



Phase 3 research report

Bristol Girls Can: Mothers in Bristol South and 'leisure time' activity – ready or not?

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Phase 3 findings



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Glossary

LTPA: Leisure time physical activity (non-incident physical activity)

BME: Black and Minority Ethnic

BGC: Bristol Girls Can

Methodology

This is the third and final phase of the social marketing scoping research for Bristol Girls Can, funded by Sport England. Other reports are available for phases 1 and 2 on request. This final phase focused on exploring the perspectives of specifically BME and non-British mothers about their readiness to engage in LTPA in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and their personal historical and cultural relationship with LTPA. Participants were purposively sampled and recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and via stakeholder networks. The sample includes a combination of participants in the target audience who can share specific insights about living in South Bristol and their non-British and/or BME contextual experiences of LTPA, and those who are from specific cultural groups (e.g. Somali and Sudanese communities) and who do not live in the target areas but are able to illuminate important insights about the role of LTPA in these cultural communities. The sample predominantly includes mothers (all of whom have at least one pre-school child) who engage in some form of LTPA, although that may have been disrupted due to the pandemic restrictions.

Interviews were conducted online and transcribed by a trusted third party. They were analysed thematically by the report author using NVIVO12. Interviews were conducted either by the report author or Tara Miran, a research assistant. Tara Miran is a Muslim woman, which is a context that allowed her to build rapport with the Muslim participants via shared experiences.

Interviews were conducted between January and February 2021, during the UK's third national lockdown.

Interviews followed an interview guide that explored the following topic areas:

- Experiences of the local community, community services, neighbourhood and social networks
- Experiences of COVID-19 restrictions
- Mundane, routine family life
- Personal history of LTPA
- Current and planned LTPA participation
- Cultural relationship with LTPA and physical cultures (bodies)
- Bristol Girls Can project offerings, activities and communications campaign ideas

Sample

Pseudonym	Children	Cultural origin	Activity level	Geographic area	Other context	Local children's centre
Sula	11, 9, 6, 3yrs	Somali	Inactive during COVID-19 but normally active	Out of target area (but living in 20% most deprived area)	Very engaged in LTPA and various sports	St Pauls
Mona	7 and 3yrs	Pakistani	Somewhat active	Lives out of area, not in most deprived areas	Oldest child has special educational needs	Compass Point
Mika	17yrs and 3.5	Polish	Somewhat active	In target area – 10% most deprived area	Single mother	Knowle west

Rav	13 months	Sudanese	Low activity	Out of target area, 10% most deprived	Poor level of English	
Kiki	8yrs and 11months	Caribbean/British	Inactive due to COVID	Out of target area, 10% most deprived	Single mother, carer for her grandmother	Withywood/Bis hopwood
Suma	2 yrs	Somali	Inactive due to COVID	Out of target area, not in most deprived areas	Student midwife	St Pauls
Winnie	11 months and 5 years	Sudanese	Inactive due to COVID	Out of target area, not in most deprived areas	Oldest child is wheelchair user	Compass Point
Sami	3, 6 and 7yrs	Somali	Somewhat active	Target area, 20% most deprived	Single mother	Redcliffe

Insights from all three phases of the Bristol Girls Can scoping research will form actionable insights that will underpin social marketing activities, offers, communications and engagement strategies.

Findings

This report focuses on the key themes of

- Mothering and LTPA
- Experiences of living through COVID-19 restrictions
- Readiness for LTPA
- Cultural context of LTPA
- Communicating the BGC offer

However, it is important to highlight that for participants living in the most deprived areas, a lack of financial and social support creates an important context for their participation, or lack of participation, in LTPA. Firstly, lack of opportunity for paid childcare means that some forms of LTPA and other leisure are off the radar:

“I would say childcare for certain parents, but that’s a big thing, money-wise. Some parents probably wouldn’t... That would stop them from exercising, or stop them from going out, for example, if they ain’t got no-one to have their kids” (Kiki).

Secondly, some participants reported a lack of trust they felt in their local area and difficulties they had faced in building relationships. All participants were asked what their local area was like. Corona virus has exacerbated, but not caused, the disconnect some people feel with their neighbours:

“I would say... I’m not going to say... If you walk round and talk to random people but, at the moment, it’s Corona. Even after Corona, it’s still, ‘would you even want to do that because is it even safe to do that?’ if that makes sense. Going round to actually talk face-to-face – that might be... because of what’s going on” (Kiki).

Kiki believes the lack of community cohesion is a reason people struggle to get involved in community events and groups. However, the Children’s Centres have been vital for some, helping to navigate an untrustworthy environment:

“Everyone knows me and they really help me to get out of the isolation they put me in the courses and things - she always considers me for everything so that can be I would say the social, family liaison in the children centre they are really, really good, very supportive I would say” (Kiki).

Locating the physical activity sessions at the children’s centre is most appealing. Mona was asked who should run the physical activity sessions:

“I think mostly people who work in children’s centres because I have seen so many faces in most of the groups I think mums will join it” (Mona).

Thirdly, some respondents reflected on the way their physical environment affects their mood and ability to cope, which has an impact on their readiness to get involved with home exercising, and to engage with people in their communities through physical activity sessions:

I: Okay and how is your space or how would you describe your living conditions?

R: Very bad.

I: Why is that?

R: Actually it’s quite a small house especially for my kids it has small rooms and it’s a very tiny flat and I’m looking out for another place and I’ve also applied for council houses but it’s taking too much time.

I: How many bedrooms do you have?

R: We have two bedrooms. It’s very small, it’s impossible to do any physical activity with kids (Mika).

Like the two respondents quoted here, both of whom live in the 10% most deprived areas, the level of socio-economic deprivation for the Bristol Girls Can target audience is an important context for how they are able to engage with the possibility of LTPA.

1.0 Mothering and LTPA

For our participants in this phase of the research, as in the other phases, an important context for understanding their relationship with LTPA is the inherent incompatibility between everyday mothering and participation in leisure, especially active leisure. Mika commented on how little time she has for herself now she’s a mother, and how her life changed so totally when she became one:

“Definitely I like it. I like to be a mum. I know sometimes I wish to have more time for myself if you know what I mean, but when you have kids your life is changed completely” (Mika).

“Then after maternity you realise you cannot just do what you were doing and you just need to find a different job” (Mika).

Mika reflects on how normative it is for mothering to be all-consuming over every other aspect of life:

“usually when you have small kids they take your whole time!” (Mika)

Her desire to go to the gym is still present, but she understands the incompatibility of this desire with the reality of having small children:

“Yes, [I would want to go to] the gym [if I had time] because usually I went a few times in the week. Now I’ve just stopped I can see it has affected me. I don’t have this kind of energy so definitely the gym. When you have kids you cannot actually do much. You cannot have a few activities” (Mika).

Mona describes herself as inactive, but used to do physical activity. She explains that physically active people are ‘happy’:

I: What are physically active people like? If you can describe someone, if you had the word physically active you thought of someone physically active what do you imagine they’re like?

R: Happy.

I: Would you describe yourself as physically active?

R: I used to be physically active now not at all.

I: Not now okay (Mona).

Instead of fighting the impossibility of physical leisure, Mika has made a conscious decision to relax more regularly for 5 minutes to regain some mental health:

“Five minutes I need to relax on the couch, I need five minutes” (Mika).

Mika is a single mother.

Sami explains how her free and active lifestyle before children has become much more restricted, although she still manages to sneak swimming into her routine:

“before, I was going to, like, saunas, I was doing, like, – I used to do, like, fitness centre, I used to go to fitness centre. I had a lot of time to do a lot of different things but now I cannot do that because I only go now swimming, is the thing that I have time for” (Sami).

For Winnie, although she really enjoys being active, after she had the children LTPA never ‘stuck’:

“It was a lot around the kids more than me, so I started to try to do little activities, I always had a plan but they never stick to it because okay, I will do this but then he would want ‘can we do this and this?’, he want me all the time to do activities with him and playing ‘I feel boring’, he don’t have anyone to communicate either me or his dad, so it takes a lot of time and the baby needed a lot, when it’s new – it was too much” (Winnie).

Mona describes that motherhood for her has really been about just having the children and nothing else. She was excited to get a job because “Finally I find something to do something which I don’t feel like my life is becoming just kids in my life” (Mona). Mona also explained that she’s been thinking about joining a gym for 7 years but hasn’t yet joined up, showing how hard it is to align LTPA with mothering.

“Yeah I know you just say oh I’ll do it next year I’ll do it tomorrow. Since Monty was born, ‘next month I will have gym membership, next month I will do that’. Okay I will do that (Mona).

Bodies

Many of our respondents reflected on the way that mothering has changed their lives and made LTPA impossible, which has had an impact on their bodies. Mika struggled with the physical and everyday changes that mothering brought:

“To be honest I couldn’t accept that change in my life when I became a mum and when I started a family and then I was very health conscious I was size zero and I got upset that I could not get back and I always tried but I think I got a bit emotionally disturbed and doing nothing, depression, I went into depression. I started to feel isolated and now I have started, a couple of months ago I started to do something as I told you. I feel happy to do something” (Mika).

Suma describes the physical changes to her body and the related changes in the activities that mothering made possible. Before she was a mum she “never sat. I was very, very skinny. I did loads of activities to gain muscles and a bum” (Suma). But now she’s a mother she describes herself as ‘lazy’, responsabilising her lack of involvement in LTPA. Mona describes the way mothers feel exhausted and get used to not doing anything for themselves:

“If you think about mums, like, if mums like us stop being physical they will get tired all of a sudden and they cannot cope with that if they have really small kids and obviously people feel tired. That’s why if people have really small kids and you are the only one you have to look after your kids there is nobody around so you would think oh instead of going to a group you would think I’m neglecting my kids and I’m not coping with it. They will stop and they will say let them get a bit bigger and I will join it I will start again... I think the only thing tomorrow I will start tomorrow. Our body is used to it now” (Mona).

Mothering becomes embodied in that bodies become used to not enacting the physical activities that were normative prior to motherhood. They become exhausted, change shape and become maladapted to LTPA. For Mona, there are skills which she doesn’t have that some LTPA requires:

“I’m not in touch too much with people. I think they love cycling and frankly I don’t know how to ride a bike and they love running” (Mona).

Mika noted that her family’s fitness levels are low, which can prevent them taking part in some activities: “I know once we all as a family did [Joe Wicks] for 10 minutes and we we’re just lying down after doing it” (Mona). Across the sample, participants felt that their bodies are not able to do the same as they used to:

“If I have free time I definitely go back to the gym because I can feel it now. I don’t have that much energy like I had before. Even before when I had such a busy time it was hard for me to go with my friends because I had so much activity. Now when I have so much time I don’t have this energy. Even when I go shopping I’m so tired. It’s like when you do something a lot and now you don’t so definitely I need to do something, especially for my back. I have the back pain because I’m not doing much anymore so definitely” (Mika).

Suma feels like being a mother has double-impacted her body. First it has triggered back ache, and second it stops her from being able to get active, which helps her backache. This is compounded by the pandemic:

“I’ve been getting really bad backache since I gave birth to my daughter, so the exercise would really help me out a lot. I went to physical therapy as well, but now that I’m not doing it, my backache is back. It’s really, really painful, and I’m just like, “I need to start exercising so I can get this backpain gone,” because I can’t just be sitting all day. That’s what I do, especially when I’m studying like this on my laptop all day. So it’s like the worst backpain, especially when you’re going to bed. Yes, so for me, this month it has been very hard with this lockdown to exercise” (Suma).

Mona also feels she doesn’t have a strong body like before she had children:

“when I go shopping I just have a bag that you can put on your arm and you come back from there carrying not much and you just feel so tired” (Mika).

For Sula, it was her ‘mothering body’ that triggered her LTPA, but she had been active as a child in Holland:

“I grew up in Holland. I don’t know whether you remember this? We used to cycle everywhere and that kept me quite fit but other than that, when I was younger, I wasn’t really active. Whereas, once I became a mum I’ve noticed that I became more conscious of my body and to make sure that I wasn’t gaining a lot of weight. Once I started basketball and other activities I thought, ‘Actually, it is actually working’. I used to go to the gym as well although I don’t do that anymore. I have actually lost more, once I became a mum than before. That felt quite good and I thought, ‘I can do this’ and I started to love it. The weeks that I wasn’t going, I felt quite down both physically and mentally. It then became part of my life after giving birth to my first born”.

Only as her body became adapted to physical activity did she recognise the changes and feel good about those, assimilating her new active body into her life.

Bodies change with the everyday changes that mothering brings, but there is a lot of pressure on women to ‘snap back’ to a pre-pregnancy shape after they have a baby, despite LTPA not being seen as compatible with ‘raising’ a child, as Suma’s quote shows:

“I stopped [playing basketball] for a while because of my pregnancy, and I wanted for the first year to raise my daughter. But I did go to the gym. When I was giving birth, I was like, ‘I’m going to snap back, I’m going to close my stomach. I’m going to go to the gym, I’m going to lose this baby weight,’” (Suma).

Support for LTPA

The nature of mothering creates a hostile environment for LTPA. This is embodied and physical, as the previous section shows, but also, as Sula explains, mothering is temporally hostile. There is no time when mothers are not mothers, and they are reliant on the support of others for childcare in order to make LTPA possible. Sula, tries to encourage her friends to take part in LTPA but understands that without support, they simply can’t fit it in:

“It is difficult for them to come and witness that because the first thing that they will say is, ‘Oh, but I don’t have anyone looking after my children’. It’s hard. That’s another problem that is stopping them from getting out there and experiencing” (Sula).

A common theme in participant accounts that only with support is LTPA possible for mothers. Sula reflects that her own LTPA is only possible due to her husband’s support:

“Definitely having a husband that is there for me and for the kids as well. Another thing that motivates me is him as well because he works out and during lockdown once a week but he used to do twice a week. Seeing him and how he was getting fitter, it gave me the motivation to do the same and we made a promise to each other that we would, without saying, ‘You’re becoming fat’; try to help each other. When one of us starts to gain weight we say, ‘Hey, you need to work out a bit more’. He made it possible for me to go and do my thing and he would then look after the kids whilst I am doing that. Otherwise I think I wouldn’t be able to do it due to childcare” (Sula).

Similarly, for Suma, it was changes to her husband’s job in combination with her mother’s support that meant she could get back to basketball:

“my husband’s job became flexible, I then left my child one day. There were two days it was on, either Thursday or Sunday. On the Sundays, I will leave her with my mum. Oh, my God. Without my mum, I don’t think I would be able to do anything... “She’s amazing. So I take her to her grandma’s house and go to basketball for the few hours. I will come back with her fed and cleaned and ready just for me to go home and put her to bed, thank God” (Suma).

2.0 COVID-19

In addition to the inherent nature of mothering, COVID-19 restrictions and limitations on everyday life has created an important emotional, physical and material context to the way our participants engage with LTPA and the idea of LTPA. During COVID, mothers have had no time to themselves. We asked participants what they did ‘most of’ in their daily routines:

“Er, daily routine, just, er, cooking, caring for my baby” (Rav).

We also asked what participants are struggling to fit in and not doing:

“Okay. For me, I wanted to go outside. I wanted to go and see my friend” (Rav).

“So, yeah, I look forward to restaurants and eating and just outside, you know, together with people” (Rav).

Sami explains simply that before COVID she had some time to herself when her children were at school. She is a single mother, so now she has no time at all.

Mika misses being around other people at work. She reflects on how she never used to appreciate working but she now does because she isn’t able to:

“Definitely [I’m looking forward to] going back to work! I miss it really. To be honest, when we are at work we are just waiting for the holiday and we want to have our rest and now I am thinking okay, I still want to go for a holiday of course in summer when it’s a sunny time

and a good time but I really miss my work. I really miss those people or those boring guests that are annoying. I still want to go. I still want that back (Mika).

Mona explains how she feels frustrated during lockdown “Because I’ve never liked staying at home, since my childhood. I think about my family life too, I have to go outside once a day. After school, after college I have to go out after that somewhere” (Mona).

For Mona, the COVID lockdowns have impacted herself and her autistic child very dramatically. She was busy and active before, but her options have been reduced to the point that her child’s emotional health is dramatically impacted:

“Before COVID, it’s been a year I don’t remember but I used to be, I mean life was okay I mean obviously getting up, getting kids ready, spend time with them, drop them at school, pick them up, going to grocery and on weekends or sometimes in the evening obviously after school I used to go to mosque which was 40 minutes walk so it was a really busy life I never used to have a plan. As I told you we cannot do much... but yeah life has dramatically changed because we don’t have any options to go out, nothing. So yeah as I told you my elder one is autistic. With the first lockdown it really affected his emotions... it’s really impacting on is emotional health...” (Mona).

Other participants also reflected that the disruption to services and support networks has impacted them severely. They are lonely, isolated, bored and frustrated:

“Yeah. My COVID has affected my baby because my baby no go anywhere and no go children centre or, yeah, and no go or no visit my friend for meet my baby (Rav)

“Before Covid I would stay with Harry. It was just the simple things like playing with him, cooking, going outside. It was just a normal routine. We go and meet friends because I have friends from my work and they have kids so they come to me. They come to mine and I go to them and also at weekends. When we are busy we complain but when you miss this you don’t have any more reaction to being busy again. [Now] I have so much free time and it starts to be so boring because I don’t know what to do with this time (Mika).

Underlying all the experiences of disruption and uncertainty has been an overwhelming fear that has coloured experiences of the pandemic:

I: So, I wanted to ask, these few lockdowns, how is it for your family?

R: Yeah. I am worried, yeah. I am worried, yeah (Rav)

Mika also explains how fearful and stressed she has become as a result of the uncertainty that COVID has brought, and the related financial concerns for her family:

“It definitely gives me anxiety. I never had anxiety and now I just have so much anxiety, definitely. It scares me, okay. Now from the first time when we had lockdown I didn’t know what I was dealing with or what this will be and how this will become and everything. I was so scared and everyone didn’t go out.

I: So lockdown anxiety?

R: Yes, definitely. It is lots of stress because I didn't know if I will be still working or if I would just receive money for work and how my support will be because I'm a single mother. I didn't know how I was going to manage the next month and what I'm going to do or if we don't have money and what I will be telling my kids to eat if we don't have money for food. It definitely affected me so much. The first months I was still depressed and everything and feeling down. I was thinking this will change everything. It definitely upset me (Mika).

Unhealthiness

Firstly, 'lockdown', or indeed multiple lockdowns (as there had been three by the time this research was undertaken) have created an embodied sense of restriction for some women that further distances them from the possibility of LTPA. Rav explains that whereas she was actively joining in with a range of events and courses in her community, now she does a lot of sitting:

"Yeah, and sometimes I was going to the college and I was going to organisations like for enjoy with our community and learning English. Yeah, and now after COVID just anything online and all the time we are sitting (Rav)

Similarly, Mona describes a complete change in her activity levels as a result of the pandemic:

R: I used to be physically active now not at all.

I: Not now okay.

R: Not now. As I told you COVID took me just lying down all the day (MN).

Formerly active research participants also explained how COVID has disrupted their LTPA routines:

R: "Me and my sister used to play basketball ever since we was younger. She plays more than me – she plays at uni – when it's open – Uwe and stuff. But, yeah, basketball – I don't know why we loved it.

I: Has the pandemic changed how you feel about physical activity?

R: No. I think it's just because of everything that's happened at the moment, I can't go and do it, if that makes sense (Kiki)

Sula misses her sport too:

I: Tell me a little bit about your fun/leisure time; what do you miss?

R: Swimming. Swimming and basketball but more swimming than anything because it used to relax me, both physically and mentally. The first thing I am going to do is swimming and then go back to basketball. These are the two things that I miss the most. We haven't played basketball for two months now (Sula).

For Sami, the lockdown meant the end of her swimming:

"So before the COVID I used to go to swimming... because kids were at school" (Sami).

Sula thinks the increase in sedentary activities and related weight gain will make it harder for people to get back to LTPA even when they are allowed:

“for some people it might be more limitation where they gained weight and they are more conscious about their body and they don’t want to go out there to show people that they have gained weight” (Sula).

Sula’s hunch is corroborated by other women in the research across all three phases, who have noted how unhealthy they feel as a result of lockdown:

I: So you’ve always been pretty physically active in different ways, so it must be quite difficult now?

R: It’s challenging, yesterday I visited to doctor and they just checked up... I had tests and stuff and when they with me I came back very sad, so since yesterday. I said ‘no, we need to change this because I’m not happy with my weight’. Even after the first child, during my second pregnancy I never get to this weight. We need to stop what we’re doing, so we cannot excuse ourselves, yes lockdown, yes children, but if we manage our time, we can do this” (Winnie)

Winnie isn’t the only one unhappy with their weight gain:

“I think I’ve put so much weight on for myself, because I feel like I sat down and I ate and snacked, that’s all I did for all of the year” (Suma).

“a lot of people they are gaining weight, they are putting a lot of weight because they are not doing much because of COVID if you are not exercising, you was going to the shops and you was doing something. When you start gaining weight it’s very difficult to lose weight. I don’t like putting weight on, it always affects me” (Sami).

“I’m being honest and I’ve put on so much weight too and I am hating myself but you are just getting used to all this lazy routines” (Mona).

“Yeah, I think most people have probably put on weight because of staying indoors and eating, like I have!” (Kiki)

“I feel chubby. I need to get back to my weight, but at the moment I can’t exercise” (Kiki).

“Me, the weight is increased (Rav)

As well as physical health, participants reflected on how their mental health had suffered during the pandemic. This may have been as a result of tangible problems such as loss of jobs and financial difficulties, as in Rav’s example:

I: What is the hardest thing for your family during all these different lockdowns? What has been the hardest thing?

R: My husband had problems with no work. This is a problem (Rav).

Mika has also struggled financially as a result of the pandemic:

“You know that I’m not working at the moment because we have the lockdown and my hotel is closed so I received the full loan but I received much less than I received from the beginning because I went back to work the beginning of September. Sometimes I have a few hours if it opens but that was only a few hours. So September was again, maybe 10 hours or

15 hours per week so it was not enough so I didn't catch many hours to have more payment now so my payment is less. It's £300 so it has affected me so much" (Mika).

Mona explained how mentally unwell she has been during the pandemic and how she is trying to overcome her anxiety:

"I was talking to my neighbour because she told me you can just have tablets and go to the doctor and I said I don't want to have tablets. You know when you find something simple indoors you don't want to get crazy, especially with the anxiety. For me it's that I don't want to have treatment for the anxiety; I just want to make myself comfortable or do something to just tell my brain this just simply will pass. This is just a moment when you feel weird and you just need to find a way to not affect you on the day and you feel completely different".

For Mona, her lack of 'freshness' has affected the way she has been able to engage with her children:

"I think I was more engaged with my kids because my mind was fresh so I used to more enjoy and it was engaging to play or to do craft or do any different thing but it's all the same, because of that you are, in other words if you are staying home I should engage more but it's going the opposite way" (Mona).

Sami has also struggled due to the isolation the pandemic has caused:

"[I feel] for the worse, because staying home all the time alone it's not easy, it affects you even mentally because you've get stressed, because you get used to going outside, doing everything outside, go to shops. Sometimes sitting somewhere in café, all those things now are not possible. So it's very stressful, I think I get used to going to my friends and now we cannot see anybody, seeing a human being now" (Sami).

Sami also explains how she feels stressed during lockdown due to the competing demands of homeschooling children and home care:

"So now the other difficulty is because they are all the time at home and I have to do the home schooling and then the cooking. Sometimes it's very difficult to manage the cooking, the cleaning, and then get started with the kids sitting with them all the time by the computer, it's not working" (Sami).

Lockdown has been very difficult to manage for mothers, and particularly those who have no social support or partner, like Sami:

"So I have to leave something, like cleaning I have to put aside because I have no time for that otherwise he's going to miss their lesson so I think that has changed" (Sami).

The pandemic has created disruption and uncertainty that have been hard to cope with for both adults and children. Participants reflected that their children have struggled in different ways during the pandemic, often due to feeling disconnected:

"They missed a lot their relatives that's the hardest thing I think because they used to meet with their cousins all the time, and they used to meet with their cousins so now it's not

possible. So I think they are more complaining but that's the hardest I think for the children" (Sami).

The physical health of children has also suffered. Mona's 7 year old son has become overweight during lockdown:

"my kid put on weight during COVID-19, he's not physically active at all, not at all. But he used to walk with me all the time, wherever I'm going I used to take him even for groceries or anything so he never, ever put on weight he was a healthy boy but now I would say that he's put on weight" (Mika)

Mika is also concerned about the screen time her children have had during lockdown.

LTPA during COVID

The general feeling of unhealthiness creates a context for participants' readiness to engage in LTPA. They feel unmotivated, lethargic and distracted, and the catastrophic change of routine that the lockdowns have created have derailed even the most active of women in terms of their everyday routines into which LTPA may once have slotted:

"This lockdown – I struggle with working out – I don't feel in the mood for it – I can't explain. I love to go running but, because I'm so busy – non-stop kids and everything – I don't really... It doesn't even cross my mind anymore – it's terrible. But I would love to exercise again" (Kiki).

"Yeah, they don't want to do it. I don't think they'd want to do it after because, once you stop, it's hard to get back into a routine of doing it (Kiki).

"Probably [people are] less confident to work out and stuff – I don't think they'd be happy with their body because of being stuck inside and not exercising. Even if they can exercise, it's not as often as they could have before" (Kiki).

"Yeah. I think they feel not happy with what they are. Some people are still exercising, but there wouldn't be as many as there would have been before" (Kiki).

For Suma, COVID has meant the motivation to be active has disappeared due to the stress and distraction of the quarantine:

"I think with this quarantine, nobody has been active. I feel like for me, oh, my God, I haven't been active for almost a year now, since quarantine happened, because it's like there's no time for it. There's lockdown. You have no motivation. You know, you sometimes want people to be like, "Let's go for a run, let's go for a hike. Okay, come over to basketball," and so on. I think because everybody has their own problems and they're all consumed into the lockdown and so on, I feel like this is what's holding people back" (Suma).

Engaging in physically active leisure has never been easy for the target group for Bristol Girls Can. Mothering inherently pushes out LTPA. It is clear that COVID has created a layer of additional challenge and difficulty for our participants, particularly in relation to their relationship with LTPA. However, there may also be opportunities for LTPA as mothers crave time for leisure, movement and self-care.

3.0 Readiness for leisure time physical activity

Although the possibility for socially desirable responding is acknowledged given that all research participants knew that the focus of the research was LTPA, there was a sense from the phase 3 participants that LTPA is something mothers would, at least theoretically, like to engage with as COVID restrictions ease:

I: What do you feel you are not doing and you would like to do?

R: Definitely something more for myself because before I was doing something for myself like training or going to the gym or running with my friends. It would be something for myself. Now I know I have free time I can do this even at home but it's not the same energy. It's not the same feeling. You don't even feel like you want to (Mika).

"If I have free time I definitely go back to the gym because I can feel it now. I don't have that much energy like I had before" (Mika).

Mika recognises that she would like to do something 'for herself' and 'if she has time' would like to return to the gym because she recognises that her lack of energy is in part due to her lack of physical activity and healthiness.

Sula had always been active up until the disruption caused by the pandemic. She is craving getting back to LTPA:

"With me, if anything, I am more motivated now and look forward more to being able to have that freedom of going back to sports. I think for me I am going to do more after the lockdown" (Sula)

Rav is also itching to expand her daily repertoire of activities from just caring for her baby and get back to exercise classes such as Pilates:

"Yeah. As a result of COVID, me, I care my baby all day and all the time, yeah. This is my fine. But I am waiting for other things like Pilates, and like, you know, go outside" (Rav)

It is important to emphasise that these participants were previously active, and struggling with the disruption caused by the pandemic. As Rav notes, "Because me and my... a lot of friends, we go to the gym and we go to the swimming and everything is closed". Similarly, Mika comments that she would like to "exercise and get my kids to all exercise too" (Mika).

Sula sympathises with the government's 'fresh start' campaign because she misses LTPA so much:

"Speaking to some of my friends and myself, I think when they say, 'Fresh start' maybe they mean that being stuck at home, a lot of us took for granted the fact that we could go outside and exercise more. Maybe it can be a fresh start in that sense where a lot of people are thinking 'Actually we do want to go out now but we can't' and then you look back and think all those years that we had the opportunity" (Sula)

Sami explains that some Somali women who have put on weight may be keen to get back to LTPA:

"Yes they want to do [LTPA] more yes... because now the ladies sitting home can see that they are changing because they are becoming more fat because ... (Sami)

What LTPA would appeal

It is important for the BGC campaign to understand what kinds of LTPA practices would draw in the target audience. We asked participants what LTPA they would like to do. Their answers included walking, swimming, basketball, yoga, dancing classes, gym, Zumba and home exercise:

“Walks. I know Somali ladies who are on the bigger side and they live in eastern area, who do walk twice a week and I was really glad to hear that when my friend told me the other day. My sister actually went and joined them because at the moment my sister usually plays basketball with us and because basketball is closed, she was looking out for other groups” (Sula).

“Swimming, walking, I really love walks, so I walk fast and for fast area so I go down to the centre without buses or something, cycling as well and all this done. But since I had the baby I’ve cycled maybe four or five times? But a lot before” (Winnie).

“I enjoy different types of things so when I used to be in the gym if I wanted to have a boxing class, I had two or three classes of boxing. It doesn’t matter how strong you are but at least you are doing something” (Mona).

The kitchen disco run by Maggie has been particularly appealing, as is a yoga group that appeals to Somali mothers:

“In another group, they do yoga so every Wednesday they do come online and they do yoga and I am quite proud to see them because I usually work on Wednesdays and during my break sometimes I tune in just to see how many people. When I see a lot of the mothers joining in, it makes me proud just to see that they are coming online” (Sula).

Sula explains that the instructor is “an Asian lady”. The classes are free.

LTPA at home

Some of the participants in this research phase, most of whom have been active outside of the pandemic, have tried exercising at home with their children, with mixed success. At times it can be fun and children join in. At other times, it doesn’t work and the mothers do not get the ‘headspace’ most needed. For Winnie, having activities that children can join in with is really important, especially online:

“When you mention children – so I do yoga online class and zumba, I have two session a week and both my children are very engaged, even if I put off the camera, even the little one she’s really laughing when she views it” (Winnie).

Winnie describes how her children’s involvement encourages her to keep going:

“They keep asking oh can we do yoga, even on days when I feel lazy or something, I feel encouraged because my other child is let’s do this and he really happy, sit in his wheelchair, it clear your mind this, it’s being fun but I love because they’re enjoying it with me, I think other children could be engaged, could be fun activity like as a team, mother and her children and other family” (Winnie)

However, Winnie makes it clear that although it is fun exercising with her children, sometimes she needs space and time without them, which she can get if her husband can take them off her hands.

“When I do physical activity with them, it will be more for fun, but not really active, because they will be around, I will not have big room to concentrate and do a lot, but I enjoy a lot and we laugh. When I really, I have days when I’m really tired and I need to clear my mind, so I just ask my husband, everyone stay away, close the door and try to have sessions without anyone, focus on what I’m doing, then when I finish I’m like yes, I’m okay, I’m relaxed” (Winnie).

For Mika, a single mother, exercising at home with her children does not work:

“I know I cannot just do the things that I was doing before so at least I try to run. I try to do some Zumba on telly but with Harry it’s impossible because he just doesn’t let you. He’ll switch off the telly. He wants his program, okay, so my Zumba is finished! I need to definitely do something outside or just try to do it when he’s at the nursery” (Mika).

For Sula, exercising at home with her children at home does not appeal:

“it’s not the same for me. I still feel like that I’m a mum so I still have to tell them off, tell them what to do or they are not doing it right and it’s always about them I’ve noticed. Even if you try to work out with your children, you’re still not doing it for yourself. At the moment when I do have that one hour or one and a half hours, I try to focus and do it myself and then I leave the kids with my husband and then go outside and do it alone. Where he takes them out for a run, I hardly take them out for sports because he is more patient than me. I think it’s very similar to a lot of the other mums. They do try but it’s just not the same” (Sula).

Similarly, Mona has tried exercising at home but her children will not let her have time:

“I don’t like to do any physical activity even exercise at home it doesn’t appeal to me. I can’t do it. I’ve tried so many times it’s just that you are going to do something specifically you can engage yourself you can, someone is here to motivate you and you are specially going out to do something and you will do it. At home you will do two minutes and the kids will be on your tummy. After Monty because I had C-section both times I had a C-section and was lying down doing pelvic exercise and Monty was lying down on my tummy” (Mona).

Although online activities work for some, Sula noted that some people in her community will struggle to access the “online bit”:

“Online is going to be difficult to be honest with you. Knowing my neighbours and some of the locals, they might struggle with accessing the online bit and even if they do, I think they are not as motivated as when we do it face to face. For now, I do know some of the mothers who join Maggie in her disco; what do they call it? I haven’t joined them yet” (Sula).

Value of LTPA

The benefits of LTPA to participants fell into two categories: for the value of destressing and rejuvenating them; for the social and relational value.

Firstly, the value of LTPA to destress and rejuvenate was felt by participants:

“Probably yoga to de-stress from the kids, as long as the kids and stuff is peaceful” (KR).

Similarly, for Winnie, clearing her mind is key:

“I like Zumba as well and yoga, whenever I find time I try to do this, but like the main thing I did for myself was I would always stay awake very late, so I could have time to clear my mind... to stay late at night so I could feel, it’s quiet, now it’s my time, so I could try and manage.” (Winnie).

Mika noted that “I used to love this type of activities, yoga especially that really keeps your mind relaxed” (Mika). Along the same lines, Mona explains how important it is for her to unwind through yoga: “I’m the person who’s been always thinking something, cannot stop thinking... but yoga I find yoga that stops you thinking” (MN).

Secondly, a key value of LTPA is the social value. Mika shares that her main activity is walking with friends and their children, to support each other. This is a firm part of her routine:

“I don’t have family here because I come from Poland. I don’t have family but the friends from my work are mostly who I spend time with. We actually meet once a week. Actually I’m getting ready after this interview to go. I’ll just go and pick up Harry and we’re just going for a walk. Every week we go for a walk. We take our coffee to takeaway. We just walk for one or two hours. We just have a chat and try to support each other because everyone is struggling. Everyone wants to talk with someone especially when you work at the customer services so you just miss chatting with people. We usually meet once a week. Usually it’s Friday before nursery or after nursery but I told them today it’s going to be a little bit later. I’m going after this meeting to meet them. It’s my friends from work and my neighbour too” (Mika).

The social element is also important for Mona, as is being outside and exploring – something she has discovered during lockdown:

“Yes we just go for a walk because there is nowhere we can sit now and have a coffee or a chat. I’ve lived here for ten years in February. Actually January, it’s 11 years now. In 11 years I didn’t see much of Bristol. You live here and you think you know lots of places and actually you don’t. We have lots of nice places and every week we try to go to a different place that we’ve never seen. We just try to see something different and walk because usually I never walk that much. I never walk that much so two hours of walking we always do and go something just chatting. We take some snacks and we just have a conversation” (MN).

Related to the relational value of LTPA is the appeal of sharing food. Suma noted that a draw for people she knows in the Somali community would be the sharing of snacks after a class:

“A good thing that would get our people to come is if you tell them there’s food. If you say there are healthy drinks and snacks or sweeties after this, it would bring lots of people, especially in my community. I know that for a fact. Sometimes when basketball goes low on people coming in, one of the coaches would be like, “There are some cakes after this,” and I’m telling you, there are about 21 people turning up. Because it’s that environment where you can just laugh and chat and eat. I feel like if you advertise that also, it would really bring a lot of people in. Yes” (Suma).

Mona reflects that LTPA can be a way for people to make friends and feel less isolated, which can be important for all mothers but particularly those who are feel like outsiders:

“They might be able to find some good people, they might be able to find some friends especially mum’s like me who are not living after their kids, the places they used to be and they don’t have connections. And some mum’s like me I don’t always initiate for the friendship. I will chit chat and if we go further and I will see if the other person wanted to go forward I might see someone” (Mona).

Sula explains that a walking group for Somali women has been a successful way of keeping social ties going during the pandemic:

“Sometime [the Somali women] walk next to each other and then try to keep a meter and a half or two meters. They are trying. When I said to my sister, ‘So why are they willing to come out now and work out or at least exercise?’ She said it’s mainly to socialise rather than to exercise as they don’t want to lose weight because they are walking very slow. It doesn’t have to be about losing weight. At least the fact that they are coming out to get fresh air and to socialise; that’s the first step isn’t it?” (Sula)

4.0 Culture

All the participants in this phase of the research were non-white and felt culturally subordinate in some way, even if they had grown up in Bristol. Participants reflected on the difficulties of fitting in and building social ties in their communities. Kiki was particularly vocal about the challenges she has faced with fitting in and feeling a part of her local area:

“In my area, majority is probably white people, and there’s only a few ethnic minority people around that whole area. That’s probably why some of them might not want to – if that makes sense. It’s hard to mix sometimes with different cultures – I don’t know” (Kiki).

“My house is not... There’s people, like... random African or Somalian, but there’s not... There’s mostly white people, and I don’t feel safe in that area because I haven’t grew up there and I don’t know no-one around that area. It’s weird” (Kiki).

“they’re scared just in case anyone says anything” (Kiki).

“I don’t go out in my area but, if I did, I wouldn’t really feel like I fit in. I probably would feel uncomfortable. I don’t mind going to the shop, but it’s mostly white people. Even though my mum’s white – and I’m really close to her – they don’t see me as white” (Kiki).

Mona also reflected on the difficulties she has had with making friends:

R: The worse thing you won’t believe me in five years I couldn’t make any friends.

I: Oh?

R: Even my kid is going to school because I’m the only Muslim women and my son is the only Muslim boy in his class so all are English and if I talk to them they are really nice but there is some I would say discrimination or something which they don’t show but you can see. My son is in year two but no mums are my friend so they have their distance (Mona).

Mona explains that she doesn’t feel like it’s a ‘racist’ area, but that she feels excluded culturally:

“I wouldn’t say it’s a racist area I wouldn’t say that but it’s like it’s not, you know what I mean it’s not like that they don’t get involved they’re in their own culture. There is a difference in their culture and we can see that they don’t involve us in their other things” (Mona).

Cultural expectations about women doing LTPA

The Somali respondents were particularly expressive about the way their Somali culture shapes women’s relationship with LTPA and their bodies. Particularly, they explain how there are cultural expectations in the Somali community about women and LTPA. Although more relaxed in the UK, there are cultural conventions about women not ‘playing’:

“There are a lot of people that do activity. But when I went back home last summer, I wanted to play football there. They just pulled me back, like, “What are you doing? Why would you play with the boys? Why would you kick about? You should put your legs together, not flash them about.” So for elder generations, I feel like you’re just like a child running after a ball when you tell them, “Yes, I play basketball. Yes, I do that exercise.” It’s really a taboo kind of subject, like, “What? No, it can’t.” (Suma)

Similarly in Sudanese culture, Rav explained that “it’s not normal to have exercise, but mostly women will not exercise because some women are busy with... they have a lot of children” (Rav)

“But in my country we are all inactive people, not go to the sport or exercise. Little bit, yeah. Mothers. They’re too busy, yeah, because mum has a lot of children. Sometimes four, sometimes five, sometimes six (Rav).

For Winnie, Sudanese culture is not so clear cut. More affluent families are able to engage in LTPA, but poorer families find little time other than the struggle of everyday life:

“in Sudan it depends on families you know? You find families with good financial situations and their kids – not all types of society can do, others are really busy and tired with like make sure that essential life needs, taking care of their kids, not really because it’s not that expensive, a kind of education and understanding... In my time it was very rare when you had kids in my area go swimming, they know them so I was famous in Sudan because we were this very small group of girls, we do this and our families understand and send us” (Winnie).

Sami also explains it’s not ‘normal’ to exercise in her Somali culture either:

“Sometimes things are different because some people it’s not in our culture and they think it’s something different, something new to them. And they think because it’s not our culture like it’s childish like it’s something for children. That’s what they think and similarly they don’t do it because they don’t have the place to do it, like they don’t know where to go and where to do” (Sami).

Sami emphasises that childcare is a major barrier for Somali women because their husbands are not supportive of their taking part in active leisure. LTPA sessions would only work if they are during school times. This would “be wonderful for them” (Sami). Similarly, in Sudanese culture, it is not normal for men to take much of a role in childcare, although Winnie’s husband is different and does support her. This isn’t common:

“Barriers would be like taking care of children, if there is any ideas of children’s centre’s where they could find child care or they can take their children, because I mean my husband is different, we grew up in different ways, we support each other, but it’s not the same happening in all families, so the women do more for their kids around their community, men are working, come late and that most happening in this society, women are left behind long, long ago. When you have active women work on some stuff, it’s difficult.

“So I think if there is anything will be done, it needs to be awareness, support and at the same time opportunities where kids could go, so if they found someone could help or take their kids as well or sometimes I think this should start to come and do and if we compare what women here and back in Sudan, you can find husband to help, because that’s the thing. If he take or she take the children home, there will be somehow he’s engaged, but still, women do a lot, it’s not British man for example” (Winnie).

For Winnie, childcare is crucial to support Sudanese women with LTPA.

Similarly, Sami explains that Somali women struggle to have time for LTPA because their partners may not want to look after the children and the child caring practices fall entirely to them:

“they love doing it I think... if they have the time, because sometimes even some ladies they are even, they have partners but the partners if they don’t want to look after the kids. So the mothers they don’t have no choice to do any activity because it’s her responsibility, the men doesn’t want to do, so she stays at home and she forgets the things that she wants to do for herself” (Sami).

“Yes because for Somali women it’s not easy, I don’t know, other people or [inaudible 31:55] people or other cultures I don’t know, but for us it’s not easy because most of the mothers they have a lot of things to do in the house. More than the men because men they are mostly at work, they are working long hours, long shifts they have. So all the time you have to do the best like in everything else, like bring children to school, bring back from the school, the school run. You have to do the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, a lot of things. So even the tuition that’s extra thing for Somali and ladies because if the child is behind and you think your child is not doing enough at school, they take children to tuition after school time. So even they don’t have no time at weekends because they have to bring children to tuition. And because we are Muslim we teach the children and that’s extra lessons because you have to do at the weekends or after school times. So that’s not even one hour for the mother” (Sami).

“I think I don’t know what can be changed because sometimes even if you talk to the ladies and they want to do something, what they ask you back is who’s look after the kids. Like they need something like when the kids aren’t at school, they need their set places that they can go and do some activity, where men will not be around because now in leisure centre [you can exercise without men] but it’s only Sundays for ladies. And some ladies they can’t do it, their kids are ...” (Sami)

Sula’s husband is very supportive of her physical activity, but she explains that this is not common:

“[My husband has] got Somali male friends who are similar to him. Again, we go back to older generations so he is from my generation and his friends are quite open-minded. They

grew up in either UK or in Europe so they do believe in equality where you need to be there for your wife and your children. Whereas if you look at my uncles or my father's generation, they are like, 'Who needs that? Mums are supposed to be at home with their children' so it is a different way of bringing up and I think the different times that they grew up. I am quite lucky because if I compare my husband to my brothers who are quite young, they have got a different mentality to him so I am quite lucky to have him who has got a similar mentality to me" (Sula).

Sula explains what she means by the lack of expectation that men will support the women to have leisure time:

"For example, with my sister-in-law she would love to do what I do such as work-out. She wants to come to basketball sessions with me and I have invited her a few times but she will say, 'But I don't have anyone looking after the kids' and then I would say, 'Well why can't my brother not do it' or, I'll call him and say, 'Hey, can you look after the kids?' and she can come and join us. He might do it once a month but then the other few times he would say either, 'I am working' or, 'I'm busy' and I actually know that he can do that one or two hours a week for her but he is like, 'Well, I'm busy' and I am like, 'You're being lazy'. It's not my thing to interfere in their marriage but when I see that they are not making the effort and I'm like 'Yeah...'" (Sula)

Sami explains that in the context of the cultural expectations about women leading child caring and not engaging in active leisure, Somali women don't expect to be able to do LTPA. They are calm about it:

"It feels like if they don't have the time, they don't have the opportunity, it seems like instead of getting stressed about it, they put it another way in their heads. Like they have calmed themselves down, like I'm a mum, I have what I have, my life is going to be forever. And something like that they know it's not good but what else can they do. And that is the thing that keep from them, because sometimes when I do something like swimming or basketball, I can see they don't have no time for it. But there's not another answer that they can give you so... Sometimes when I look at them it's like if they had the opportunity they would do it but they don't have it so I cannot give them so there's no point in telling them it's good, because you can see that they don't have no – and so yes" (Sami).

Culture and bodies

Participants were asked about the physical culture of their particular communities. They reflected on the physical culture of women's bodies. Somali respondents, for example, noted that it is not normal for Somali women to be fit and active:

I: Okay. So, how do you think mothers in Sudanese community feel about their bodies? Do they feel fit and healthy?

R: Not fit and healthy.

I: Not fit and healthy? How do you think they feel about their bodies?

R: Yeah, because not all of Sudanese are doing physical activity. It is not habit to (Rav)

Sami also notes that Somali women do not feel fit and healthy, and this is expected because children come first:

“No they don’t feel fit and healthy, but we’ve seen like - because we are Muslim and we accept a lot of things. Even if you are not happy with it we accept it, because sometimes you think you are not going to live forever in this world. So even if your body is the most beautiful thing on earth, you’re going to die so they don’t bother. So they think I’m a mother, I have children, my children comes first so body comes second, so your body is the second thing that you – firstly put the children first” (Sami).

Sula explains in some depth the Somali physical culture of bodies, describing the significance of size as a generational concept:

“Can we break it into two halves? So you have the older generation and I set myself as a mid-generation because I have kids now, they are the new generation aren’t they? Girls my age are quite similar to what I am going through now but the ladies that are older than us and are mothers; I feel they have a different mentality. Also, when it comes to their body; when I went to Somali and in our culture, a lot of the ladies believe, ‘the bigger, the better’. Although coming to Europe and the western countries, for most people, their mentality is changing things slowly because of health reasons is it not good to be big. I think back home in Africa, when a lady is big, she has got the money and wealth to show for it. For example, when I go back home to see my father or my mother-in-law, she will say to my husband and to myself, ‘Oh she is dying, what did you do to her? You need to feed her’ and I say, ‘No, it’s the opposite’. When I go there I make sure that I eat healthy and I don’t over-eat sweet things because we love sweet things. I remember my mum-in-law encouraging me saying, ‘You need to gain some more weight’ and I said, ‘No, I did this on purpose, I don’t want to gain weight’. We always go into this conversation where I try to convince them and they try to convince me. I think it’s a cultural thing as well” (Sula)

Importantly, the larger bodies of the older generation of Somali women mediate their relationship with LTPA, in that their larger bodies make some sports unpleasant experiences and unappealing:

“Until you experience those sports, they wouldn’t understand the fun that they are missing out on. When I try to challenge them and say, ‘Come and join us’ for example for basketball, a lot of the local mums said, ‘You can’t keep up with the younger girls’, I am going to organise one hour a week for all the mothers who are bigger to come and play basketball, they say, ‘But we can’t keep up, it’s not fun, we don’t want to lose weight’” (Sula)

Despite the emphasis on ‘larger’ bodies for the older generation, women in the Somali community were described as under huge pressure to have bodies shaped into acceptable forms to fit UK culture. For example, Sula thinks that turning off the camera in an online class because of shyness and poor body confidence is “a woman thing” more than a Somali thing. She further contextualises this in the Somali culture:

“back in Somalia they would think, ‘The bigger, the better’ but over here, that’s not the case... [They’ll say] ‘Look at me, I’m fat and when I see you I feel so embarrassed next to you’ and I say, ‘Don’t do that. It’s not about look; it’s about how you feel’. On the other hand I’ve got loads of teenagers, 18-19 year olds who are quite big who come to my basketball

sessions and they are really proud about how they look and we joke around and I do tell them, 'Well done' and they wear something tight and you can see their bum, you can see their belly hanging over and they are very proud and they show it off. It should be like that, shouldn't it? You should be happy with what you've got."

Suma also describes this physical culture of the Somali community in more detail, particularly focusing on the pressure women feel after childbirth to go back to their pre-mothering body:

"it's like something that's drilled in you, like, "Oh, my God, you need to lose it straight after you give birth." It doesn't give you a chance to heal, nothing like that. That's why I want to become a midwife, I think, just to mentally be there for women, because people give you the wrong advice, that's the thing. They give you completely the wrong advice. If you have, let's say the baby blues, or depression, or even postnatal depression, those words can hit you hard. They can literally turmoil. You might even turn around and blame your child, because you were skinny before you had this child, instead of seeing it as a blessing. "Oh, my God. These stretch marks are a sign of I'm a mother." Instead of seeing it, "Oh, my God. I need to hide them. Get them away. Make them disappear." I feel like mothers should know they should wear those stretch marks as a badge of honour. "Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I did it, girl. Yes, I'm a mother." Do you understand? So I feel like it's completely different in Africa, because I went, I've seen it. It's completely opposite here where here, the elder generation focusses on you losing weight and being skinny. Where there, they focus on you gaining weight, because you need to put weight on. Oh, my God. The men like weight. They like a little bit of meat, you know? So it depends on the culture, really, and the society" (Suma)

Sami describes her Somali community as 'harsh' when it comes to expectations about women's bodies:

"I think my community is the harshest community when it comes to weight, because especially elder generations. I was very skinny, like very skinny before I got pregnant, and I used to always get, "You're never going to get married if you're this skinny. You can't bear a child if you're this skinny. She looks like a homeless person. Don't you eat?" They will say it to your face. They're not saying it behind your back, which I feel like is a bit nicer if you heard it as a rumour. But they will come to you in front of a hundred million people and say this right in your face. It was just like, "Okay." I remember my aunties were fattening me up before I got married, so I looked like you could look at. But it's very harsh in my culture. Then I gained weight, and it was all... I was like, "Okay, so I gained weight. There you go. Are you happy now?" It's like, no. They're never happy. Because the next thing is, "You gained weight with one child? Oh, my God. Your husband is going to leave you. He's going to find a skinnier wife." It was like they were saying this to me. I will come to weddings, I would be feeling myself and looking good, looking cute, and they will just be like, "Um, you're fat." It's just a constant reminder. "Is there no gym near you?" I literally got that 100 times. "Is there no gym near you? Don't you have time to go to a gym? You should stop eating." It's like, "You don't even know." I was going through baby blues at that time, so I wasn't eating much. I lost my appetite, and I still gained weight. It was like, "I don't eat." So I was like, "I don't eat, so what's the problem? At one time I was skinny, you weren't happy. Now I'm chubby, you're not happy" (Suma)

She goes on to explain that the harshness and scrutiny she experienced is very common:

“Yes, very [common in Somali culture]. I feel like very, very. I think the first thing when they look at you is they look at your body. If you’re skinny, they’ll tell you, “Oh, my God, you’re too skinny.” If you’re fat, “Oh, my God, you’re too fat.” If you’re even thick, if you have a pear shape, there will still be something about you that they don’t like, and they will tell you, especially the elder generation, because they have no filter. Even if it’s not filtered, there’s a lot of jealousy” (Suma).

LTPA for weight management

Sula is very active herself but explains that LTPA in Somali community tends to be entirely associated with weight management, not fun:

“Another reason why they come to basketball is to lose weight and then they say, ‘You know what? I want to compare myself with how I am now and how I will be in a years’ time or three years’ time’ and that makes me really happy”.

Sami started basketball to lose weight. She had been very slim and active but then gained weight and was concerned about this due to the scrutiny she faced by her Somali community:

“After my miscarriage, I became very careful when I got pregnant with my daughter. So I sat a lot, and ate a lot. So I’m an emotional person. I eat with emotions. If I’m happy, I eat. If I’m sad, I eat. If I’m hungry, I eat. If I’m bored, I eat. So it’s like I eat a lot, and then I don’t do exercise, so I sit. But I think I became very active when I gained a lot of weight and people noticed. They were like, “Oh, wow. You look different.” Some people that I’ve known for years didn’t recognise me when I came in front of them. So I felt like, “Okay. I need to come back to my skinny self.” But I was still happy that I gained my thick thighs, and I liked what I had. But at the same time, I was like, “But everybody else expects otherwise,” and I went into basketball for that reason. Then realised, “No, I like basketball. I want to do this for fun. I don’t want to lose weight. I want to tone, maybe. Get my belly back and stuff, but still have what I’ve got, you know, shake that.”

Suma experienced the physical scrutiny of the Somali community first hand and worked hard to reshape her relationship with LTPA:

“I started dieting, I started losing weight a little bit. Then straight after stopping the diet, I would gain that weight back on, because I did lose it really quickly. I think I remember I never looked in the mirror for six months straight, because I just didn’t want to look at it... [I was] Nineteen. I just couldn’t look at it. I was just disgusting. I couldn’t look at a mirror until I lose weight, until I fit back into my old clothes. I never threw my old clothes away, because I wanted to go and fit back into size six. Around that time, I was size 20. So I was like, “I’m going to get back to that size,” and I was so determined. Then I realised, I think, one of my best friends, I think we became close after we both became mothers, we sat down and we actually talked. She was like, “You realise they will never be happy. You’ll go back to your size, and they’ll come back with that skinny talk again.” So I think she motivated me into actually use basketball as something like a de-stressor, something that you could use to just focus on you, you laugh, you be happy, not something that you should play so you can lose weight, and so on. It was like, “Oh, my God. She’s actually right.” That’s how I started just

playing basketball, to just have fun, to destress, to be myself, like to meet myself. Like people sometimes go and get their nails done, I go and play basketball” (Suma)

The relationship between body image and LTPA described by Suma is not uncommon in the Somali community, as Sula explains:

“I can only speak for Somali for now, although other African countries and Arabs, they share similar ideas. When you say exercise or sport, the first thing that comes in their mind is for losing weight purposes. To them they don’t see it as fun and I think because in their mind they think, ‘people work out to lose weight’ that they are stuck in that mentality and they don’t know the fun that they are missing” (Sula)

“a lot of the time when I go either to the basketball session or if I join; I used to go to yoga in St Jude’s and they would say, ‘Oh, why do you come here because you don’t need to lose weight. You are already slim. I wish I had your body’ and I am like, ‘It’s not about getting slim, it’s about staying healthy and happy’ and then they are like, ‘Well, we don’t get it’” (Sula).

Suma explains that there is such physical scrutiny in the Somali community that this effects women’s relationship with LTPA. They either do it to ‘get skinny’ or otherwise ‘retreat back and develop a mental illness’:

“Yes. Some people might be motivated by the fact that they want to prove the other person, “No, I can get skinny. You’ll see. Yes, I’m going to go to the gym. I’m going to be active.” But some people could retreat back and maybe even develop a mental illness, depression, anxiety, feel like they’re not good enough, let those words keep running around their mind, and really believe... I feel like if I wasn’t strong enough, I might have believed, “Oh, my God, yes. My husband is going to leave me. I’m too fat, I’m too ugly for him.” It’s just if you have a weaker mind and you believe that, it would cause some, not only issues in your mental and physical health, it would also cause an issue in your marriage and how you see life, and how you would raise your own children. Because if you got told that and you were drilled, “Oh, my God. You’re too big. Oh, my God,” by people you thought were family, or were friends, then it’s like you’re going to drill that same thing – especially if you have a daughter – the same thing in her mind. So I feel like it can go both ways” (Suma).

Managing LTPA sessions

Kiki, and many of the other respondents, specified that women-only sessions would be the way to appeal to the BME community, and also sessions that are lead by a BME instructor:

“Probably if there’s like a BAME woman that’s doing the classes – they would probably want to come more, if that makes sense. That’s probably the main thing – what they’d like (Kiki).

“I think is they have place for ladies, all ladies I think they would love to do that, they will enjoy it yes” (Sami).

Sami explains that women in her culture do not like exercising around men:

“And I don’t know sometimes even if they want to do it, the places that they want to do there’s some men, and because of our religion they don’t want to do that around men, they

don't want to do exercise. So that's what is stopping them to do the activity that they want" (Sami).

Mona explained how difficult it can be finding exercise sessions that are for women only:

"It's a shame that in Bedminster there is only one swimming pool and as being a Muslim they don't have only women hours. And the one that does is quite far and it's not possible for me to go. Before Monty I was crazy about learning ballet dancing. I had some classes because in London, I used to live in London before. In London I had a leisure membership and they used to do ballet dance, all classes and everything and machine exercises I only like the treadmill. Otherwise I like yoga, Pilates and I don't know if my body would ever be able to do it again or not".

"And swimming too, just five minutes walk there's a swimming pool but they don't have special times for women only. And in my area the gym has a sauna and a steam but they don't have special times for women. Even in the children's centre, I think Redcliffe children's centre they have swimming classes but they don't have that for parents, not only for mum's timing" (Mona).

Mona explains the intricacies of exercising as a Muslim woman:

"As a Muslim we can do gym we can do exercise with males but sauna, steam and swimming that's impossible for us. And obviously as a Muslim women we don't feel comfortable too. If we think that it's a religion point of view and we don't specifically talk about it, I won't say even religion, some Christian girls they don't feel like too because I went to the gym and I asked them if they have sauna and steam and they said it's not just about this some English girls also asked us I think they're not comfortable" (MN).

Sami enjoys swimming if there are all-women sessions like at Easton:

"The lifeguards are women...Yes all women, that's because they asked for – we asked for to be all women. Sometimes they say women are sick and they have to be replaced with a man, but that day they tell us and a lot of women they go back home" (Sami).

For Mona, it is also a 'woman thing' not just a cultural preference to have women only exercise sessions:

R: In my community there are not specifically things like for women only.

I: There's nothing for women only?

R: Not really, not in my knowledge actually.

I: Okay. And why is that important?

R: Yeah it's a natural thing that everyone is not comfortable with other sex like everyone cannot become stable, every woman can not be comfortable with men doing some physical activity with men and I think that's an important issue I think. Yeah I'm speaking as a woman.

I: That's great.

R: Not community, not culture, not religion I think as a woman (MN).

Sula described her frustration at having to constantly 'ring around' because swimming pools do not advertise clearly whether sessions are all women, including life guards. It is important for Bristol Girls Can that women-only sessions are advertised widely as such to the Muslim communities in Bristol South.

One of the key reasons for having women only sessions is so that Muslim women can relax, wear appropriate sports clothing and not have to worry about being watched:

"Outdoor sports, for example now evening during lockdown you have got basketball courts. In St Paul's they have got one. In St Jude's they have got one and in St Phillips and some of the girls that I coach approached me and they said, 'Can we play outdoors at least few of us?' and then they asked me if I could come and coach and I said, first of all, because of lockdown and even without the lockdown we can, but it is difficult to play in headscarves so that is another thing because when we play sports we like to wear something comfortable and take our headscarf off and let our hair down kind of way" (Sula).

Having a female coach or session leader is really important to Suma so that Muslim women can wear comfortable clothes:

"[Sessions should be] definitely somewhere where it would be only women. So something that's not mixed, including the coach. So whatever activity it is, it's all women and it's secluded. When I'm saying 'secluded', I'm not talking about from just only Somali groups, but secluded in an area where they can actually wear the right outfits for that sport. For example, if you're doing basketball, a hall where there are no cameras, or if there are cameras, they are a bit turned away, and they can wear the shorts and let their hair down, you know, put their hair in a ponytail so they can play. That would definitely get a lot of Muslim and Somali people involved, definitely. Already, I've got 10 people that I can bring to that sport if you say that to them... I wanted to play basketball in my college, because they have a basketball group. Then they said that the coach was a guy, and not only that, basically it was mixed people, both women and men. I was like, "I really want to play, I do." Because I wear the full hijab from head to toe, so it's hard for me to bounce the ball around with a long thing. So I was like, yes, you need somewhere secluded for that. That's the only thing" (Suma).

Online, the Somali-dominant yoga group tend to turn off their cameras, particularly because of general shyness, but also due to a concern that the sessions will be recorded and shared:

"Most of them turn them off... Lately I am quite shy myself because when everybody turns it off, I am like, 'Okay, awkward' so I tend to turn mine off as well. It would have been really nice if everybody had theirs on and then we could see each other and encourage each other but I think a lot of them are quite shy and again, it goes back to their body and they are not comfortable with showing their body when they are wearing something tight" (Sula).

Sula explains that Muslim women may be frightened that the online sessions will be recorded:

“Another thing going back to turning the cameras off, another thing is some of the mothers are scared that we are recording it and then we have to remind them ‘This is not recorded once the zoom stops, it’s gone, you don’t have to worry about it’” (Sula)

“Some of the other ladies that I spoke to said, ‘Oh but then some of the ladies might have their sons or their husbands who are in the house who might peek over and because I am not wearing my head scarf, I don’t want them to see me’. The first thing is the woman thing where we are conscious about our body and then the other two are culture/religion... Yes, if you are not wearing your head scarf and you are being recorded, that video can go anywhere in the world, you never know. It’s a scary thing for them but I have joined a few of the zoom calls where I kept my head scarf on and then they could record it, its fine.” (Sula).

Suma suggests people should have a choice about whether they want to turn their cameras off in an online session:

“If the person that’s doing it, for example, because one of the times I was doing the dance thing, there were only women, which was a good thing. But the background men kept walking around, so they can see you on the laptop wearing your leggings, you know, flipping your legs around like, “Hello.” For us, it’s a bit, you know, we don’t allow that. But I feel like everyone should have a choice to put their cameras on. It’s a bit of fun to see everybody’s faces, to get to know everybody, put a name to the face. But to also let those people who are still a little bit anxious to put their face, or let them know, hey, if there were men around, just put your headscarf on and come on camera, like I’m doing. But, yes. I think it’s okay to let everybody have a choice, it’s fine. It will be a little bit fun. I would like to see people’s faces. I always put my camera on, because I’m like, “Look at me. Hi.”” (Suma).

Finally, the issue of music can also be culturally sensitive to Muslim women:

“I have that gyms for practising Muslim women, they struggle with the music. Almost every they have got have quite loud music on in the background and in our religion it is not permissible to listen to music. Acapella is fine but it is with the instruments and lyrics are another barrier” (Sula).

Winnie’s view is that Sudanese Muslim women can be fairly relaxed about music:

“Most of Sudanese you could say ninety eight percent is Muslims, but not really strict Muslim, most of the women here, it’s fine, we listen to music and stuff, it’s very small amount of people who really strict Muslim, we cannot hear music or something, but I never hear of someone like this here, all of them – they could put hijab but not cover their face or stuff, so I don’t think we have a problem” (Winnie)

5.0 Communications

Interviews explored how to best communicate Bristol Girls Can physical activity offerings to the cultural communities that participants identified with. For Kiki, trust was always going to be a major concern. She explained that she wouldn’t trust any information she would see in promotional material and would only go if she as invited by word of mouth. Mona felt the same, explaining that she really only trusted word of mouth recommendations:

R: I don't trust anything [advertising] like that, if someone especially won't recommend it to me.

I: So you think recommendations are...

R: My first answer was if any member of staff from the children's centre I know like my health visitor or Fatima or any other they will contact me they normally pass on or if I visit them they give me the leaflet what's happening. I won't go for pages to be honest. Mohammed's school staff or their peers will recommend something, this is happening in this area or here or this is happening or this group is happening so I will trust that (MN).

The reason the yoga classes are so popular is that a key community 'leader' has encouraged other women to take part.

"She is very active in the Somali community and in my area and she is really good with putting out links and then most ladies that know her join because she encourages them to join and then she tells me, 'Can you get some ladies as well, your neighbours' and then I try to get my neighbours to join in and then once they see a familiar face, they tell their friends. It's easier that way for them to come and join that group.

For Suma, it is important that women represented on the campaign are familiar to the Somali community:

"You do the same when you're shopping. You look for your body type on the models to see, "How does dress look on that body type? Would it look as good on me?" I feel like that's a really great idea to actually represent someone is wearing the full gown, or wearing the headscarf like this, and doing the sport. And advertising it's a free space where you could get to know other people, make friends" (Suma).

Tactics

Participants were also asked what would work in spreading the information about Bristol Girls Can sessions, especially for women in their communities. The answers given aligned with previous research stages, focusing on social media groups:

"Mostly, social media these days, unfortunately! Snapchat and Facebook" (Kiki).

"Bristol Home-School and then the Bristol News page" (Kiki)

"Probably local shops as well – posters" (Kiki).

"Personally I will look on Facebook with my children centre staff" (Mona).

"Things to do in Bristol, around your area. Physical activities to do in Bristol or around your area. What's happening in your area something like that" (Mona).

6.0 Conclusion and recommendations

Key implications for the development and management of the Bristol Girls Can social marketing programme are now considered.

1. A range of activities might appeal, including yoga, swimming, basketball, Zumba, Pilates and traditional exercise classes. However, all activities offered should be positioned for

beginners. Mothers feel that their bodies are incompatible with physically active leisure. They are tired, feel unhealthy and overweight, and experience pain and exhaustion routinely. In some cases they lack skills required to join in. Their bodies are not adapted to physical activity.

2. Activities and communications should encourage and reward mothers to reformulate their routines in a post-COVID era to include self-care in the form of physically active leisure. This can be encouraged in small steps. Covid has created an extra layer of 'unhealthiness' for mothers, in that they feel disconnected and stressed, and lethargic as a result of the extra sedentary hours spent during the various lockdowns. Even those who were routinely active are out of the habit.
3. Activities should assume mothers do not have support for childcare. Children either should be able to attend and join in, or childcare should be provided. Timing activities during school hours will allow some mothers to attend as long as sufficient time is allowed for the rigid school run.
4. Communications should appeal to mothers' willingness to connect. Mothers feel disconnected and claustrophobic, and welcome the concept of self-care, social activities and opportunities to destress. Notwithstanding the difficulties of translating the 'idea' into a tangible part of their routine, there is a readiness to engage in community based activities.
5. BGC activities should provide opportunities for destressing and relaxing; and also provide opportunities for socialising and fun. These are the main values of LTPA that women recognise.
6. BGC activities and promotion should strive to reframe LTPA as fun rather than for weight management. It is culturally ingrained that women's bodies, particularly in the Somali community but in other cultural groups as well, are under intense scrutiny. Women feel pressure as single women, during marriage, during and after pregnancy and as mothers to have the right size and shape body. Physical activity has become seen as a way to manage bodies, rather than as fun in its own right. It is important to provide opportunities for trial so that women can experience LTPA for the fun and social aspects, and that communications reframe LTPA as a leisure activity rather than a body management technique.
7. Exercising at home is not always possible, nor provides the benefits of self-care and socialising that mothers need. Face to face activities in local, familiar environment should be at the heart of the BGC offer.
8. There are important ways to manage LTPA offers that include Muslim women.
 - a. Ensure session leaders are women and that no men will be able to view the session. Having female only classes will appeal to Muslim women and non-Muslim women alike and allow Muslim women who wear headscarves to dress appropriately for the activity without fear of being overlooked.
 - b. Ensure there is an established protocol for online access in the case of online classes, e.g. that having cameras on/off is a matter of choice, that sessions are not recorded or shared.
 - c. Ensure there are some sessions that have no music. Having no music for some sessions will appeal to some Muslim women for cultural reasons.
9. Communications should ensure BME and non-British women are included. It is important to ensure all the activity management measures in (9) are clearly communicated so Muslim women are able to make a judgement as to whether their participation is culturally

appropriate. Furthermore, campaign communications should include women who resonate with BME and Muslim women, including those wearing culturally ascribed clothing.

10. The most effective way to communicate the Bristol Girls Can programme will be via established networks, many of which are situated online and use social media platforms. Word of mouth, facilitated via these established networks, will be the most powerful way to encourage women from BME and non-British cultural communities to participate. Experiences of exclusion from 'mainstream' British culture are common.