



# The female-friendliness of New Zealand's tennis clubs

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## ABSTRACT

Across an array of contexts, a 'female-friendly environment' is increasingly thought to positively impact participation levels for women and girls. The aim of this study is to provide insights on the female-friendliness of New Zealand's tennis clubs. Both numeric and text data were collected as part of the 2021 National Sport Club Survey. Tennis club representatives agreed more strongly that their club has suitable changing facilities for women/girls and that playing/training times are equally allocated than club representatives across the full sample across every sport. Within a typology of female-friendly clubs, most fit into the disengaged category in which the prevailing view is unfortunately that female-friendliness isn't an issue and that existing inclusion efforts are good enough. It is suggested that tennis organisations at regional and national level provide information and strategies to clubs that have an aspiration to become more female-friendly.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women and girls are consistently reported to participate in sport at lower rates than men and boys across the lifespan (Eime, Harvey, Charity, & Westerbeek, 2020). Women and girls' participation in sport has previously been examined from a range of perspectives. However, most of that research has been related to women and girls' physical activity, with organised sport forming a smaller component. Over the past 10 years, research has focussed predominately on the individual and social determinants of women and girls' participation in club level sport and much less at the organisational level (Casey et al., 2017; Hanlon et al., 2017). Community sport clubs are the primary venue in which women and girls engage in sport. Little is known about the influence of the environment in those clubs on women and girls' participation.

Across an array of contexts, a 'female-friendly environment' is increasingly thought to positively impact participation levels for women and girls. For example, female-friendliness is considered an important environmental dimension influencing adolescent girls' use of other public spaces including libraries (Agosto, Paone and Ipock, 2007). What exactly constitutes a female-friendly environment in various public spaces including sport clubs is still an open question, although we are learning more about it.



There is an opportunity to better cater to female participants in the wider sport marketplace (Dixon, et al., 2021) but we need to better understand the landscape in order to take action. In tennis clubs, female-friendliness has been a consideration going back decades (Boyle, 2019), but it warrants a revisit as clubs head into a post-pandemic operating environment. The purpose of the present study is to explore the extent to which New Zealand tennis clubs are female-friendly. This is done using numeric and text data collected as part of the 2021 National Sport Club Survey.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Gender and Community Sport Clubs

It is widely recognised that sport is inextricably linked with notions of masculinity, and sport settings are a prominent place where dominant gender relations are constructed, legitimised, and perpetuated. Relatively few studies have focused on the relationship between gender and community club-based sporting spaces (Jeanes et al., 2021). Sport clubs are not always supportive of female participation and the exclusionary capacity of sport clubs is well documented (e.g. Collins, 2014; Spaaij et al., 2014). Sport clubs that only recognise male sporting achievements on walls, and a lack of visibility of females throughout the club can be deterrent for female participation (Fowlie et al., 2021; Jeanes et al., 2021).

Women and girls who participate in sport can feel an 'us' versus 'them' culture, and find it difficult to socialise into existing club culture (Rowe et al., 2018). They can feel outnumbered, and this can be an intimidating environment (Casey et al., 2017; Rowe et al., 2018). However, the increasing number of women participating, coaching and administering sport, and considerable growth in participation in male-dominated sports are resulting in changes in the contemporary sport landscape (Jeanes et al., 2021) and this includes clubs as facilities in which women and girls engage. To facilitate women and girls' participation in sport, facilities, and the wider club environment, needs to be comfortable and safe (Oxford & Spaaij, 2017; Spaaij, 2013). Consideration of that environment ought to include both social and physical environmental factors.

### Social environmental factors

The way in which a club's culture is perceived, the extent to which decisions and allocation of resources are equitable and whether it has a welcoming feel for women and girls are important. A welcoming and inclusive environment is known to influence women and girls' participation in community club sport. For example, in Casey et al.'s (2017) study of female adolescents and sport clubs, over 80% of respondents agreed that the friendliness of the club, knowing someone at the club and friendliness of the coach were positive and influential factors affecting their participation.

The equitable allocation of resources, such as equipment and coaches are also key factors to providing a female-friendly environment at community sport clubs. Allocation of resources is often based on the value that a club places on a particular team, or group of members. As community sport clubs remain largely a masculine space, it is no surprise that the allocation of important resources often favours the men and boy's teams. In some cases, female players receive lower quality equipment than their male counterparts, and in others they are unable to have any access to equipment or spaces that are purely allocated to men's teams, such as the fitness centre (Ozturk & Koca, 2021).

Carmona and Ezzamel (2016) refer to 'spacings' as a way that space is portioned according to priorities, and as a demarcation of who holds the position and power within a space. In community clubs, male sport is often prioritized through the inequitable allocation of resources (Jeanes et al., 2021). Such unequal allocation of community sport club 'spaces' can include boy's and men's teams having priority



access to facilities, while female's teams were required to play and train on lower quality surfaces, smaller spaces and further away from the main club rooms (Jeanes et al., 2021; Ozturk & Koca, 2021). Also, allocation of training times is often based on men's team schedules because of the lower status of teams in the club (Ozturk & Koca, 2021; Welford, 2018).

Body image concerns are a critical component for women and girls' participation in sport. Awareness of their presentation of self, and consciousness of the critical gaze of others can be a major barrier for sport participation in females (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011). Related to this, feeling self-conscious is sport uniforms, and sport uniform requirements have been seen as a deterrent for women and girls to participate in sport (O'Neal et al., 2015; Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). By providing women and girls with gender appropriate, flexible, and comfortable uniforms that is distinct from the men's can foster female-friendliness in a community sport club (Ozturk & Koca, 2021).

### Physical environmental factors

The physical characteristics of facilities at sport clubs can either discourage or encourage women and girls' participation in sport. For example, we know that the aesthetics, convenience, and specific aspects of a physical environment such as footpaths can influence engagement in physical activity (Humpel, Owen, & Leslie, 2002). Importantly, the physical attributes of a sport facility also directly shape positive habitual behavioural (Owen, Humpel, Leslie, Bauman, & Sallis, 2004) and have long-term impacts on individuals (Sallis, Floyd, Rodriguez, & Saelens, 2012).

Historically, the physical characteristics of sporting facilities have been designed primarily to meet the needs of male participants (Pavlidis, 2018). In addition, club facilities are becoming outdated, which compounds the fact that many sport clubs not provide the range of amenities that attract and sustain women and girls. The physical architecture of a club is a spatial and visual reinforcement of the perception that women and girls are devalued and relatively invisible (Jeanes et al., 2021).

The majority of sport club changing rooms are designed and built for men's usage. With the increase of women and girls' participation at community sport clubs, the aspect of the built environment remains largely unchanged. Women and girls are often expected to use the same changing rooms as men, with open showers and benches, and urinals, which are unappealing to women and girl players (Jeanes et al., 2021).

The physical environment again reinforces the space as masculine, although women and girls can now occupy this, it remains symbolically and physically for men (Carmona & Ezzamel, 2016).

Perceived safety is a frequently reported physical environmental factor related to women and girls' participation in sport (Hanlon et al., 2017). This includes considerations around lighting, parking, night time environment and more. Crespo & Jabaloyes (2021) argue that safety should be top of mind for the tennis community in the provision of service and management of facilities.

### Female-Friendly Environments

Taken together, the social and physical environment of a sport club come together to create a female-friendly environment or lack thereof. These elements can be developed, managed and promoted to encourage participation among women and girls. These are important considerations for tennis clubs. Management and volunteers must make their female players feel special and bring them in as part of the club (Pavlidis, 2018). Improving female-friendly club practices may help address participation barriers reported by women and girls (Casey et al., 2017). The limited studies that focused on female-friendly environments within the community sport club context suggest both social environment factors and physical environment factors are associated with women and girls' participation in sport. Notably, recent Voice of Participant data (Sport NZ, 2021) highlighted how environmental elements drive the tennis player experience, which suggests a more nuanced understanding would be very useful. An exploration of the extent to which tennis clubs are female friendly and the nature of that environment should be multi-dimensional and contrasting these insights with clubs in other sports would be helpful.

### METHODS

The National Sport Club Survey (NSCS) is run in partnership between Auckland University of Technology's Sport Performance Research Institute New Zealand (SPRINZ) and the New Zealand Amateur Sport Association (NZASA). It is an annual snapshot of the management and operation of New Zealand's approximately 8000 sport clubs. Those clubs for which the 2021 NSCS project team had a contact email (n = 7027) were invited to participate and 1034 did. Of about 350 tennis clubs in New Zealand, 326 were contacted via email to complete the 2021 NSCS and 54 did so. Club representatives including chairs, presidents and secretaries across 80 sports and all 16 regions of New Zealand completed the 2021 NSCS. Two reminders invitations were sent over the two week period the survey was open.

The NSCS features a combination of numeric and open-text questionnaire items. One subset of items is included annually, while additional items within priority areas are introduced each year. In 2021, there was a particular focus on the environmental dimensions of women and girls' participation. Scaled items (seven point, agree/disagree) queried the extent to which representatives reported that their club had suitable changing facilities, allocate space/time/equipment, facilitate access to coaches, consider gender appropriate equipment/apparel address safety concerns. In addition to each scaled item, club representatives had the opportunity to provide further commentary on each environmental dimension with open-text follow-up questions. For example, for changing facilities, the instruction was "Please provide any further thoughts on the changing facilities for women/girls in your club.". Numeric data was explored using descriptive statistics and mean difference testing while text data was thematically analysed.

**Table 1**  
The Female-Friendliness of Tennis Clubs compared to All Sport Clubs.

Item	All Sport Clubs Mean (SD)	Tennis Clubs Mean (SD)
Our club is welcoming to women and girls	6.35 (.919)	6.44 (.746)
Our club has suitable changing facilities for women/girls	5.38 (1.687)	6.21 (1.095)*
When allocating playing and training spaces, women/girls are equally prioritised compared to men/boys	6.01 (1.261)	6.38 (.954)
When allocating playing and training times, women/girls are equally prioritised compared to men/boys	6.07 (1.236)	6.59 (.701)*
When allocating equipment, women/girls are equally prioritised compared to men/boys	6.12 (1.167)	6.45 (.938)
In our club, women and girls have the same access to coaches as men and boys	6.27 (1.069)	6.63 (.793)
Our club makes available gender appropriate sporting apparel/uniform	5.69 (1.468)	5.58 (1.640)
Our club addresses facility safety concerns particularly relevant for women (e.g., lights in the carpark)	5.31 (1.401)	4.81 (1.674)

\* Significant difference at .05 probability based on t-tests.

RESULTS

Numeric Questions

Club representatives responded to several scaled items related to female-friendliness. Scaled items were developed for this project and inspired by the work of Casey et al. (2017) and Sport Victoria, an Australian state sport organisation. Results for all sport clubs and tennis clubs are presented in Table 1. Overall, club representatives agreed strongly that their clubs were female-friendly across the various dimensions. Two distinctions were evident as a result of independent t-tests. Tennis club representatives agreed more strongly that their club has suitable changing facilities for women/girls and that playing/training times are equally allocated than representatives across the full sample - including all sports.

Open-Text Questions

In response to open-text items about the female friendliness of their club, representatives of New Zealand’s tennis club’s offered a number of insights. In addition to statements about various elements of female friendliness including safety, coaching and security, a typology of club willingness to provide a female-friendly environment has emerged. Several quotes are provided next in support of prevailing sentiments and the typology related to the female-friendliness of sport clubs.

A number of statements were made that capture current attitudes about the female-friendliness of New Zealand’s tennis clubs. For example, one club representative suggested that the timing of sessions may need to be re-thought:

*“Tennis... is still a bit old-fashioned particularly around provide a ladies mid-week interclub during the day but the men’s is held in the evenings (i.e., working women cannot always participate)”*

Another club representative characterised their environment as very friendly, particularly female-to-female:

*“The lady members tend to be very friendly with each other and new female members”*

In terms of addressing the safety concerns of women and girls, tennis club representatives offered a number of statements indicating that this was on their radar.

*“Safety and security facilities such as cameras and lights are positioned and used for the safety of everyone”*

Tennis club representatives reported a variety of strategies to be inclusive with uniform/apparel offerings. One club seemed to be purposeful about this:

*“We have an optional club hoodie in one generic style, club playing top that comes in two different colours (orange and white) and two different cuts (unisex and women’s)”*

Many club representatives described new and separate changing facilities for women that seemed to add to a sense of comfort and belonging. One club reported that *“we (now) have two designated changing rooms”*.

**Table 2**  
Statements Reflective of Attitudes Towards Female-Friendliness.

Tennis Clubs	Other Sport Clubs
<b>Female-Friendly</b>	
“We offer drills/coaching with a female (non-coaching staff) at weekends to enable females (to) to increase their skills without feeling intimidated by male staff”	“We have worked hard to build a pathway for girls and women at our club and are two years into a five year plan. We are often complimented by visiting teams for our setup for girls/women, which is nice” (Football Club)
“On club social tennis nights, new women will often be put into an all women’s game to help them feel more comfortable.”	“A lot of the equipment was setup for men, rather than women, even though there was more women in the club. However, this is changing and a more equal amount of equipment is allocated to women” (Rowing Club)
“Young girls may be placed in an all-girls coaching group if numbers allow to make them feel comfortable/more welcome”	
“For some of the older teenager girls we assign a younger female coach and this appears to keep the girls involved longer”	
<b>Aspirational</b>	
“This is an area we need to do more”	“We’d love to offer more programmes for women but are unsure how to find and encourage uptake from more women who have never participated in sport before, aside from those who contact us directly” (Volleyball Club)
	“A one-size-fits-all approach is provided to our female athlete by the coaches who are all male. Perhaps a specific and separate process should be put in place whenever female athletes join that ensures that any of their needs or queries are met through their journey with the club.” (Swimming Club)
<b>Disengaged</b>	
“Our women and girls do not ask for any special treatment from the club compared to our men and boys”	Women and men participate as equals and there is no distinction by gender of opportunities and spaces” (Croquet Club)
“My club has no issue with inclusion but does not have passionate people driving this so the status quote remains.”	“We don’t believe there is any distinction when it comes to a member’s gender. Each member is equally important in all areas of priorities and concerns” (Rugby Club)

### A Typology of Female-Friendliness

The full 2021 NSCS female-friendly, open-text data set indicates that clubs likely fit within a typology of attitudes towards female-friendliness. This includes clubs that prioritise and are proactive about addressing female-friendliness (i.e., Female Friendly), those that haven't done anything yet but have an ambition to do so (i.e., Aspirational) and those that don't seem to see a need (i.e., Disengaged). The subset of open-text tennis club data indicates that tennis clubs fit within this typology. Various statements from both tennis and other club representatives are included in Table 2 to reflect these three categories of sport club female-friendliness. The majority of all club representatives (including tennis) provided various perspectives on female-friendliness that fit into the 3rd category - Disengaged. The view from many in these clubs is that female-friendliness isn't an issue and that existing inclusion efforts are good enough.

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which New Zealand tennis clubs are female-friendly using numeric and text data collected as part of the 2021 National Sport Club Survey. The results of this study are uplifting in a sense but also convey the ongoing challenge of creating female-friendly environments for women and girls in tennis clubs. In New Zealand, tennis clubs seem to do a couple of things very well with regard to female-friendliness. Compared to other sports, respondents have strongly conveyed that their tennis clubs have suitable changing facilities for women and girls, which we know is important. Also, the tennis clubs mean score was higher than the across-sport mean score on equitably allocating space for playing and training.

Like clubs offering other sports, New Zealand's tennis clubs also have room for improvement in this area. Like all sports, tennis club representatives agreed the least about consideration of safety concerns. This is inconsistent with the call from Crespo and Jabaloyes (2021) that safety should be a top priority in tennis clubs. Allocating resource and priority to this matter should flow down from regional and national level as it will require a cultural change (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). On related note, efforts should be made to better understand the extent to which clubs are transgender-friendly and initiatives implemented based on those insights.

It is suggested that tennis organisations around the world that are operating at regional and national level should focus on clubs which are aspirational about female-friendliness at their club. Initiatives are likely to be more successful if club representatives see a need for change and are willing to put in the work. Likewise, tennis organisations should encourage clubs to actively promote the female-friendly aspects of their clubs as part of membership drives. Effectively, the current consideration of female-friendliness in tennis clubs is a market research exercise and insights should be reflected in the execution of successful strategies aimed at this particular audience (Monegro, 2021). Further, Monegro's commentary regarding the importance of digital tools for tennis clubs should be taken into account here - insofar as female friendly aspects of tennis clubs can be conveyed to audiences of existing and prospective members. Finally, we note that female-friendliness is likely linked to the presence of female leadership within clubs as it's been noted from other NSCS data that when women are in leadership, outcomes for women and girls are better.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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