



SPÓRT ÉIREANN  
SPORT IRELAND

# Women in Sport

Officiating Report

#WomenInSportIRE





# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION &amp; BACKGROUND</b>	<b>4</b>
Introduction to Women in Sport	4
Introduction to the Research	4
Profile of Research Participants	5
Research Findings	6
<b>THEME 1: MOTIVATION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>THEME 2: CONFIDENCE &amp; COMPETENCE</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THEME 3: RECRUITMENT &amp; RETENTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>THEME 4: DEVELOPMENT &amp; PROGRESSION</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>THEME 5: TRAINING &amp; EDUCATION</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>THEME 6: SUPPORT &amp; RECOGNITION</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>THEME 7: INACTIVE OFFICIALS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>THEME 8: VISIBILITY</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>TAKEAWAYS FROM THE RESEARCH</b>	<b>17</b>



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# INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

## Introduction to Women in Sport

Sport Ireland's vision for women in sport is one where women have equal opportunity to achieve their full potential, while enjoying lifelong involvement in sport. Sport Ireland is committed to increasing women's sustained involvement in sport as coaches, volunteers, officials, club members, athletes, advocates, leaders, and participants from grassroots to the podium.

Sport Ireland's Policy on Women in Sport recognises the importance of supporting and developing women officiating in sport, with the implicit intention to build a healthy pipeline of women, increasing recruitment and enabling retention of women as referees and match officials.

The definition of an official in sport is "any person who controls the actual play of a competition and administers the rules and laws of the sport, makes judgements on the rule infringements, performance, time or score and to ensure the proper conduct of a sporting fixture in a safe environment".

For the purpose of this report, the term "official" refers to all officiating positions including referees, umpires, match officials, tournament referee, third umpires, table officials, scorers, TMOs, timekeepers etc.

Findings from the Irish Sports Monitor (2015, 2017, 2019) indicated a ratio of male to female officials at 3:1. This report aims to inform future strategies and plans through a more in-depth understanding of the status of women in sports officiating, and the social, physical, and practical barriers that face their success in these roles.

## Introduction to the Research

There is limited international and domestic research on women in sports officiating upon which to draw. The research and consultation for this report was conducted by Knight, Kavanagh & Page, a UK based research consultancy. The research was carried out as follows:

Extensive desk based research was conducted.

An Online Survey, constructed using learnings from the Sport Ireland Women in Sport 2020 Coaching Survey and distributed in the Irish sports sector.

The consultant also undertook interpersonal interviews with officials from key NGBs to discuss and delve deeper into the survey results.

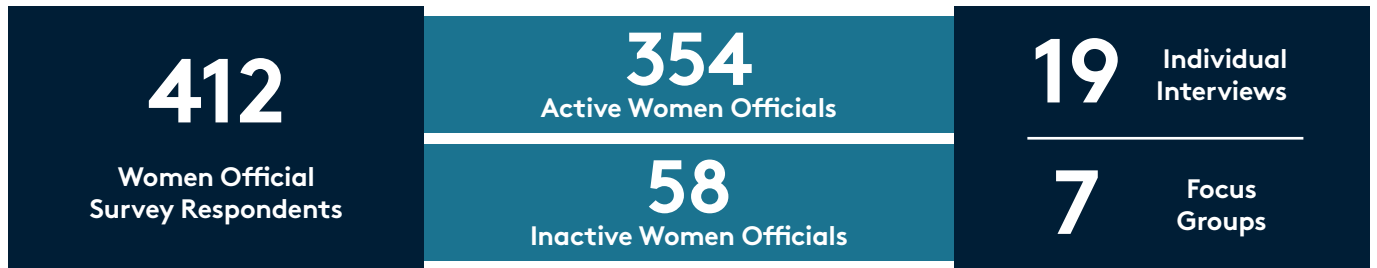
Qualitative Interviews/Focus Groups, 19 semi-structured interviews and 7 focus groups carried out online with current, aspiring and former women officials.







## Profile of Research Participants



**60**  
Different Sports  
Represented

**45%**  
of respondents have  
11+ years officiating  
experience

**32%**  
of respondents spend  
7+ hours officiating per  
week

**64%**  
of respondents  
officiate for mixed  
gender sports

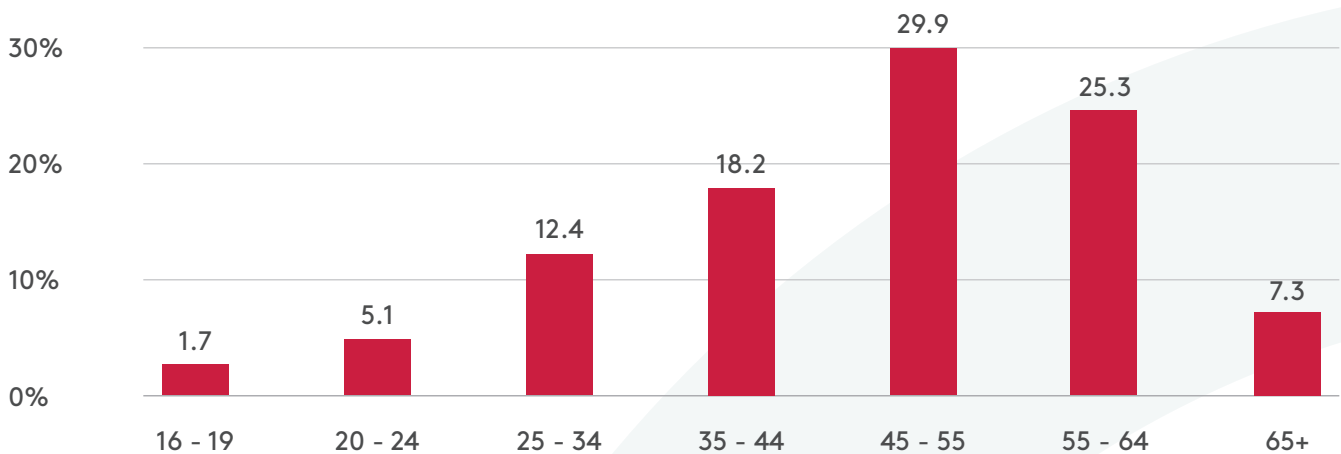


Figure 1. Women Official Survey Respondents by Age Range



## Research Findings

Following a thematic analysis of the findings from the survey, individual interviews, and focus groups, eight themes were identified. These themes are outlined below and explored in more depth in the following pages:



This report presents a balanced view of women's experience of officiating. Theme 1 will demonstrate that women are motivated to officiate and to progress in officiating, while theme 2 will show that women feel competent and confident with regards to officiating.

Theme 3, however, will explain that more than half of the respondents to the survey experience abuse or criticism when officiating and that many feel the pathways into and through officiating are not clear to women.

Theme 4 will explore how women are interested in progressing and developing their officiating and theme 5 will show that three quarters of the respondents have qualifications, and more than half have completed some form of training in the last two years.

Theme 6 will highlight that while three quarters of the respondents feel well supported by their NGB, that support can sometimes feel ad hoc and most feel more work could be done with regards to peer supports/ mentoring and recognition at club level.

Theme 7 will explore reasons why female officials tend to quit, and highlight the impact of a lack of time, the quantity of training required, the lack of support they can experience at club level and some of the problems they can encounter with supporters.

Finally, theme 8 will show how almost half of female officials had never or hardly ever been exposed to female officials in their own sporting career, but that many of those who had been exposed to female officials said it influenced their decision to officiate.





## THEME 1: MOTIVATION

Factors that affect the motivation of an individual to start or continue a career in officiating can be identified in the majority of themes outlined in this report. In this section a number of specifically intrinsic motivations that were identified in the findings are highlighted.

Women officials stated their main reasons for commencing and continuing an officiating career as:

1. To put something back into their club/sport.
2. To stay part of the club/sport.
3. For personal development.

# 50%

of respondents said they continue to officiate because they are good at it

# 53%

of respondents said they really enjoy officiating

Findings also confirm recognition of the fact that becoming an official enabled some respondents to go further within sport than they had as a player.

Extrinsic motivations were also identified, where 53% of respondents said that support they received from within their sport or NGB was the main factor in helping them to continue officiating, followed by unofficial peer group support (49%).

*"Once involved it can be addictive."*

*"Market the positives of officiating; love of the sport, still enjoy it, not the same as performing, form friendship groups, and great fun in its own right."*

*"I started refereeing at University to earn money but became hooked on the experience."*

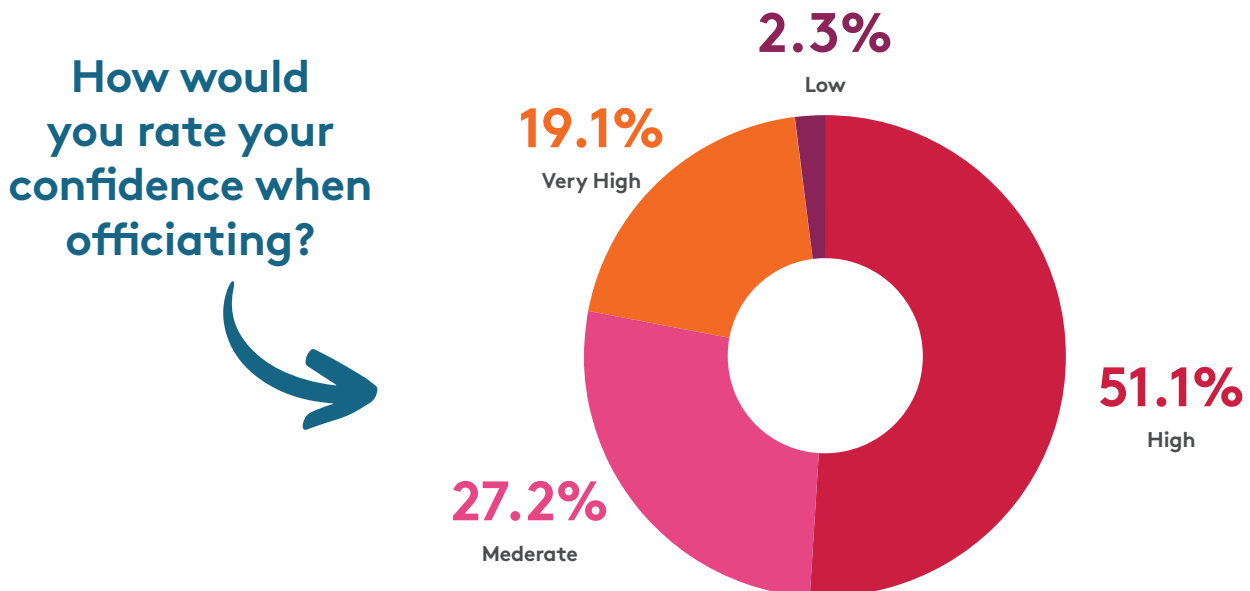
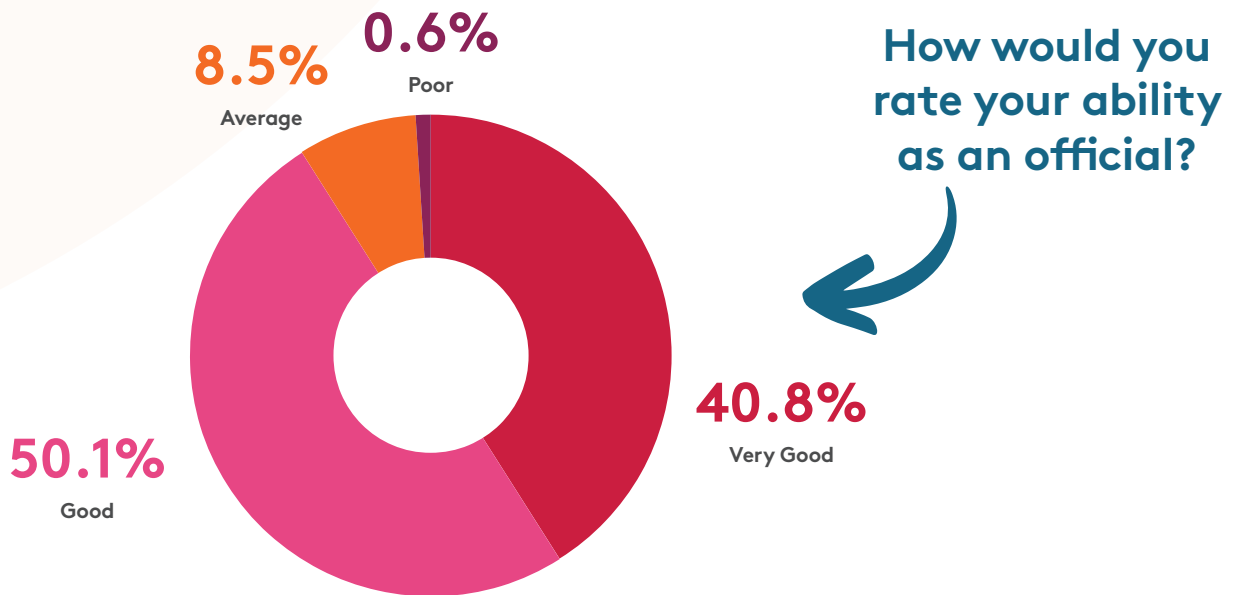
*"I started officiating at 14 and carried on, I have never stopped playing and love both."*





## THEME 2: CONFIDENCE & COMPETENCE

Female officials reported high levels of confidence and competence in officiating. 91% of respondents reported that their ability as an official is good or very good; and 70% of respondents rated their confidence levels whilst officiating as high or very high.



*"They (qualifications) are important to prove that you are competent."*



## THEME 3: RECRUITMENT & RETENTION

A number of challenges related to the recruitment and retention of women officials were identified:

**55%**

of officials indicated that abuse or criticism from players, coaches and/or spectators as a main challenge to women starting and staying in officiating

**41%**

of officials indicated that a lack of clarity in relation to pathways and progression is a challenge to retention

A factor identified in the recruitment of women officials was that they were asked in a way that appealed to them, such as, "why not you?" and/or "there aren't enough women officiating in the sport, so why not you?"

The opportunity for ongoing engagement in their sport and the related social interaction and friendship was highlighted as a significant factor in the retention of women officials.

Those officials who had taken a break from officiating due to injury, or to start a family identified that a lack of recognition of their prior qualifications and experience was a barrier to their re-engagement; as well as, in some cases a lack of communication during their time away from officiating.

Support from NGBs/clubs appears to be less structured and highly dependent on their capacity, ability and motivation. This was identified as a significant factor in the satisfaction and retention of women officials.

*"Just because you take time out to have a child doesn't mean you forget everything, and you shouldn't have to start from scratch."*

*"Getting returners back after an injury or children – need to keep in touch, communication = 'feeling part of it' very important."*

*"It would be great if when you go back after having a family your previous achievements and qualifications were recognised to some extent."*

*"Ask in the right way, any offer must be on the terms of the official, try to accredit prior experience/qualifications."*



## THEME 4: DEVELOPMENT & PROGRESSION

### Positive Elements

90%

of respondents plan to continue officiating in the next year/season

55%

of respondents have an ambition to progress to the next level of officiating

41%

of respondents expressed interest in becoming a high performance or elite level official

### Barriers

A number of barriers to progression were identified by respondents.

These included:

- Lack of knowledge about pathways and progression options.
- Lack of support and/or discrimination.
- Lack of opportunity, courses, and/or training.
- Age.
- Time constraints.
- Family and childcare commitments.

However, some respondents were happy with their current role or simply not interested in moving on.

50%

of respondents consider lack of knowledge of the pathways and opportunities open to them as a primary obstacle to their progression

*“Make people more aware that there are attractive pathways with exciting opportunities – European and Olympic, get to meet Olympians.”*

*“What do they want to do? Different role – training, mentoring?”*

*“Create more awareness of the roles and of the pathways and rewards available.”*





## THEME 5: TRAINING & EDUCATION

There is a strong desire from women officials to attend officiating courses, training and education. Respondents indicated that acquiring qualifications validated their ability and right to officiate at various levels.

**75%**

of respondents hold a current officiating qualification

**60%**

of respondents attended an education course/workshop through an NGB in the past 2 years

Challenges were highlighted around engagement, particularly with training and education opportunities. More specifically, a widely held view was that much of the training that is available to officials is not sufficiently 'consumer-centred' - in that it does not take into account the situations of its audience for ease of enrolment/participation. It was highlighted that more consideration should be given to the:

- Location of courses.
- Timings of courses (time of day, days of week, times of year).
- Duration of courses.
- The use of women as tutors and course leaders in education delivery.

It was highlighted that further consideration should be made as to the nature in which training is delivered. In person training was recognised as essential for "on pitch" specific training and assessment work. However, a blend of virtual and face-to-face delivery was considered favourable and more user-friendly.



*"Getting qualified reduces the imposter syndrome and the fear of the unknown."*

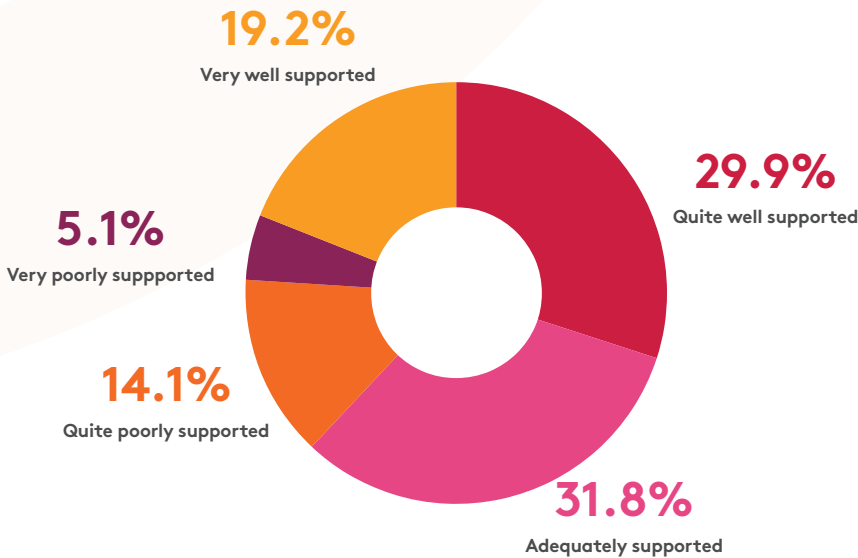
*"Qualifications are validation."*

*"[Our sport] has a very high failure rate on [training] courses, which can put off women where confidence and perceived expectations are against them."*

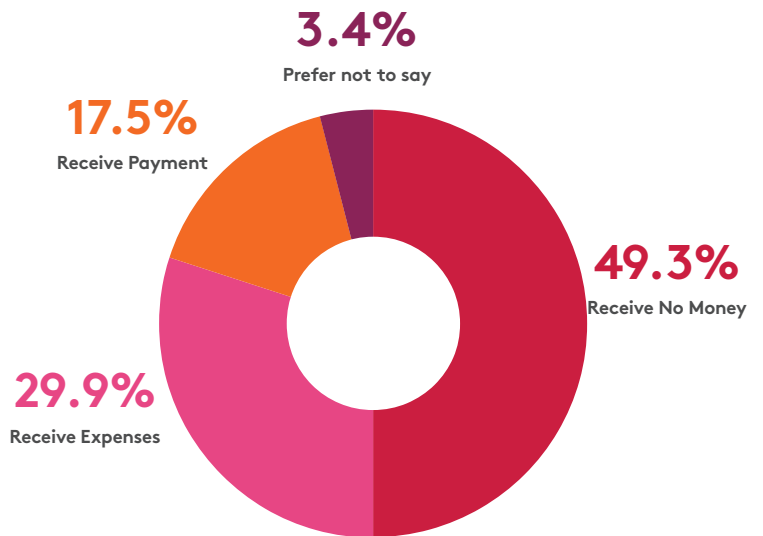


## THEME 6: SUPPORT & RECOGNITION

The majority of respondents indicated that they feel supported by their club/NGB in their roles as officials. It was highlighted that, in general, more contact and support is provided to those officiating at higher levels of the competition scale. Support for those officiating at below high performance levels was best described as ad hoc.



### 'Paid status' of Women Official Survey Respondents



When asked how they would like to receive support:

- 50% of officials would like to receive support in the form of feedback on their current practice.
- 48% of officials indicated they would like to observe (shadow) other officials in their sport.

Findings indicated that the establishment and availability of a peer support network was deemed very important. 76% of officials reported having what they consider an effective peer network available to them; 85% of those who are not currently involved with a peer network reported that they would like to have access to such group and that they would benefit from the opportunity.

Basic recognition and reward can be used to reinforce that the role of the official is respected and appreciated. Even actions such as providing kit (of the right design/size/quality) helps to make women officials more part of a team

*"Even a simple call to see how it's going would be great."*

*"The right kit is important - women are not small men and feeling good and looking the part help build confidence to play the part."*

*"Women need to work twice as hard to get half the recognition."*

*"More coaching/mentoring support would be welcome regardless of level or experience (of the official)."*



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## THEME 7: INACTIVE OFFICIALS

14%

of respondents were  
inactive officials

30%

of inactive officials had careers  
of 2 years or less

30

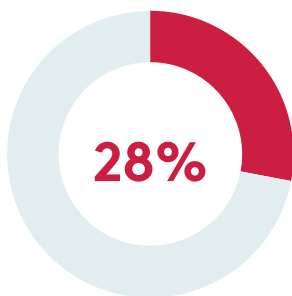
different sports were represented  
in the inactive official cohort

74%

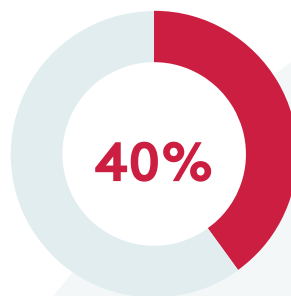
of inactive officials had officiated  
at competitive club level

The research identified a common journey to becoming inactive in officiating. Reasons identified were similar to the barriers to progression reported in previous chapters. The most common were:

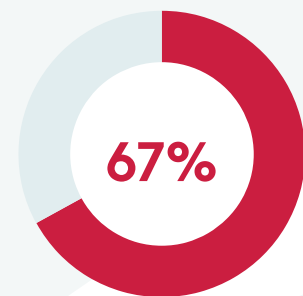
- Lack of time.
- Amount of qualifications and training required to remain up to date.
- Lack of support from club/organisation.
- Problems with supporters and/or participants.



of inactive officials said they  
intend to resume officiating



of inactive officials said 'they  
may' resume officiating



of inactive officials said they  
have never been asked to  
resume officiating

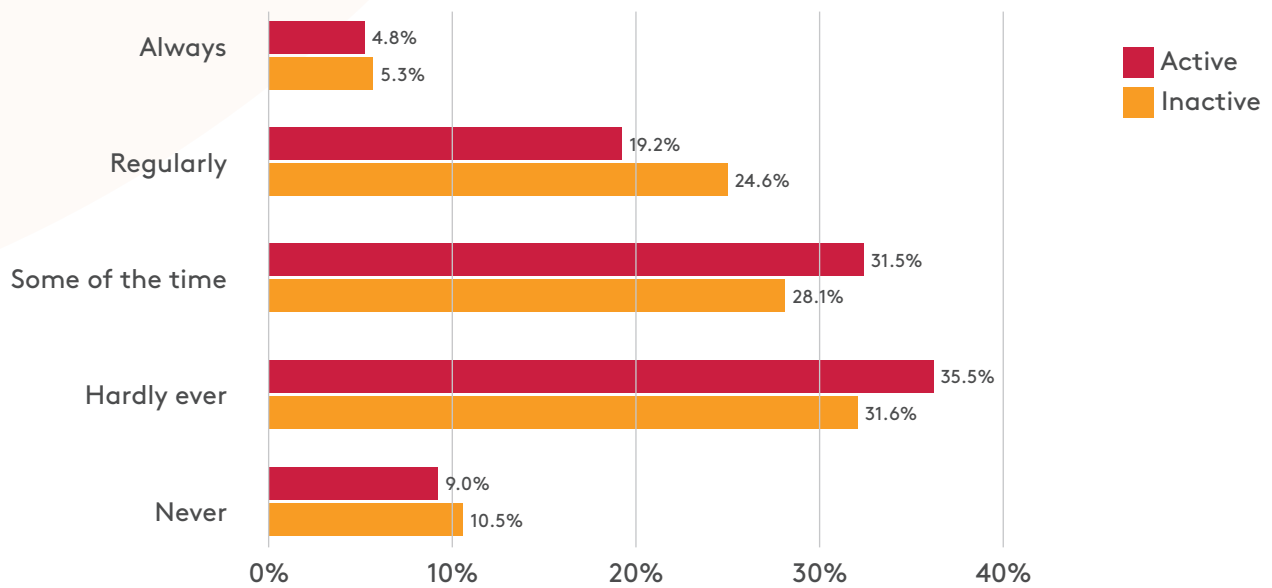
*"[Events] 3 weekends in a row in Cork, very difficult to access for many people and specifically women with families."*



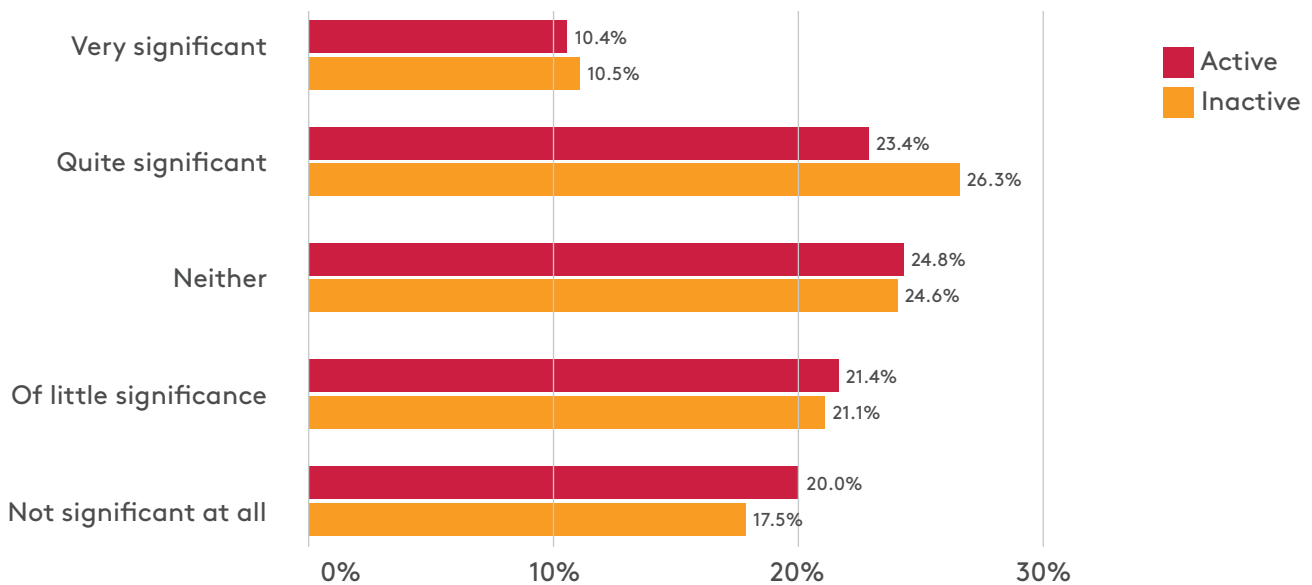
## THEME 8: VISIBILITY

Survey respondents were asked about their experience of women officials during their time participating in sport and whether this had an effect on their decision to become an official themselves.

Both active and inactive officials reported having hardly ever or never being exposed to women officials during their time participating in sport.



For a third of respondents having been exposed to women officials previously had an effect on their decision to start officiating themselves.



Focus group participants suggested that getting more young women into officiating roles may help to increase the appreciation of officials and over time contribute to improving attitudes towards officials.



*“Encouraging sports to qualify and use women coach educators and mentors would help normalise the idea of women officials and leaders.”*

*“Use female tutors and course leaders, normalise women in officiating.”*







## TAKEAWAYS FROM THE RESEARCH

<b>THEME 1: MOTIVATION</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote the personal and professional benefits of officiating.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 2: CONFIDENCE &amp; COMPETENCE</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tailor mentoring to provide development opportunities as well as assessment.</li><li>• Promote the competence of female officials.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 3: RECRUITMENT &amp; RETENTION</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore structures that allow for more flexibility in the role.</li><li>• Work to reduce the abuse and criticism of officials.</li><li>• Explore opportunities to attract young women and girls into officiating.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 4: DEVELOPMENT &amp; PROGRESSION</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Highlight and promote pathways and opportunities that enable women to progress to higher levels.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 5: TRAINING &amp; EDUCATION</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore more accessible and flexible methods of delivering training &amp; education, tailored to the needs of women.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 6: SUPPORT &amp; RECOGNITION</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge the needs of women officials.</li><li>• Provide appropriately sized kit.</li><li>• Develop and support peer networks and communities of practice.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 7: INACTIVE OFFICIALS</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore avenues to maintain communication with former women officials.</li><li>• Develop flexible and tailored pathways for inactive officials to resume officiating.</li></ul>
<b>THEME 8: VISIBILITY</b>	<b>ACTION:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore opportunities to showcase the success and presence of women officials.</li></ul>

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