



WOMEN-ONLY RACES RESEARCH: A SUMMARY REPORT

December 2024

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SheRACES unveils research on women-only race experiences

There's something special about crossing a race finish line. A sense of joy, achievement, community and so much more. Completing a challenge can be transformational, giving you confidence through the rest of your life.

Despite this, women are underrepresented in trail races, especially as distances increase. Some of the reasons are societal – women have less available time to train, and are not supported to continue in sport through key life stages such as puberty, postpartum and menopause.

SheRACES' original research, conducted in 2022, uncovered key barriers to women participating in races that events could address themselves. This led to the creation of [race guidelines](#) for female-inclusive events. These have since been incorporated into races from 5km to multi-day ultras, and around the world from Ireland to India – increasing female participation, giving women a better race-day experience and equally valuing our competition.

In our most recent research, we wanted to understand the motivations and needs of women to race in women-only environments, which are rarely provided by race organisers, yet have the potential to open up the trails to many more women. As well as conducting an open survey, we spoke to leaders of particularly underrepresented groups, such as Muslim women, women of colour and older women, to understand their specific needs in events.

This summary presents our initial findings, specifically looking at the experiences of women at women-only races. The full research encompasses more detail around race logistics and creating races for women and inclusive of women. A complete report will be available in due course.

400

women took part in our survey

Who took part in our survey?

Our open survey gathered insight from almost 400 women. 72% of respondents identified as White (compared to 82% of the UK population, according to 2021 Census data) and 14% identified as Asian/Asian British (compared to less than 10% of the UK population). 4% identified as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and 5% as Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial or Other Ethnicity, with the remaining 5% opting not to disclose this information.

The majority of women were aged between 30 and 49 (69%), with 19% over 50 and 12% under 30. When it comes to sports, 92% of those surveyed take part in running or walking regularly, 40% cycle regularly, 27% swim regularly and 10% take part in other sports, ranging from weight training and yoga, to team sports and triathlon.

Only 6% of those who answered the survey had never done any race or event before. 81% had taken part in a 5km event, including parkrun, while 59% had run a marathon or ultramarathon. 26% had done a triathlon.

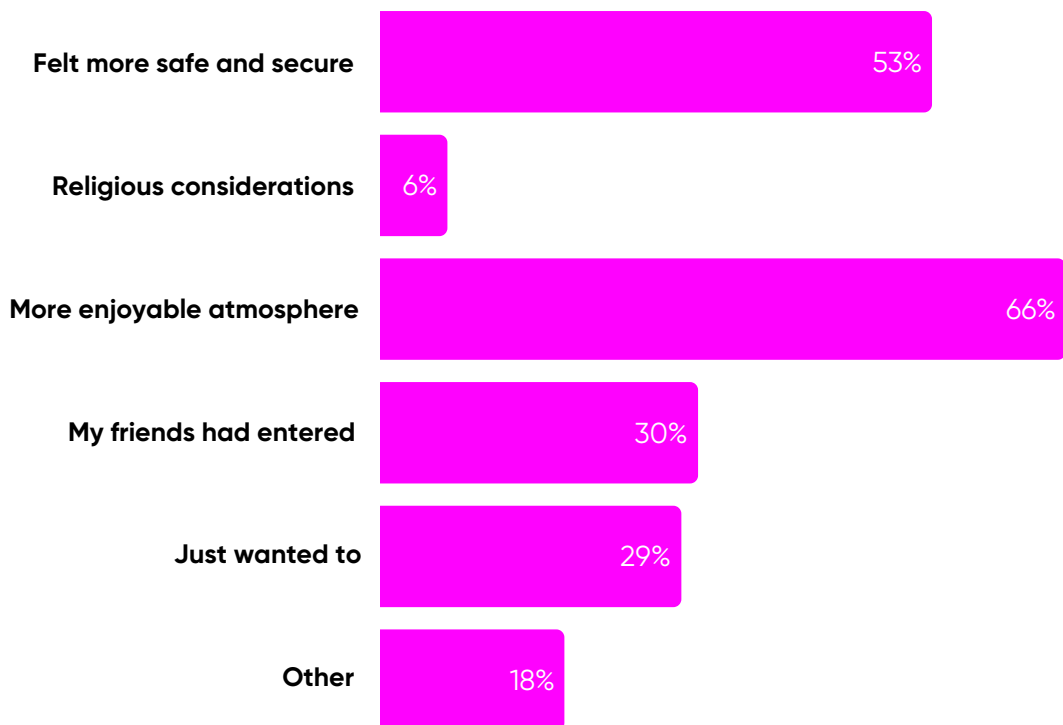
41% of the women we surveyed had taken part in at least one women-only race.

Key findings on women-only race experiences

One of the aims of the survey was to find out why women had chosen to take part in women-only races, and whether there was a demand or need for more women-only events.

We asked those who had attended a women-only event previously, why they entered (women could choose multiple options). A significant 66% said that it had a more enjoyable atmosphere, while 53% identified that it made them feel safer and more secure. 30% entered an event because they had friends doing it, while 29% wanted to do the event anyway, not specifically because it was women-only. 6% of respondents chose a women-only event due to religious considerations. 18% entered for other reasons, ranging from supporting a specific charity to wanting to race in a less competitive environment.

Q: Why did you enter a women-only race? (Multiple answers allowed)



53%

of women who took part in the survey said women only events made them feel safer

Common themes were identified throughout the survey in the comments and insights supplied by the respondents.

More enjoyment and support

Many women who also enter mixed races, and therefore can directly compare the two experiences, noted a sense of joy in the support they received when racing only with other women, being able to fully open up in their conversations and develop bonds with other participants.

"I think women-only races have an especially feminine, empowering and uplifting focus."

"It's an enjoyable atmosphere and great vibe... brilliant to be able to race just other women."

"It was a joyous experience, and that, for me, was because it was a women-only event."

Key Findings

Increased confidence

Many women highlighted that a women-only race gave them the confidence to try something new, whether that's a new type of event entirely, or a move to a longer distance than they'd previously raced.

"It was a very safe space for my first half marathon, especially with all female pacers as well."

"Less intimidating for my first bike event."

"It felt very supportive. It was the longest triathlon distance I'd done and I didn't feel the time pressure. It felt like I was racing on an even playing field."

SheRACES previously advised on the [SheUltra™](#), a women-only 50km trail race with no cut-offs and no pressure, raising money for women's cancer charities. In our research around that event, we found that many women who had taken part in the event now felt more confident to enter a mixed event having not done so before. In this survey on women-only races, some of the respondents had taken part in the SheUltra race this year, or were planning to do so in the future.



"I've wanted to do an ultra for a while, but perimenopause has really dented my running ability and I am a lot slower than I used to be and fatigue easily if I overtrain. So finding an event with no cut-offs and exclusively for women has really given me the confidence to give it a go."

Safety and security

"Only while participating in the women's only race did I really understand that I had never felt really safe in a 'mixed', normal race."

This quote sums up the experience of many women when racing. Safety means many things to women. For some, they felt safer in a women-only event due to the lack of harassment; for others it was the ability to wear what they wanted without fear of judgement; and for some respondents it was less potential to come to harm.

"It feels far safer to be surrounded by women only. There's no gross comments, no potential to be in an unsafe situation and all around more relaxed."

"I think it's important to have some spaces which are for just women – for religious and trauma reasons, as much as any. Women are having to be constantly vigilant about their safety, and it would be nice to just enjoy a run/race without having the concern about men."

"Women feel more comfortable and secure running with other women without worrying about inappropriate behavior from men. This creates a supportive environment where we can focus on enjoying the activity and encouraging each other."

Of those who had entered a women-only race previously, older women (aged 40+) were more likely to say they entered these events because they felt safer and more secure than younger women (18-39) were.





Sophie Power, founder of SheRACES and GB ultrarunner, took part in the inaugural SheUltra event in April 2024 and said of the experience:

"I was on the start line of the SheUltra, a women-only ultra in Wales, and wondered why it just felt different from normal. I finally realised it was that I had personal space around me and with only women could just fully drop my guard and relax. It was quite the contrast to the discomfort I had at the TDS [a 148km ultramarathon, part of the UTMB Mont-Blanc series] start line, where I was physically squeezed against men and could not even see another female."

Community and friendship

Many women in our survey noted that it was easier to convince less-committed friends to try a race that was women only as it was more welcoming.

"Getting a group of female friends together for a women's only event is extra special."

"I find it's easier to get my non-running friends to participate when it's women only. They feel less intimidated and see the event as a social fun experience."

"I loved seeing the groups of friends, groups of clubs, alongside seeing the front runners being competitive against each other."



Religious considerations

Some communities have different needs, which are not catered for at many events, particularly in mixed race environments.

We recently released [detailed research into the women's experience at triathlons](#). For this, we worked with several Muslim groups to develop [race guidelines](#), including the need for private changing facilities and adapted rules regarding race tattoos and headwear. Women-only races can more easily address these needs and actively encourage more women to participate.

"[I] prefer women only especially for modesty, for safety and security, as well as religious reasons."

"For religious reasons, I wouldn't like to be in such close proximity to men, where bodies can touch during the start of a race where it's extremely crowded."

Faster athletes also want to race in a female-only environment

While women-only races can be a fun and friendly experience, encouraging participants of all abilities and with less pressure around times and cut-offs, it's important to note that they can still offer a competitive element for those women at the front of the field. Women-only events give a good experience to faster participants too, enabling their competition to shine. It also means that everyone can clearly see the women's race, which can get lost within a mixed-race environment, giving it the full focus it deserves .

"As a fast woman I wanted to be at the front of the start line and try to win outright – not 'as a woman'."

"All the top women started together and could see each other."

The feeling of safety and security was also felt by faster runners, as well as those at the back of the pack.

"As a faster runner, it is quite daunting sometimes being at the start line surrounded by so many men who push and shove at the start, and I wanted to feel safe when starting and be able to run my own race."

"Although being one of the 'faster' runners means that we're quite spaced out, it's enjoyable to not have to race with the male egos."

Women supporting women

Not everyone wants or needs women-only races for themselves, being comfortable and happy with mixed races. However, what was notable within the survey was that these women were understanding of the need for them and supported them on behalf of other women.

"I am a strong ally to Muslim athletes who need this space to be female only."



Demand for races

The biggest takeaway from this research is that a hugely significant **87% of women answering our survey were interested in taking part in a women-only race in the future.**

Women-only races appeal to many different types of participants. From our survey, this includes:

- 'Front of the pack' athletes who have the opportunity to compete / finish at the front of the race, instead of among men.
- People entering their first race having the confidence to do so, feeling supported to enter, feeling comfortable in their environment – and women supporting others to be able to do this. This can give them the confidence to enter more races alone in the future.
- 'Slower' runners or those who sometimes do not meet cutoff times – and may be put off from entering mixed races due to this – feeling able to enter and having the opportunity to complete a race, be treated respectfully and be allowed to do this.
- 'Middle of the pack' or 'back of the pack runners' having the opportunity to feel like they belong / fit in / are no longer at the back of the pack.
- Groups of females who want to enter and/or run together in a relaxed environment.
- People who do not feel comfortable in mixed races for any reason.
- Women who prefer women-only spaces for religious reasons.

Women who identified as Asian/Asian British, or Black/African/Caribbean/Black British were most likely to say that they would participate in a women's only race.

Despite this, there are currently limited women-only events in the UK, especially those that offer female-only support at aid stations, including marshals and medics, which some of those in our research said were needed in order to feel fully comfortable to take part.

SheRACES Trail Series 2025

SheRACES Trail Series 2025

This research into women-only races establishes the genuine need and demand for these events. The survey results, in combination with our conversations and insight work with women's groups, has inspired the SheRACES Trail Series, launching in 2025.

We have listened to the needs of all athletes, and developed the most inclusive, supportive and enjoyable female racing experience possible.

We would love to see more race organisers offer these opportunities, and welcome them to work with us to ensure they fully understand the needs of a diversity of female athletes.

For more information:

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Race logistics

This report has established the clear demand for women-only races. The survey also asked several questions to clarify what a 'women-only race' meant for women and their preferences around race logistics.

We asked: "In a women-only race, as well as athletes, who else would you expect to be female?"

84% said medical staff

68% said aid station volunteers

64% said course marshals

18% said they would also expect spectators to only be female, where an event could be closed off

We note that for a trail or open road race, it would be very difficult to organise it so that spectators were only female, however this would be a possibility for a private race, for example in a stadium.

"As a hijab-wearing woman, the appeal of a women-only race would be the potential to race without a hijab or in less modest clothing (e.g. leggings, short sleeves) – this would only be possible if the entire event was female-only."

"I don't have a need for female-only staff, so personally wouldn't expect it, but would consider it a big bonus for staff and volunteers to be female."

Expectations differ, so it's important when organising a women-only race to be clear exactly who will be female in terms of the volunteers and staff, as well as athletes, when women sign up.



We rely on funding support to carry out our important research and advocacy. Please consider supporting us with a donation [here](#), find out more about what we do and how to help on our [website](#), or contact us about partnerships via hello@sheraces.com.