

Every event is different. From 5km fancy dress road races, to ultra-distance off road triathlons. What is the same is that women belong on their start lines. Actively encouraged to be there, with a positive experience when we race and having our competition held in equal regard.

We've put together a set of guidelines for race directors to help support female athletes. Our suggestions aren't relevant for all races - city road races don't need safety trackers for example. But most apply for all races, such as diversity in marketing images and equal race coverage.

The inclusive events we speak with have high repeat rates, and high recommendation rates showing encouraging female athletes is good for events too. We encourage you to ask past female participants what they think can be improved - and please share any great ideas with us to support other events!

If you believe your event is actively welcoming of female athletes please contact us and we'll add you to our supporters hall of fame.

Level the start line

[Whilst women now make up over half of runners globally](#) we make up less than 20% of starters at longer races - just 16% at ultramarathons in 2018. And less than 8% at the prestigious Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc.

Some of this deficit is societal - women still take on a higher burden of caring responsibilities and have less leisure time than men. Which makes training difficult - especially for longer ultras and triathlons.

But there are many things race organisers can do to ensure women are encouraged to race and have more opportunity to be on that start line.

> Inclusive imagery

The start line image of a race is often one of just men - women are less inclined to push our way to the front. To make women feel welcome, include a range of images of competitors in your marketing. From those at the front, to the back markers. Including women of all ages, shapes and colours. Show us we belong.

> Race overviews

Consider the language used in marketing - words like "toughest" and "dangerous" may appeal to men. But for many women they can be a barrier to entering, making us question our capability even if we do have a strong chance of finishing. Instead give advice on what is needed to finish, for example the average pace, total climbing, and minimum training guidelines.

> Generous cut-offs

Cut-offs are important for the safety of participants and the logistics for race organisers. But strict early cut-offs can penalise and deter women, who have on average more even pacing through the longer races. Shorter races should also be inclusive of beginner runners who might be running and walking.

> Planning

Include as much information about the logistics of the race on the website. How to get there, where to stay, bag drop facilities, toilet facilities, kit recommendations and more. Having an active social media page where people can ask questions, as well as reviews from other women who have done the race is also helpful.

> Fair deferral policies

Events should ensure that no woman is penalised for having a child and can take her place on the start line when she is fit, healthy and ready. Pregnancy and then returning to running postpartum can be a difficult journey for women and the running community needs to actively support us.

Whilst we understand race organisers have fixed costs, the proportion of women that might want to defer each year for pregnancy is very small, and this is more than offset by the value of inclusivity.

Races with no lottery: Races should offer pregnant women a deferral for up to 2 years (or a refund). If a woman has just become pregnant before a race, she may not be ready to race 1 year afterwards (current guidelines are not to resume any running for at least 12 weeks post birth)

Lottery races: For those entries with ballots, places won should be rolled over for up to 2 years. For races that require points, qualifying times, or have double entry lottery bonuses if unsuccessful in the draw, these should also be carried over for 2 years.

Bonus points: It's not just women that are affected by pregnancy. [Ironman has recently acknowledged this](#) and has deferral options for partners when the race is close to the baby due date, as well as for those adopting children.

> Active selection

For those races with low female participation and ballot entry, reserve a portion of slots for women to ensure better representation. The London Marathon does this with the same amount of places reserved for "Good for Age" qualifying times for men and women.

Equal the experience

In order to give the best race experience possible for all, it's important to look at the athlete journey through a female lens too.

> Toilets and changing facilities

Women aren't designed the same as men. So we don't all feel comfortable peeing in front of others. Ensure there are appropriate toilet facilities at the race start and finish, and where relevant on course. Aim to have changing facilities for women before and after the race too and sanitary products available at each aid station. And remind male racers that even if the female toilets have a shorter/no queue, they are not for their use.

> Safety

Ensure women feel safe before, during and after your event. For swim starts or crowded races consider separate areas for women. Rolling starts where possible can be more comfortable for all racers. Have a mix of male and female volunteers at each aid station, including medical staff.

If a race goes through remote areas or the night, offer safety trackers and "buddy up" runners at checkpoints. Also consider the end location and time, making sure runners can safely get to their destination. If results are posted online, allow names to be anonymized on request.

Race rules should also include etiquette on course. For example, peeing on the trail/at the start line, passing too closely from behind and making inappropriate comments is unacceptable.

> T-shirts that fit

Unisex t-shirts are not unisex. [They are male fit.](#)

At SheRaces we encourage races not to give out t-shirts for sustainability - or at least give entrants the choice of a charity donation instead, for example to [Trees not Tees.](#)

However, when t-shirts are offered, women should be given an equally well-fitting t-shirt to men, with a size guide with measurements included on the entry form. If other "rewards" are offered, these should also be equally appropriate to women.

> Breastfeeding athletes

Include a note on your race guidelines asking entrants to get in touch if they have any other needs, such as breastfeeding where we might need a pump at an aid station or race finish, as well as a chair. The rules on "Outside Help" outside specific zones should obviously not include meeting babies and their carers too!

Many conditions are hidden, both for men and women so encouraging that conversation of additional needs is inclusive for all athletes.

Respect our competition

Our competitive race should be given equal respect to the men's (or open) race. We train as hard. We race as hard. We deserve the same recognition.

> Equal coverage

Any discussion of the race - before, during or after - should include equal reference to the women's field and result as the mens, including photography and film. If the women's field is small consider attracting greater competition.

When results are posted online, the women's results should also be separated out and posted alongside the mens/open classification. This makes it easy to see the female podium, rather than it being lost within the overall.

> Room to race

Allow the leading women their own space at the start if relevant. This allows athletes to be recognised (and identify each other) but also to ensure the women's race has the same clear start as the mens. In swim starts this also makes us feel safer.

> Equal prize money

Where prize money is offered, it should be equal for men and women, with the same size podium and same number of veteran categories. Awards should also be of equal value and suitability.

This list isn't exhaustive of course and there are so many more ways to make races more inclusive for all runners. We'd love to hear from you if you have other ideas. Let's make racing better for all.