

Women's Event 2022

In March 22 Skydive Tilstock facilitated the first women only skydiving event in the UK: The Women's Edition Tilly Takeover Team 2022 – consisting of Cath Leather, Kate Lindsley, Sara Jane Orton, Vic and Becs Bradley, Freya Lees, Mary Barrett, Alabama Shanker, Keira Chapman, Laura Dixon, Katy Saxby, Delfina Nowicka, Ellie Southworth, Kat Busby Hicks, and with guest appearances from Maxine Tate and Siân Stokes. Concern had been raised by some of us over the results of a piece of work that British Skydiving Council member Kate had done into women's experiences on instructor courses. This had highlighted a range of difficulties for women within the sport and we were keen to find out some more about this from directly from women skydivers. We wanted to look at the barriers that stop women progressing in the sport, given that currently less than 16% of skydivers are female.

Our aim was to offer a space for women to come together, meet other women in the sport, make friends, bond, do some great skydiving with some amazing women skydivers, and be inspired that there is a place for women in this sport. The idea was to lead an all-female team, from DZO, Chief Instructor and pilot, to all our instructors and flyers. It was important to us that the women coming could see what they could be. We wanted to build on the experience of other women only events, such as Vic and Becs' "Chick Jam" - women's tunnel time, which has seen some really positive outcomes for women's progression and longevity in the sport. We knew it was important that we carve out a space for women to learn, grow in confidence, not feel intimidated or pressured, have fun, kick back, but also, crucially, to have the opportunity to discuss their experiences within skydiving: the good, the bad and the ugly, so that we can learn and grow as a sporting community.

It was incredibly enjoyable and was an absolute pleasure to welcome so many faces, old and new, to Tilly and meet so many fantastic and inspiring women, wherever they were on their skydiving journey, from complete beginners to old hands. We as organisers learned so much from the group's collective wisdom and this document aims to digest it, break it down and ensure we can learn from it, both to help us improve for future events but also as an aid for gathering data to assess the issues and barriers that women face in the sport so that both British Skydiving Council and DZs can start to make positive changes to support women skydivers.

We had 30 attendees, who over the course of two fresh, bright days at the start of the season, took part in discussion forums including on the challenges women face in skydiving, shared knowledge and experience with each other, and discussed issues they wanted help on. The event coincided with International Women's Day to raise awareness of women's issues, whilst having the aim to give women encouragement and support to grow in the sport. We wanted to garner confidence of attendees to stay in the sport and also to go on to achieve coaching and instructor ratings, of which women are far less frequent holders of accredited skydiving positions in comparison to men.

Discussions were wide ranging encompassing harassment and discrimination as well as, confidence, kit questions, and the positive sides to being a woman in the sport and how to encourage good allyship and positive advocates from the men in the sport. As Maxine said – "a fish in the ocean doesn't know it's in water as that's its environment". Helping others to see how the environment doesn't always work for women, will encourage attitude changes that can be helpful to women. Really small and subtle changes, such as just reminding a man how a certain action may impact on women, can have a huge effect. Chris Boardman recently tweeted about his experience of learning how intimidating it can be for women running or cycling on their own when men come up behind them. Just this small act of communication has begun to change how some men act and this continue to make a difference to women, as men talk about it with each other.

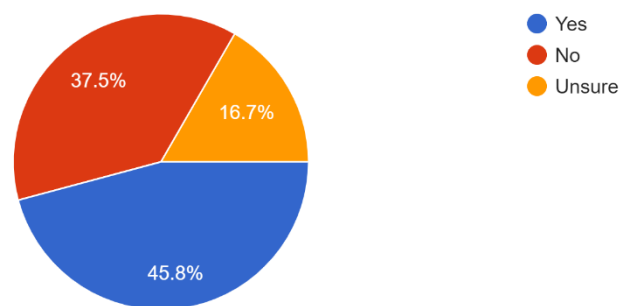
There were ground discussions including great landing advice from Maxine: “Boom and follow through”! Two-way, four-way, free flying, AFF and discussions on normalisation of deviances, confidence, how to tackle imposter syndrome, skills, abilities, kit and general chatter. Lots of the women had come knowing only a few others or none at all and it provided a forum for them to make friends and feel confident about turning up at other DZ’s or events where they would now know people. A Whatsapp group for the participants has continued all year to keep attendees in communication with each other, share info and post about their experiences and achievements. Interestingly, participants have also used it to share incidents that have made them feel uncomfortable and how following the event they have felt empowered to be able to challenge those situations. There has been a lot of support and encouragement from within the group to call out poor behaviour aimed at women.

Responses and Conclusions

Harassment in the sport perceived because of being female. Highest figure is Yes at nearly half (45.8%), Unsure and Yes combined at 62.5%.

Have you experienced any harassment in the sport because you are a woman?

24 responses



Examples given of this included:

- stalking and psychological abuse;
- sexist and inappropriate comments used about and to women, including by instructors and CIs; feeling that you have to be twice as good as the men to get any respect;
- unwanted sexual innuendos;
- feeling uncomfortable packing as men watch and make comments resulting in the woman removing herself from the packing hall and finding private space to do it;
- being patronised and babied because of being young and female, while male jumpers of the same age and ability do not get questioned/lectured in the same way;
- language that belittles the jumper, such as “girls can’t land canopies”;
- a participant had reported harassment, it didn’t get acted on. Years later she received some apologies but her confidence had already been dented by that point;
- one participant said she was used to daily sexist and stereotypical comments, including one that day on Facebook from a chief instructor;
- an instructor that always double cheek kisses women jumpers, but not the men and leaves her feeling uncomfortable and that it is inappropriate;
- being pestered and men refusing to take no for an answer;
- being given repeated unsolicited advice while learning to pack, while the male learners had no issues;

- bullying through marginalisation and exclusion based on sex and age.

Reasons given for not reporting harassment included:

- a lack of confidence to report wrongdoing to the club;
- fear there would be retribution and safety issues if the person found out;
- the wrongdoing being committed by DZ staff;
- fear of being believed or that it would be acted upon as the person was “high up” in the sport;
- felt wouldn’t be taken seriously;
- didn’t know who to report to or how to do it;
- felt unconfident to challenge and that it was “her fault”;
- didn’t think the DZ would only bother if it was a staff member and not just a club jumper.

The outcomes of these experiences included stopping jumping at a particular DZ and the feelings arising from these situations were described as:

“unpleasant, uncomfortable, unequal, inferior, unconfident, inability, stupidity, being crushed, feeling too fat, or that they should quit skydiving.”

The women described trying to avoid perpetrators of harassment and feeling unsafe, anxious, embarrassed, paranoid for their own safety or the safety of their equipment and had even stopped skydiving for a while.

I find these answers deeply disturbing but not particularly surprising. However, just because women carry on regardless, it is worth saying that **nobody** should be made to feel this way while trying to partake in a sport they enjoy.

Negative impacts perceived due to sex, race, religion, age, disability, or sexual orientation

Of the responses received only 18% perceived no negative impact on their skydiving, the remaining 82% complained that age and race played a factor but predominantly the disadvantages were sex based: Such as being assumed to be less competent or able than men; kit not designed to fit women; lack of support or respect because of being a woman; sexist, racist, homophobic, derogatory language; having to prove yourself against the men; and safety issues at event parties or staying overnight at DZs, including keeping away from or an eye on predatory men:

“I’ve also been aware of particular men on dropzones (some of whom had positions of power like being coaches or instructors) that I and other friends (both other females and male allies) would keep away from or keep an eye on to ensure that they didn’t ‘take advantage’ of women (particularly university students or new skydivers) when drunk at parties.”

I find this last point to be particularly poignant considering the high profile events of male violence and sexual misdemeanours that have happened to women skydivers over the last year.

Motivations for coming to the Women’s Event

These included wanting to get back into skydiving in a less pressurised way than at their home DZ; being keen or curious to be in a women only space (a majority of attendees had never been to any gathering that was exclusively for women); Wanting to improve the sport for women; Knowing from previous experience that the organisers would support them and hold a worthwhile event; Being impressed by the organiser line-up; Wanting to meet other women; Wanting to not feel like quitting skydiving; Wanting to be amongst women as was nervous about skydiving again after a break; A change from jumping with men; Be able to ask questions and not feel judged; To have a new experience.

Highlights for participants of the Women's Event

The women responders highlighted the following positives from the event:

- the warmth and friendliness of the group;
- the great skydives; the group conversations;
- learning and being understood; being away from men;
- making friendships and forming connections;
- seeing confidence in everyone's abilities grow;
- having an amazing vibe from being only women;
- showing women a pathway to progression by coaching and role modelling;
- sharing advice and best practice;
- having all women in the plane (lighter and smells better!);
- insights from the Friday night discussion;
- the lectures;
- Maxine watching the landings to give advice; the packing brief

Learning

As it was the start of the season, we took extra time to ensure everyone had received a clear brief, felt confident in their abilities and that they were ready to skydive. It became apparent early on that many women weren't very confident about packing their own rigs, so we organised a packing brief. It also became clear by the end, that women weren't confident about mixing with the stall holders. I had a discussion with the reps that had come and agreed that at the next event, we would take time to host a meeting with all reps and participants, to enable reps to give a talk about what they do and what they offer and make it less intimidating for women to interact with them.

100% of the women who responded to the questionnaire said they would come to the event again. We would like to grow this event, allowing more women to come and experience something that is just for them. I would like to collaborate closely with British Skydiving Council as I feel that there is a responsibility to ensure that women are treated equally and can learn, partake and excel in an environment that nurtures and encourages their talent, while ensuring they feel safe and respected.

It is clear from this snapshot of life as a female skydiver, that there is some way to go in tackling sexist behaviour and attitudes from the male cohort of skydivers. This surely will be best achieved if we can all work together?

Kat Busby Hicks, DZO

Skydive Tilstock Freefall Club