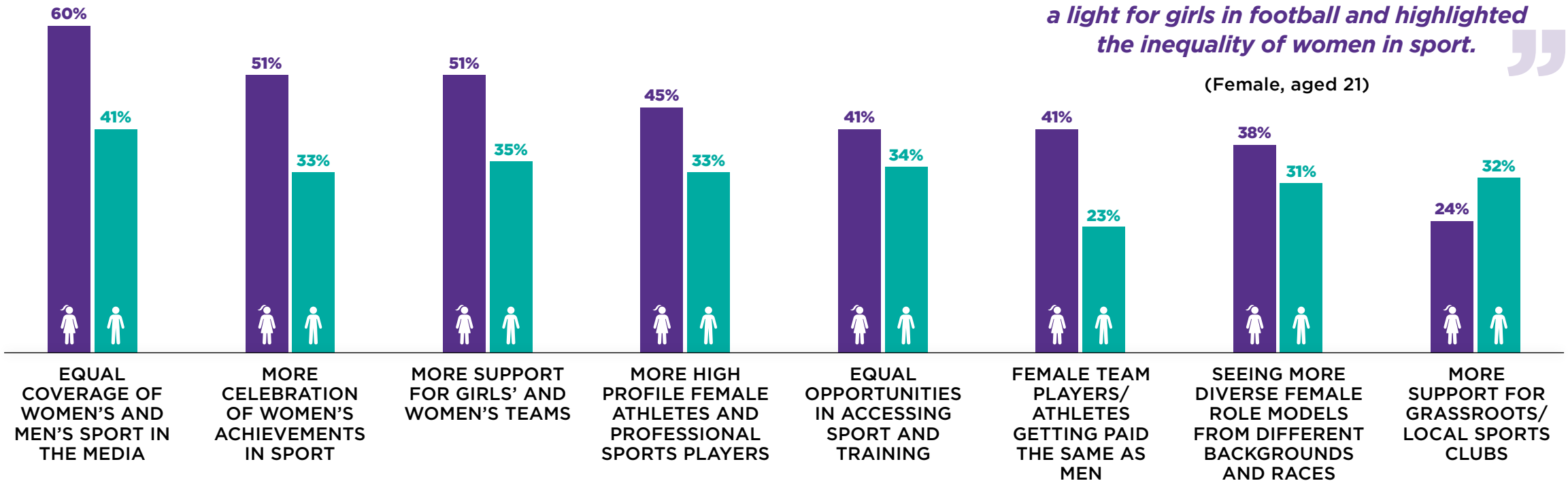


**WHAT CAN WE DO  
TO INCREASE GIRLS'  
ENGAGEMENT AND  
ABILITY TO DREAM  
IN THE FUTURE?**



# GIRLS WANT TO SEE GREATER GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT THAN BOYS

## WHAT GIRLS AND BOYS WOULD LIKE TO SEE IN THE FUTURE OF SPORT



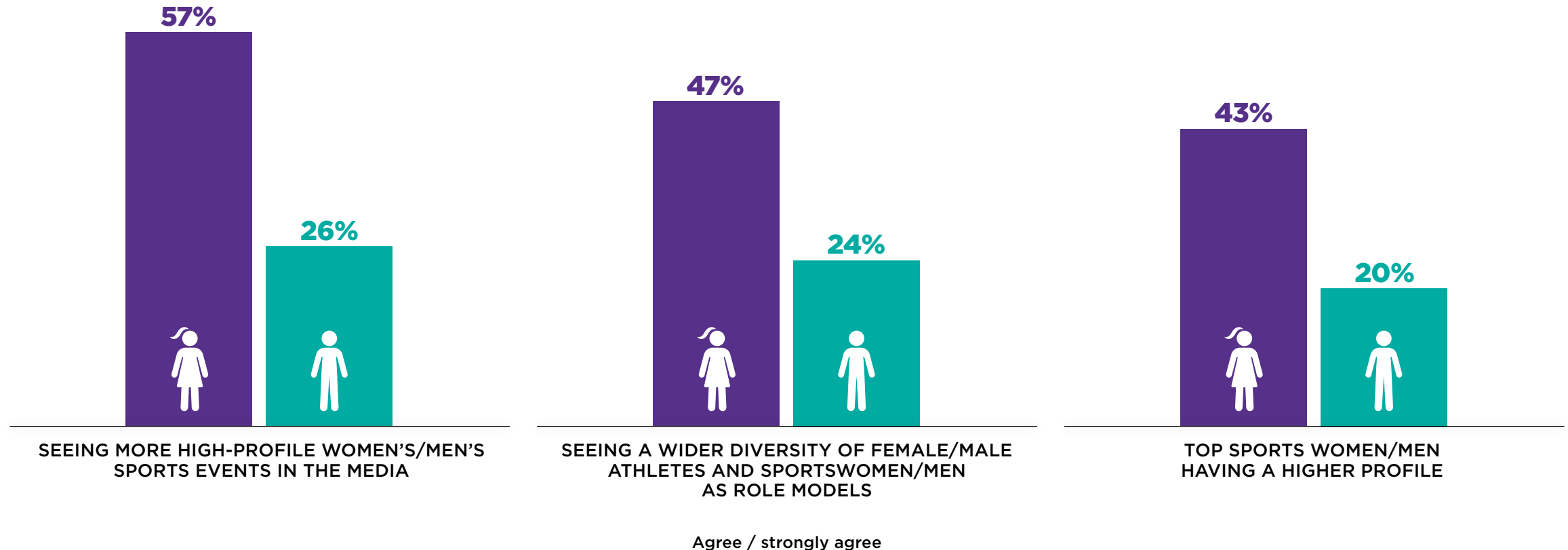
Agree / strongly agree

“ I absolutely love the Lionesses they are such a role model for girls and women of all ages, despite Spain winning. The WWC has shone a light for girls in football and highlighted the inequality of women in sport. ”

(Female, aged 21)

# GREATER VISIBILITY AND DIVERSITY IN WOMEN'S SPORT COULD ENCOURAGE MORE GIRLS TO TAKE PART

## WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE GIRLS AND BOYS TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN SPORT

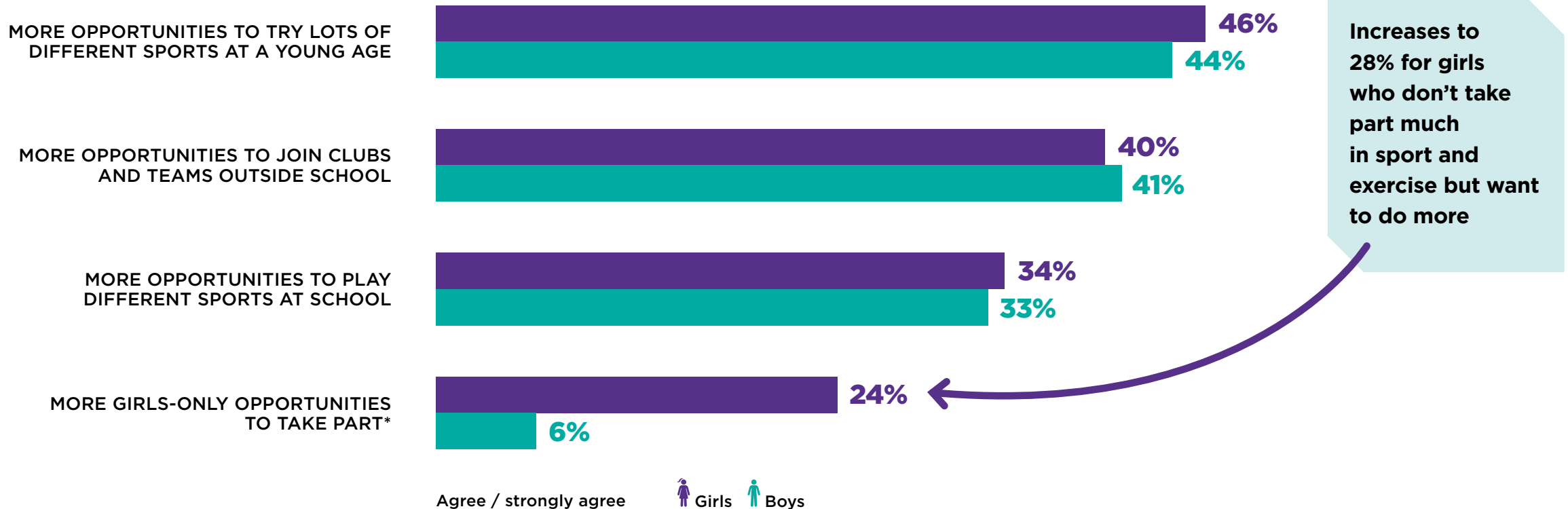


**NOTE:**

■ Respondents answered statements specific to their gender

# GIRLS AND BOYS WANT MORE OPPORTUNITIES IN AND OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

## WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE GIRLS AND BOYS TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN SPORT



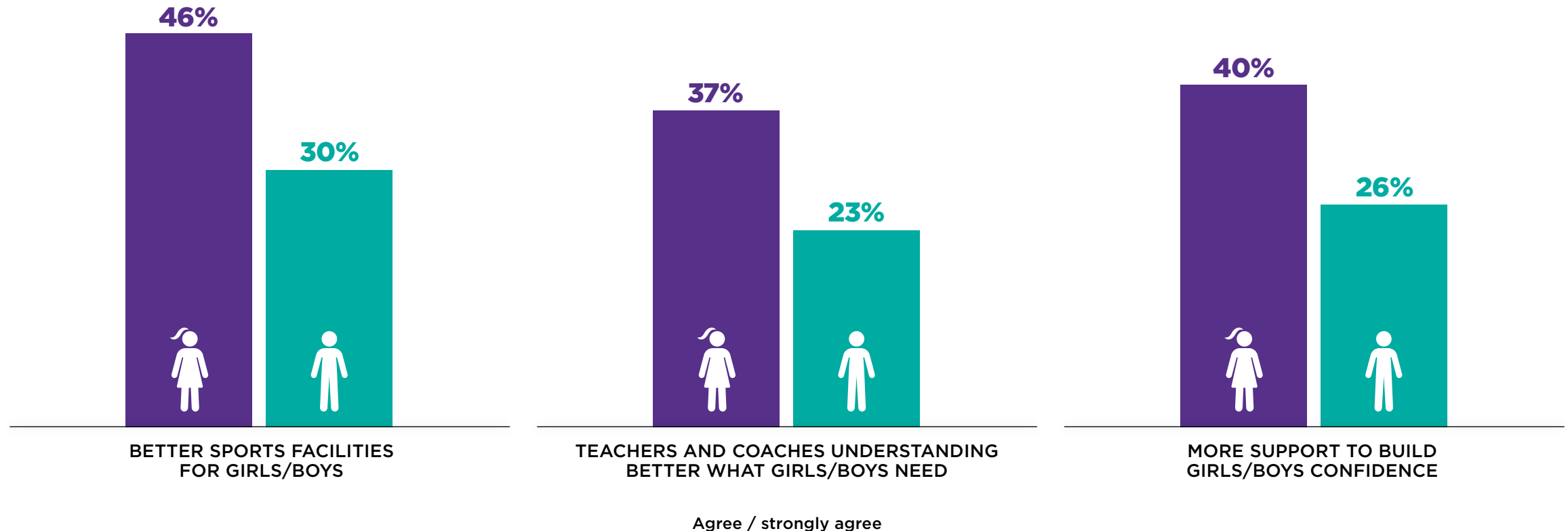
**NOTE:**

■ \*Boys statement 'More boys-only opportunities to take part'



# DEVELOP A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF GIRLS' NEEDS... ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

## WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE MORE GIRLS AND BOYS TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN SPORT



**NOTE:**

■ Respondents answered statements specific to their gender

**We would love to hear how you have used this research. Get in touch with us at:**

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