

Hey BASOCers!

I am writing on behalf of Edinburgh University Orienteering Club (EUOC) regarding gender equality in orienteering. This applies to everyone so please read on!

After listening to 'The Run In' podcast about gender equality in orienteering, many conversations were sparked in EUOC and we had a live discussion evening surrounding topics which had been raised in the podcast, linked below:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/00Q9nwUhSAkv4zRDXVeFa2?si=T6iiUVQCQjKwgMMVxZyYug>

Following on from our discussion we have formed a focus group, aiming to raise awareness about these gender inequalities and kick-start change within our sport. Since our initial event, Scottish Orienteering have hosted a panel-discussion around the subject. We have decided to write to other clubs to share what action we believe should be taken and why. If you don't have the time to read through all of this then please fill in our quick survey we have made:

<https://forms.gle/9yYxrwQZEjLHVgC9>

There are three main points of discussion which we believe are important to address.

Firstly, significant differences in winning times is a major source of gender inequality within orienteering. Within elite categories, when planning for the men's long race the aim is a 90 minutes winning time, whereas the aim for the women's race is only 70 minutes, but why? Do we really think that women are incapable of running for 90 minutes? Looking to other running-based sports, women and men run the same course in a hill race, or distanced-based disciplines (eg marathon, 10km, etc). Whilst we aren't suggesting that women run the same distances as men, it seems reasonable to ask for equality in winning times, just as there is in the sprint and middle disciplines. In addition to making women feel valued and capable, a 90 minute long race brings new challenges which women are currently missing out on: more game-changing long legs, more technical terrain reached and more tactics required to win to name a few. In Sweden, equality of finishing times was discussed and is being adopted by the Swedish Federation, with the IOF just announcing that increased winning times for the long-distance events, for women, are being considered. These developments are a step in the right direction, and proves that there is no reason why Britain can't be doing the same, and be the change we want to see.

This isn't just a problem for the elites, but every female junior orienteer faces discrepancies in course lengths as they progress through the sport. From as young as 14 years old there is an expectation that girls run shorter courses than boys. Just looking at the JK long in 2019, the M14 winning time was 45:32 (5.8km), whereas the W14s had a winning time of 32:48 (3.8km). The point has been made by many athletes that this gender differential from an early age can send out negative messages to girls along the lines of 'you run slow', 'you are not as strong as the boys', 'you are not as mentally tough', 'you have less endurance than the boys'. It is also important to consider what messages the imbalance gives to boys. Running for a shorter time inevitably leads to the expectation that as girls move up through the sport, they will run shorter courses, and feel less competent in completing anything longer.

Increasing women's winning times may be faced with opposition; afterall, it would mean changes to training plans for the athletes involved (in the elite categories in particular). We aren't suggesting these changes are made overnight, but more of a staggered increase from 70 to 90 minutes in order to allow athletes to adapt their training programmes. Looking long term, the more equality within the junior age classes means that by the time these female athletes move into the senior age classes

they will be used to running the same length of time as the men. the sooner we implement equality in all age categories, the sooner it becomes the norm and the sooner girls and women feel completely comfortable orienteering for a longer time.

The second point we believe important to address are selection inequalities within Britain. You only have to look at the membership of the squads on the British Orienteering website where you will find that the men's senior squad is made up of 14 athletes and the women's squad has only 10 athletes. The junior Talent squad has 11 men and only 7 women - why is this? Are there simply more male athletes meeting the standard and if so, why? Additionally, there is a tendency to take a full squad of men to international competitions, but not women. It appears that selectors measure the performance of men with that of women by looking at minutes behind the leader. Any such comparisons are meaningless and irrelevant of course. Women have to be compared with women and men with men. You may say that numbers are not important, and that if athletes are not reaching the required standard they should not be selected. However, the converse argument is that a talented individual who does not get selected, misses out on valuable opportunities to develop and gain experience, which they can draw on to aid improvement and they may resultantly become demotivated. If this is happening more in women's orienteering than men's then the knock-on effect is that talented women will be lost from the sport and up & coming athletes may miss out on valuable opportunities to compete at the top level. Furthermore, there is a big drop off of women in the W20 class, which is not reflected in the men's competition. Is this related to selections? Perhaps not for everyone, but it certainly is a contributing factor for some. The people in EUOC have numerous friends across the U.K. who have dropped out of orienteering because of 'unfair team selections'.

Finally, there is a growing field of research into female physiology and performance, yet there is still a lack of education around female athlete health, the importance of the menstrual cycle and the risks associated with Relative Energy Deficiency. Within EUOC we are working on educating our members on these topics and looking into how we can best support our female athletes. Other groups such as The SOA and ScotIOS are doing the same. However should the specific effects of the menstrual cycle on training and performance be compulsory training for all coaches? EUOC believes it should.

Ultimately there is a lot that can be improved within orienteering, even if you feel like there's no need for change or if you don't see the impacts of these inequalities – BASOC as a club has many key influential female members, which is brilliant, however there are still problems elsewhere. Gender equality is a systemic problem, but that doesn't mean it should be accepted; We should have a system where all athletes feel valued and recognised. So what now? Firstly, we encourage you to listen to The Run In episode referenced, start a discussion with other club members, and personally think about what you can do to support gender equality in orienteering. We would also be grateful if you filled out our survey (attached below) to find out opinions on these topics within the orienteering community - whether you agree or not with our goals we would appreciate your input.

SURVEY LINK: <https://forms.gle/9yYxrwQZEgJLHVgC9>

If you have any questions about anything mentioned, or anything you would like to add, feel free to get in touch at secretary.euoc@gmail.com, or email me at katrinamcgougan6@gmail.com

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and I hope to see you all back in the forest this summer!
Kat McGougan