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## Childhood health and cultural inequalities: women pay the price

Scientists at UNIGE and Université Grenoble Alpes have shown that women from under-privileged cultural backgrounds are less likely to take physical exercise in adulthood, with a potential impact on their long-term health.

## PRESS RELEASE

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It has now been demonstrated that the socio-economic conditions in which children grow up in will have an impact on their health behaviour— particularly physical activity – in adulthood. But what are the key factors that influence physical activity as an adult? And does gender play a role? To answer these questions, researchers from the University of Geneva (UNIGE), Switzerland, worked closely with Université Grenoble Alpes in France to analyse the data of 56,000 people in Europe. Contrary to a widespread belief, the scientists found that cultural rather than economic factors are largely responsible for determining physical activity in adulthood. Moreover, they noted that women were affected by this phenomenon more than men, with the latter seemingly insulated from it. You can read more about the results of this research in the journal *Psychological Science*.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that more than 80% of adolescents worldwide are not sufficiently physically active (based on 2021 data). This lack of physical activity is linked to an increase in the incidence of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and even certain types of cancer. In addition, the WHO estimates that physical inactivity causes one death every six seconds or about 5.3 million deaths a year (WHO 2020). But what are the conditions that encourage people to take part in physical activities? What factors come into play?

Boris Cheval, a researcher at UNIGE's Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences and last author of the study, explains: "Earlier studies showed that the socio-economic conditions that children grow up in have a profound impact on whether they play sports in adulthood. The more disadvantaged the environment is, the less active the person will be." The researchers sought to determine what factors actually play a role in this conditioning: was it the economic or cultural level?

### Cultural inequalities predominate

The research team analysed the data of 56,000 people in the SHARE database (Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement in Europe), a European socio-economic database of over 25 countries. "Every two years", continues Dr Cheval, "the level of physical activity of around 56,000 adults aged 50 to 90 was measured over a period of 13 years." Furthermore, the scientists had access to four indicators to help them understand the economic and cultural conditions of the people taking part in the study: first, the number of books in the home at age 10 and the profession of the parents (cultural indicators); secondly, overcrowding at home – i.e., the number of people in relation to the number of rooms – and the quality of the accommodation (material indicators).



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Boris Cheval, researcher at the Centre inter-facultaire en sciences affectives (CISA) of the UNIGE.

High resolution pictures



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The initial finding was that 26.6% of women are inactive, compared to 23.4% of men under all conditions. Aïna Chalabaev, a professor at Université Grenoble Alpes, director of the SENS Laboratory, and the study's first author explains: "First of all, we observed that material indicators didn't play a determining role, unlike cultural indicators, which had a real influence on the person's physical activity in adulthood."

The researchers then discovered a clear difference based on gender: the percentage of inactive culturally-advantaged men was 27.8% compared to 31.1% for disadvantaged men, while these figures were 29.6% and 37.9% respectively for women, a difference of 8.3% (compared to only 3.3% for men). The statistical models also confirmed that the adverse effect of this cultural inequality was significantly higher among women than men.

### **Socio-economic conditions define gendered physical activity**

"This study confirms a theory put forward by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu," continues Dr Cheval. "He explains that in disadvantaged social categories, the physical activities on offer in childhood are geared towards competition and masculinity, like football and rugby. Among the more privileged classes, on the other hand, these activities are less gendered, like tennis, golf or dance."

This categorisation of sports would further exclude young girls from disadvantaged social classes from taking part in physical exercise – an exclusion that would then become rooted in their adult behaviour. "That's why the gap is smaller in men. As a result of their gender, they seem to be better shielded from physical inactivity because playing sport is valued among boys, regardless of their socio-economic conditions", says Professor Chalabaev.

The study shows that the cultural environment during childhood may play a determining role in physical activity behaviour in adulthood. Public health policies should, therefore, pay particular attention to children from disadvantaged social classes, in particular girls. "It's about preventing physical inactivity as much as possible, since it is a global problem with enormous health and economic consequences",

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