

## Women

**Women problematic drug users suffer an additional layer of disadvantage and exclusion. They have a higher incidence of STDs, HIV and other blood borne viruses, poorer access into all services including drug treatment and high levels of discrimination around their roles as parents and women.**

Female problematic drug users generally do not access sporting facilities within the community. The women's sports initiative offered an opportunity to provide a person centred approach which met the individual needs of the clients. The universities have been very supportive by allowing the women to bring their children and this has frequently increased numbers who can attend sessions.

*"I enjoy going to the gym because I wouldn't have the money to go otherwise, so I really enjoy getting involved and a chance to meet up with the girls in the group. I like gym, football, and boxercise cause it keeps me fit and the staff are down to earth and friendly, it's a really fun day out which I really look forward to and know I will be supported."* Service User.

Durham, Teesside, Northumbria and Sunderland Universities have all offered gender specific programmes and these have proved to be very popular. The women are offered a range of sports and activities including trampolining, fencing and gym work.

Northumbria University sports workers have engaged a regular group of five previous and current sex workers in weekly self-defence dance classes which have been well received by the women through increasing their confidence and safety awareness.

*"I really enjoy all the activities at the gym it makes me feel much better in myself and I get to see everyone, all of the staff are helpful and friendly and I wish I could go everyday."* Service User

The Women's Project currently works with 32 female clients in South Tyneside and Sunderland. All of these women are affected by substance misuse issues and in addition have other issues that make them particularly vulnerable such as BBV, domestic violence, sex work, self harm or homelessness. In total 23 of the women have attended Durham University's sporting facilities with regular attendance of 10 women and 4 children.

*"We work with the women in three ways including crisis intervention, one to one work and through providing diversionary activities of which Durham University is one. The women have found the university to be very flexible and understanding of their needs, allowing children to attend the university which otherwise would be a barrier to the women attending. All of the feedback from the group has been positive and includes that the women do not feel stigmatised when they attend, they have also found the staff and university to be open minded and non-judgemental."* Drugs Worker, South Tyneside DAT.

The male dominated culture of sport can sometimes lead to women not participating in traditional sporting activities. For some it is not viewed as feminine or to their taste. Others find the competitive aspect of sport unattractive and intimidating. Evidence suggests that it is often the 'social' aspect that is the main incentive for women to take part in sporting activities.

*"I love going to Durham because it has made me much fitter than I used to be and it has helped me to build some confidence around normal people, it's better as well because normally when you go to activities with drug projects it's all men and you have to do things like fishing or football, this way you're with all of the girls and it's much better you can have a laugh and don't feel as self-conscious."* Service User

Feedback indicated that as part of broader support the sports interventions helped many women to tackle drug misuse by improving health, self esteem and reducing associated personal problems.

*"Since attending Durham I have seen a vast improvement in the women's wellbeing, it has helped the women to gain confidence in their abilities. Not only has the project helped the general fitness and wellbeing of the women, it has enabled them to gain confidence and feel comfortable in the surroundings of a university, since attending six of the women have enrolled into educational programmes, this is a massive step for them as most do not hold any formal qualifications. The staff have always been very encouraging and have gone out of their way to make the women feel very welcome. I would highly recommend this excellent programme to any drug project for their clients."* Drugs Worker, South Tyneside DAT.

Research shows that women tend to be more self-conscious about their body-image when taking part in sporting activity than men ([www.wsf.org.uk](http://www.wsf.org.uk)). This is particularly true for female problematic drug users, whose body shape may change significantly throughout their drug taking career. Research has found a significant negative relationship between exercise behaviour and social physique anxiety. Individuals lacking in self-confidence about their self-image are often less inclined to take part in sport and recreational activities (Lanz, Hardy & Ainsworth, 1991).

*"I think Durham is class because it gives you something to do instead of just sitting around and thinking about gear (drugs) all day, they treat you like a normal person and it's good because not many people treat you like a human being."* Service User

Research studying the psychology of sport among a variety of individuals and circumstances have generally found that there is a positive relationship between changes in mood and engagement in physical exercise (Plante & Rodin, 1990). All the women who took part in the sporting activities offered by the universities commented that it had positively impacted on their lives of confidence and self-esteem.

*"I go to Durham gym on a Thursday and really look forward to it because I get to see everyone and it gives me something to do and takes my mind off everything. I really love boxercise and I always pretend the punch bag is someone who has done something bad to me so I'm getting really good at it."* Service User