



Gender In Youth Sailing

Introduction

In 2011, the National Schools Sailing Association (NSSA) sponsored research into gender, identity and participation in youth sailing. This research was conducted by General Committee Member Elena Gaddes as part of her studies at Oxford University, and was supported throughout by the NSSA.

The research aimed to consider how girls responded to their involvement with youth sailing, and how it affected the construction of their gendered identity. The research addressed several main themes; the male/female ratio at NSSA events, the effect of sailing on gendered identity, both within the sailing environment and without, and the effect of competitive sailing on young girls confidence/empowerment. The research was therefore primarily concerned with formalising our understanding of the effect of participation in NSSA on young girls, in order to better inform us as to whether the NSSA should be working to increase female participation.

The research concluded that participation in youth sailing has a positive impacts on young girls. Girls involved with the sport were found to be more likely to be confident, and empowered. They were also more likely to base their sense of worth on their achievements and aspirations, rather than their appearance or sexual desirability. This sense of self extended out of the environment of the sailing world, and also had a positive impact on their behaviour in spaces such as school.

Based on these results, the NSSA has been working to increase the amount of girls participating in youth sailing, with a particular focus on attendance at our annual NSSA Regatta Week. Since this report was conducted, we have experienced a yearly increase in the percentage of competitors that are female.

A breakdown of this yearly increase in female participation (fig 1), as well as a more comprehensive summary of the research project, follows below.

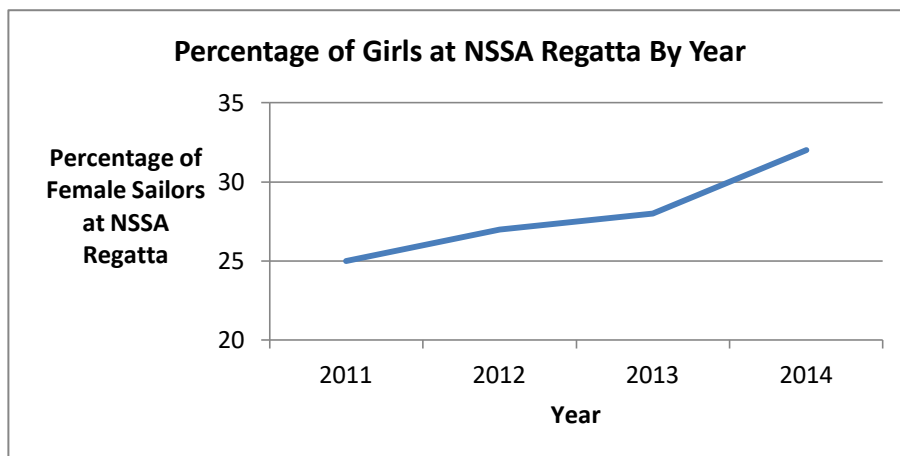


Figure One. Graph showing the number of female competitors, by percentage, at the NSSA Regatta between 2011 and 2014.

The Research

The research aimed to consider girls within youth sailing, and specifically, within the competitive sphere of the NSSA. The research was conducted throughout the summer of 2011, and involved the use of focus groups with young female sailors at both the NSSA Regatta at Grafham, and the NSSA single handed team racing at Upton Warren. In addition to these detailed focus groups, survey data was collected from 60 of the 72 female participants at the NSSA Regatta.

Working with young children offers many challenges for researchers, so before research could be conducted, ethics clearance for the project was received from the University of Oxford Ethics Committee. In addition to this, the researcher held an up to date CRB check, and conducted her research in groups to avoid at any point being alone with a young person. Through these measures, the research complied with NSSA child protection policies.

Distribution

As can be seen in Fig 2, of the 18 member squads that sent teams to the National School Sailing Regatta Week in July 2011, not a single squad contained more girls than boys. Only 1 squad - Tees and Hartlepool - contained equal numbers of boys and girls, and they were an exceptional case in that their team contained only one girl and one boy. A further 3 teams – Datchet, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire – took teams that contained no girls at all. Overall this meant that girls made up

exactly a quarter of the total number of competitors, which in 2011 was just under 300 young adults.

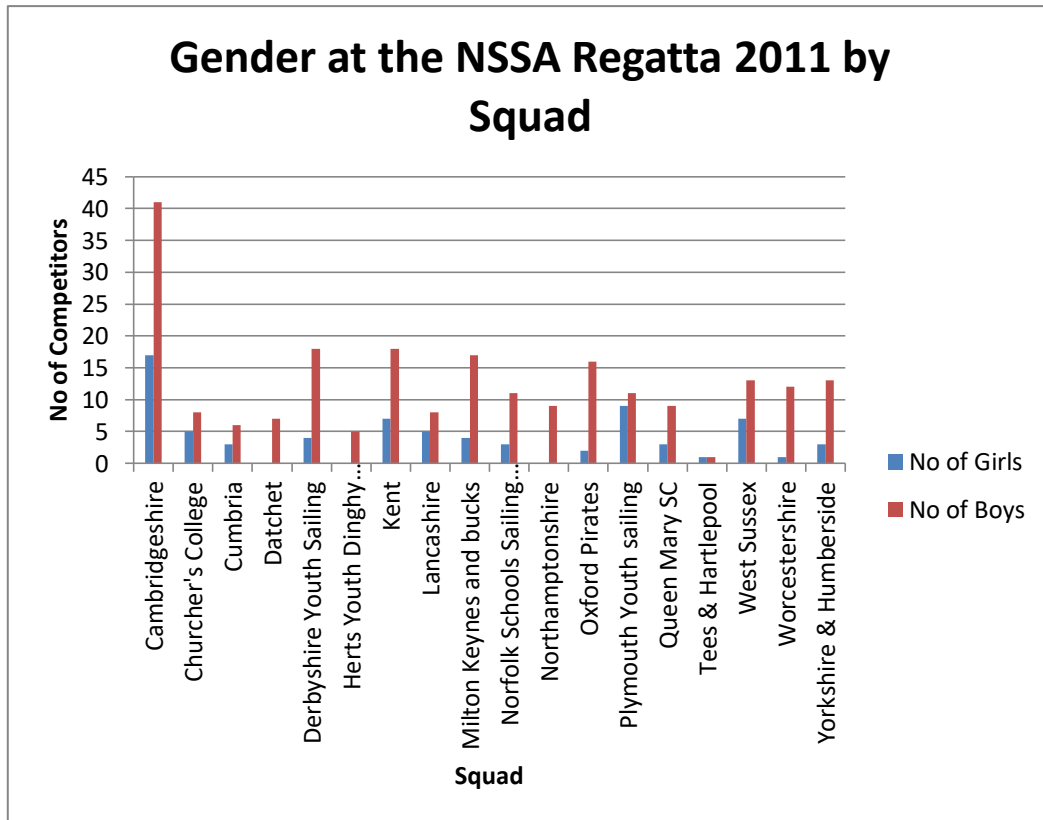


Figure Two: Gender Distribution at the NSSA Regatta 2011 by county squad.

Although there is a disparity in terms of attendance at sailing, there is an even greater disparity in terms of female achievement. At the NSSA Regatta a quarter of competitors were female, but only in one of the five fleets did girls manage to achieve a quarter of the top ten places. In three of the fleets no girls placed in the top ten at all. In the top twenty they were slightly more highly represented, achieving a quarter of the top twenty positions in 2 fleets. However, boys dominated the top ten positions of four out of five fleets (see figure three).

<i>Fleet</i>	<i>Highest Ranked Female Sailor</i>	<i>Percentage of Female Sailors in Top 10</i>	<i>Percentage of Female Sailors in Top 20</i>
Laser Standard	n/a	0	0
Laser Radial	17 th	0	5
Topper	12 th	0	20
Fast Handicap	2 nd	30	25
Slow Handicap	9 th	10	25

Figure Three: Female achievement at the NSSA Regatta 2011.

Identity

Participation in competitive youth sailing, and particularly NSSA events, was found to affect the way that young girls create their sense of self and identity. While it is important to stress that in any culture there will be multiple contradictory interpretations of identity, two key forms of identity were identified within the sporting subculture. One, described by research participants as ‘social sailors’, rested upon traditional markers of female identity. The other, described as ‘committed sailors’ mixed conventional markers of feminine identity with non-conventional ones.

For the ‘social sailors’, sailing is not generally a central part of their lives. Instead, they participate largely in sailing to take advantage of the social nature of the culture. To compete in competitions they must have a minimum sailing ability, but many of these girls achieve this at a young age, and then ‘coast’ at the same level, training rarely, and attending major residential competitions such as the NSSA Regatta largely to take advantage of the holiday atmosphere and opportunities to socialise.

For these girls, their feminine identity is constructed around a much more traditional interpretation of gender. This traditional feminine identity includes the idea of the female as gentle, delicate and glamorous. The ‘social sailors’ build up identities constructed around this ideal. These girls are the girls most commonly seen in short board shorts, tight rash vests and sunglasses. Status is attained not through sailing ability, but through a combination of appearance and male attention. There is a

perception that being a higher achiever than the boys will detract from this male attention by 'bruising the boys ego' as one girl said, so girls are either complacent about mediocre results, or play down achievements off the water.

In contrast, for the committed sailing girls of the sport, status was built not on traditional ideas of appearance, but on ability and talent. For these girls, appearance both on and off the water was shaped around proficiency and commitment, rather than conventional ideas of feminine attractiveness. For example, when girls were asked how they chose their sailing kit, and almost all of the participants chose practicality and price over appearance or colour. Being well equipped on the water translated into a commitment to the sport, and for these girls that was the only way in which appearance was important.

Breaking away from a version of femininity based on appearance and attractiveness meant that these girls achieved status in a very different way to the less committed sailors performing the traditional gender identity. For the committed sailing girls, respect amongst other girls and boys alike was based upon sailing ability, commitment, and attitudes to the sport. Successful results were valued highly, and sailing ability was a more significant divider of society than gender was.

Many girls described how friends were created irrespective of gender. Amongst the sport the fact of being female itself was not a basis for any unity or bonding. Many girls described how friendships were formed based on fleet positions as the week went on. People sailing at the same level made friends with those who finished around them, and so friendships were formed based on mutual sailing ability and respect for the other. For these girls, their identity as a sailor was far more important than their identity as female. The shared identity between those committed to the sport, irrespective of sex, was greater than that shared by the committed sailing girl and the less committed 'social sailor'. Girls were showing that the shared identity of 'sailor' was more important than that of 'female'. While in the sailing environment, they were able to create an identity that was based more on their identity as an athlete, a sailor, than as a girl.

Parallel Identities

For most girls, being back in the wider world meant a return to the traditional feminine identity formed around outward appearance, being conventionally attractive, gentle and delicate. At school, girls performed this version of femininity in order to fit in, and be normalised. According to the questionnaire, 84% of girls said they acted in a more conventionally 'girly' manner at school. They wore makeup, straightened their hair, and played down their sporting prowess.

While these girls performed a traditional feminine identity while in the wider world, they still appeared to retain a sense of a different identity to the girls who weren't involved in sport. Other girls conformed more fully to the normalised feminine identity, dying hair, wearing fake tan, and creating an identity completely centred on appearance. However, the committed sailing girls retained a sense of their other performed identity. Although they wore makeup and did their hair in order to be accepted, very few of them had dyed hair, or wore fake tan. Very few of them had therefore invested so heavily in the traditional version of femininity. For many girls, the confidence they found from the sailing 'world', and knowing they don't have to act in an overly feminine way in order to be accepted meant they had the confidence to perform a version of femininity that had less of an emphasis on appearance than that of their peers.

Empowerment

For many young girls competing at NSSA events, sailing appeared to offer a source of empowerment. When asked in the questionnaire, 77% of girls said that sailing had made them more confident within themselves, while 49% of girls said they felt that sailing had made them more confident in the wider world.

The obvious case of empowerment occurs in those who achieve high results and therefore feel more confident about their own ability. But participants in the study explained that sailing not only made them more confident when they achieved things, but it made them more confident simply by participating. For some girls, simply participating in something different from their peers gave them a sense of their own individuality and worth when they returned to school. They spoke of feeling that there was more to them than their peers, and about having more interesting stories to tell.

For some though, the confidence was about the whole sailing 'world', not just the competing and training itself. The alternative society of the sailing 'world' afforded them a place where their values were more respected, where their individuality was more celebrated, and where they felt less likely to be judged or measured on superficial markers such as conventional prettiness as they were at school. Coming to a place removed from the rest of their lives, and finding a place where there were people like themselves, offered many of the committed sailing girls the chance to see they could fit in without conforming to the same normalities they needed to at school.

Participation in sailing also affected the relationship that girls had with their body. Sport has always been associated with traits that are empowering to men: strength, aggression and competitiveness, amongst others. These traits have traditionally been a source of male empowerment, separating

them from the traditional feminine identity. For women, these traits were at conflict with their traditional performance of gender, and so were something to be avoided.

However, for female athletes, many of these traits are required in order to succeed at sport. In sailing, wind awareness and understanding of the mechanics of the boat are combined with strenuous work to control the boat. Strength in the arms, legs, and core body is required to control and manipulate the boat.

For many of the committed sailing girls, the development of muscles on their upper arms and shoulders was a cause for both celebration and concern. On the one hand, it went against traditional feminist ideals that they would have to equate themselves with in the wider world in order to achieve social standing, and yet on the other hand it was a show of strength, training and commitment in the sailing environment. While this muscularity may equate to commitment within the sailing world, it almost certainly loses this value in the wider world, where conventional ideals of the female body dominate.

Sailing can therefore be understood as contradictory in the way that it relates to female empowerment. On the one hand, girls reported a sense of increased confidence due to their participation in the sport. However, in addition to this, girls frequently described their discomfort with the demands of the sport on their body. The question remains whether the increased confidence from sport participation can override the loss of confidence that this body conflict over muscularity can create.

Implications for Youth Sailing

It is clear from this research that there is no simple relationship between participation in NSSA events and gender. At present, girls remain under-represented across the fleets, both in participation and achievement. However, it is also clear that for those girls who do compete, there are several ramifications.

Sailing fosters the creation of alternative gendered identities that rest upon skill and commitment, rather than appearance and desirability. These identities teach the importance of skill and achievement in young girls by rewarding it with social status. As such, this may lead to increased achievement in later life, as girls are encouraged to work hard for the things they want. This unconventional gender identity may also show both girls and boys the limitations of traditional gender stereotypes, and the potential that breaking out of these stereotypes can offer.

In addition to this, girls reported that this emphasis upon sailing skill was more significant than gender in the formation of social ties. Girls were more likely to befriend boys of a similar skill level than girls who sailed at a different level. This breaks down the emphasis on gender that much of our contemporary society relies upon, and teaches both boys and girls the importance of friendship and respect across the gender binary.

Sailing participation was also found to effect confidence and empowerment of young girls. Girls reported that sailing increased their confidence, but also described the effect of the demands of the sport on the body, and the contraction this could create.

In balance, it would appear that female participation in NSSA events has numerous beneficial effects for both young girls and boys, while retaining some inherent difficulties and contradictions. This research therefore shows that female participation in youth sailing is more likely to be beneficial to young people than not. This information allows the NSSA to make an informed decision as to whether to attempt to increase numbers of young girls participating at their events.

Summary of Key Research Themes

Key Themes Raised in Research	
Distribution:	In 2011, girls accounted for exactly 25% of the participants at the National Schools Sailing Association Regatta. However, they only accounted for 8% of top 10 positions across the 5 main fleets, and 15% of top 20 positions. They therefore remain under-represented in the highest positions of this event.
Identity:	Two forms of female identity within the sailing world were prevalent. Committed, competitive girls identified as 'real' sailors and were characterised by untraditional approaches to female gender performance – based on skill, commitment and strength rather than appearance, docility, or value within the heterosexual matrix. In contrast, the less committed sailors performed gender identity in a more conventional sense, with focus laid upon their appearance and attention from boys. Status, within the sailing world, it must be noted, was attributed to girls largely on the basis of their sailing skill and training commitment, rather than appearance or other traditional markers of female status.
Parallel Identities:	The performance of this alternative gender identity from committed sailors extends out of the sailing environment and into the wider world. Girls who commit to the sailing environment are less likely to have dyed hair, fake tan, or wear large amounts of makeup on a daily basis. However, this lack of traditional feminine signifiers, combined with their often muscular bodies, can lead to a lack of social status for these girls when outside of the sailing environment.
Empowerment:	Despite some image and body tension caused by conflicting norms within the two spheres, 77% of girls within the study reported an increase in confidence due to their involvement within the sport.