

Without Limits

Female Player Survey

Over the summer, Without Limits set out to find out what female players think about the current state of ultimate and what needs to be done to get more women playing. When we initially crafted the survey, our goal was to get at least 100 responses in order to help inform future Without Limits work, specifically our skill clinics and leadership clinics. Over a three week period in June and July, we wound up with responses from 1,581 women, far exceeding our expectations. The message was loud and clear: women have a lot to say, and they want to be heard.

The open-ended part of the survey focused on three aspects– why women start playing ultimate, what keeps them in the sport, and finally, what needs to be done to close the existing gender gap and get more women playing. The second part of the survey gathered details on the players taking the survey and opinions on the USA Ultimate gender equity policy, which you can find at the end of this report. We heard from both current players and women who have stopped playing regularly; the responses we received were insightful, thoughtful, and provided clear ideas for moving forward. Based on your responses, what we've found is that the two most important factors for women are the *quantity of playing opportunities available*, and the *quality of those playing opportunities*.

Quantity of Playing Opportunities

Most women started playing ultimate in college and kept playing because it was fun and provided an outlet for competition and exercise. Not only did their teammates become their social group, but they also loved the feeling of belonging to the larger ultimate community and what that represented. None of these factors are surprising to any of us who played college women's ultimate.

According to the survey, women feel that having a positive experience in high school or college will keep women interested in playing to some degree once they graduate. However, one of the biggest barriers to continuing to play is access to the right type of opportunity after college. The right type of opportunity varies based on commitment, division, cost, competitiveness, and location. Women told us they wanted to see more variety in the level of play and more women's teams in their community.

"Not having as many strong female programs as male programs...I already know of 2 female players from high school in NJ that had to join a different team just in order to play, because their own schools didn't have a team."

"I think more options for levels of play. Currently, after I graduate, I really only know of one option for continued play, which is a competitive women's team. While this may be something I am interested in, if I would need something that was less time demanding, I wouldn't know what my options are. Simply more information on options to play and how to do it would be great."

Distance from any club team or the only option for playing women's in their area being an elite club team were the two most common reasons women felt their opportunities for playing ultimate were limited. Women also mentioned that they specifically had difficulty finding women's tournaments that were accessible, both in college and at the club level. This is an area that Without Limits has focused on improving, but clearly more work needs to be done.

Finally, college women's players without a coach frequently did not know what opportunities were available to them over the summer or after college, especially beyond existing elite club teams. Without a leader to provide guidance, it can be hard to know where to look for pickup, leagues, and club teams.



Quality of Playing Opportunities

Although being able to find the right type of playing opportunity nearby is certainly important in getting women to play, most of the responses focused on the quality of playing opportunities as having the biggest impact on whether or not women continue to keep playing ultimate.

"I think just a good experience in college ultimate will keep females playing after college at some level. One big impact for me and girls on my team has been strong female leaders and strong male supporters. Encouraging coaches and females who put themselves out there to show younger females the sport can make a world of difference."

At the college level, players talked about having enough girls on their team as a big factor for having productive practices and fun at tournaments. When not enough women are on the team, it can be difficult to run certain drills and impossible to hold a full scrimmage, limiting the entire team's development and satisfaction. Tournaments without enough women can also be frustrating as players get tired and/or injured. In short, it's a cycle; the more women that play on team, the higher the quality of playing opportunities will be for everyone, causing players to stick around which makes it easier to recruit additional players in the future.

Good coaching was also viewed as one of the most important factors for a positive playing experience at the college level. Important qualities of a good coach include being encouraging, understanding the women's game, serving as a positive role model, being familiar with recruitment, and organizing practices and leading a team with a season-long plan in mind. Since a full-time coach is not an option for some teams, players also mentioned having access to top women's players to emulate and/or learn from in a skills clinic setting was helpful in providing an alternative form of mentoring and leadership.

Outside of college, women were very clear that a positive or negative co-ed experience had a major impact on whether or not women, particularly newer players, continued to play. When male players ignored women or looked them off on the field, or women felt they had to go out of their way to prove themselves to their male teammates, our survey respondents felt that it demonstrated a lack of respect. These experiences took away from their sense of belonging to the ultimate community which is such a big part of why women are drawn to ultimate in the first place.

"I think to recruit women who have never played sports you have to make them feel empowered right off the bat. I think that is what is so addictive about sports, especially for women."



Ways to get more women playing ultimate in your community

In order to reduce the gender gap that currently exists in ultimate and get more women playing, there are a number of things individuals, recreational league organizations, and entire communities can do. For female players in particular, it is important to take the lead and become visible role models in the community. We have the ability to create positive change in our community. In order to start this conversation and give people some ideas of where to start, we've come up with a list of specific strategies you can use to address the issues brought up by the women who answered the Without Limits player survey.

Increase the number of opportunities

- 1. Cast a wide net to recruit new players**—These people might include co-workers, people you meet at the gym or coffee shop, neighbors, friends, daughters of friends, etc.. Building the future of ultimate is as much about recruiting elite athletes as it is about creating a wide base of players. Female ultimate players place a strong focus on community and on building self-esteem and joy in sport for those around them.
- 2. Start a women's club team** - Forming a women's team that practices and travels to tournaments together is one of the best ways to increase the number of female players. Organization is key - make sure you have leadership, a practice and tournament season plan, and if possible, a coach, before you start recruiting women. Work with other communities nearby to host scrimmages or small tournaments to create accessible opportunities to play other teams.
- 3. Organize a women's league** - In addition to traditional leagues, organizing a supplementary women's league that encourages growth and development is a great way to bring in new women who might be hesitant to start playing, particularly in a co-ed setting. Consider running short lessons or drills prior to playing in order to help players develop skills. These skills sessions are also a great way to engage club players and encourage them to be invested in local growth.
- 4. League-specific strategies** - Provide buddy discounts or other incentives for players who recruit new women for league. Lower the barriers to entry as much as possible, and incentivize introducing new women to the sport. Mandate 4:3 ratios in leagues, which can encourage everyone to make a bigger effort to recruit women to play. With a 4:3 ratio women can also be more involved in the game, improving the quality of their experience.



5. Work toward providing a range of playing opportunities that are accessible to women at whatever level they are at - The more variety your community can offer in terms of commitment, skill level, division, cost, and competitiveness, the more likely you will be to have an opportunity that fits an individual player's needs.

Improve the quality of the experience:

- 1. Encourage women to become more visible both as individuals and as team members on and off the field** - This can be done through coaching, taking on leadership roles in local ultimate organizations, actively promoting top teams and players, etc. You have a huge opportunity to be a role model for current and future players, so use your voice and be seen!
- 2. Host skill clinics for women in the community** - If you don't have enough women or resources to organize a women's league, hosting periodic skill clinics run by experienced players and coaches is a great way to build a local women's community. These can be open to everyone who wants to learn, or you can target particular groups – new players, middle school or high school players, college players, or even club players.
- 3. Engage with local middle schools, high schools, universities, and other organizations to run events, build awareness, and provide coaching** - Be visible in your community and utilize the wide range of resources that are available. Assess your local ultimate community's strengths and weaknesses, and build a plan with specific strategies for moving forward.



Detailed Survey Results



1581

Survey respondents

6

Average number of years playing (ranged from >1 to over 20 years)



46

States



4

Countries (Including the US)

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO WOMEN?

Belonging to part of a community

Access to different levels (based on skill, cost, commitment, etc.)

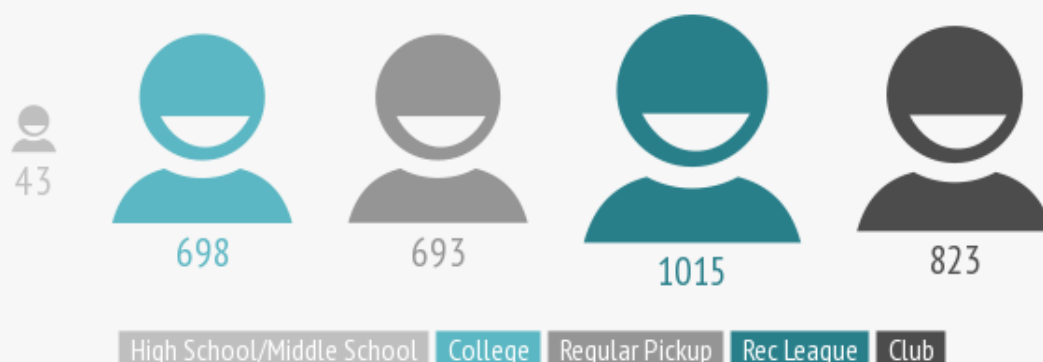
High quality and responsible coaches

Positive co-ed experience, particularly for new players

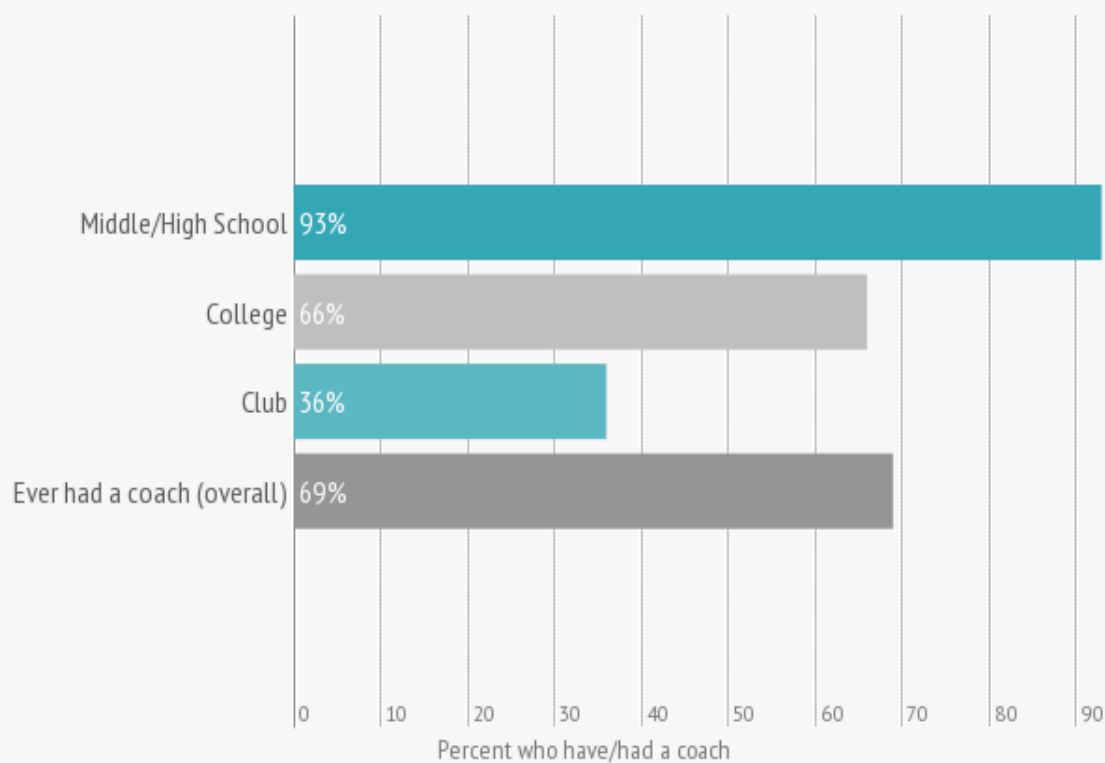
Knowing what opportunities are available after college

Increased visibility of female players and role models

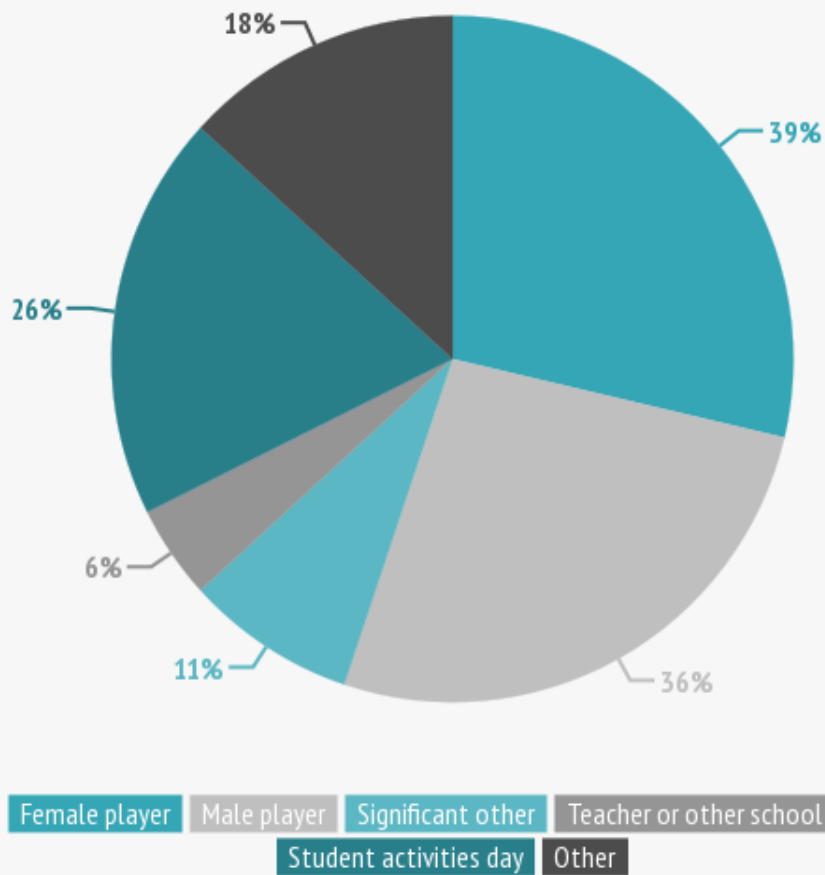
LEVELS WOMEN WHO TOOK THE SURVEY PLAY



DO YOU CURRENTLY HAVE A COACH/HAVE YOU EVER HAD A COACH?



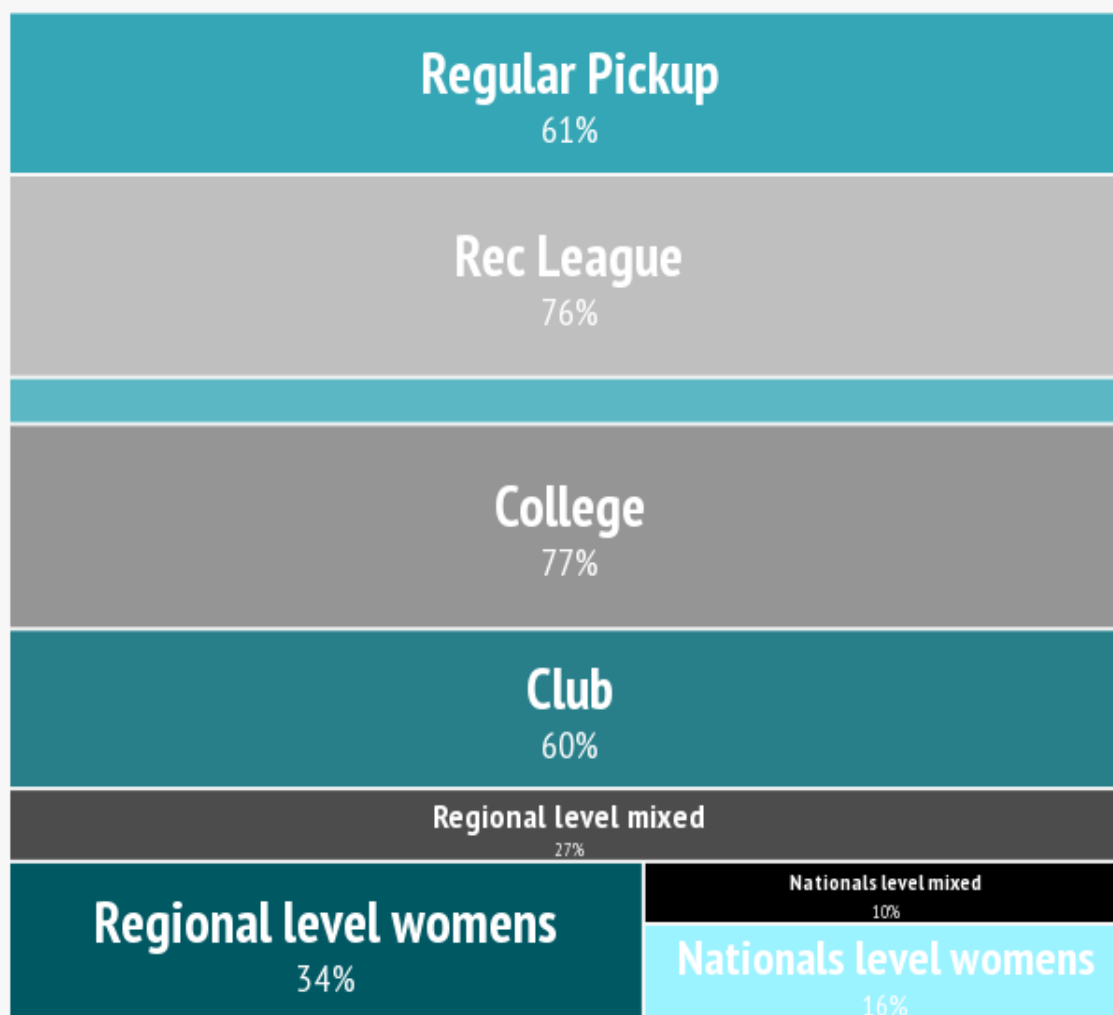
Who got you to start playing?



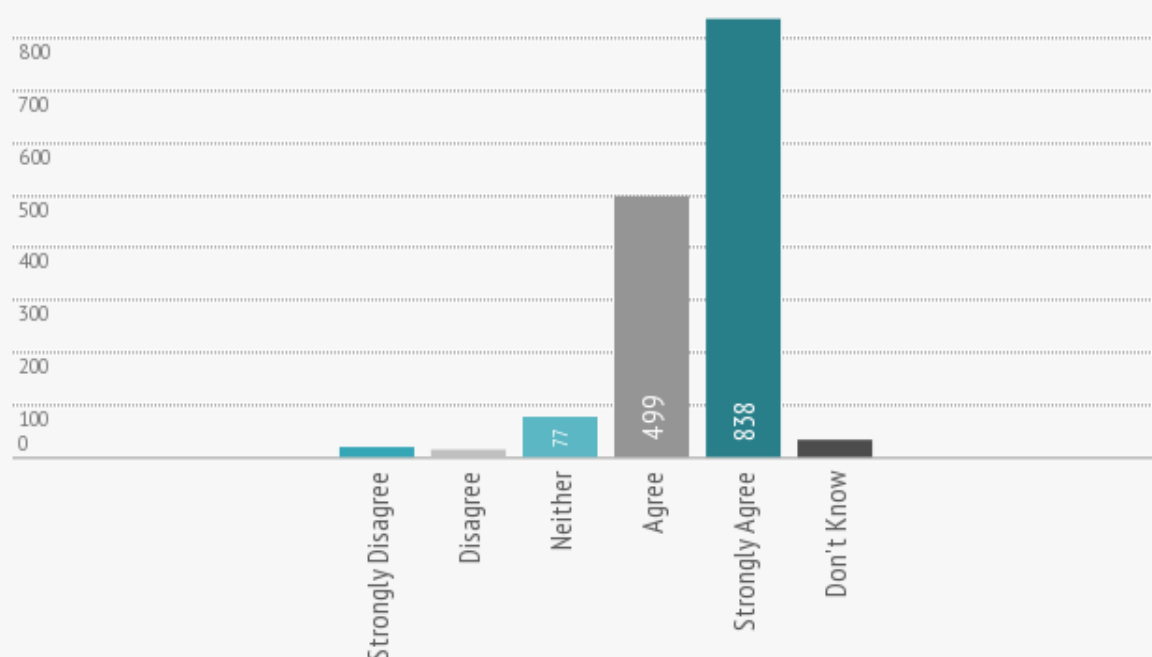
Pro teams are helpful for the growth of women's ultimate



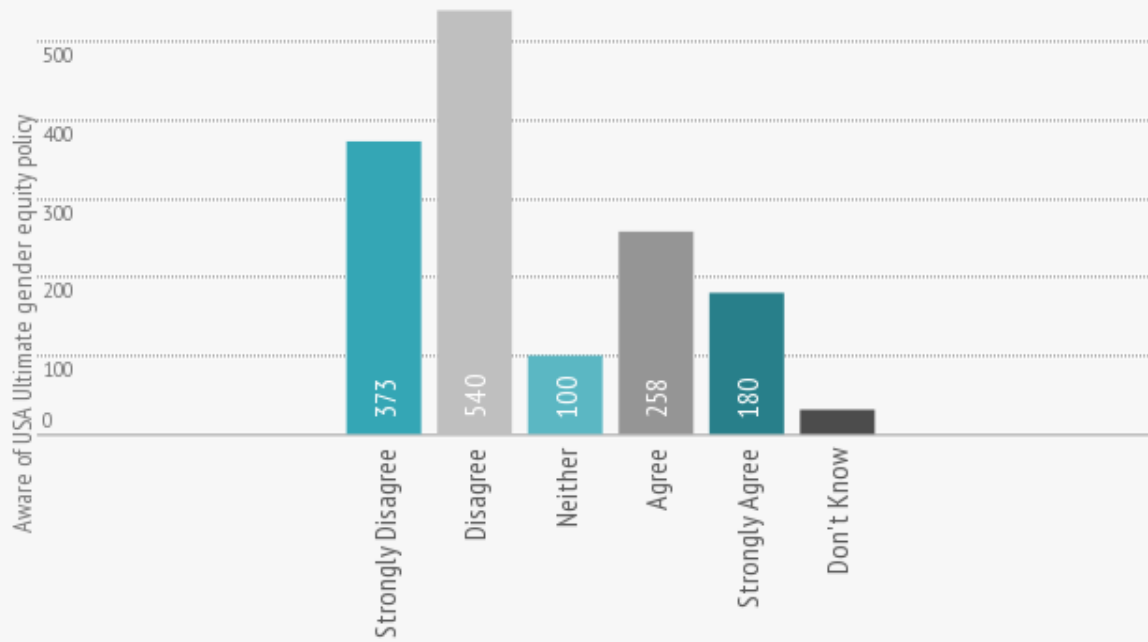
Levels women who responded had ever played



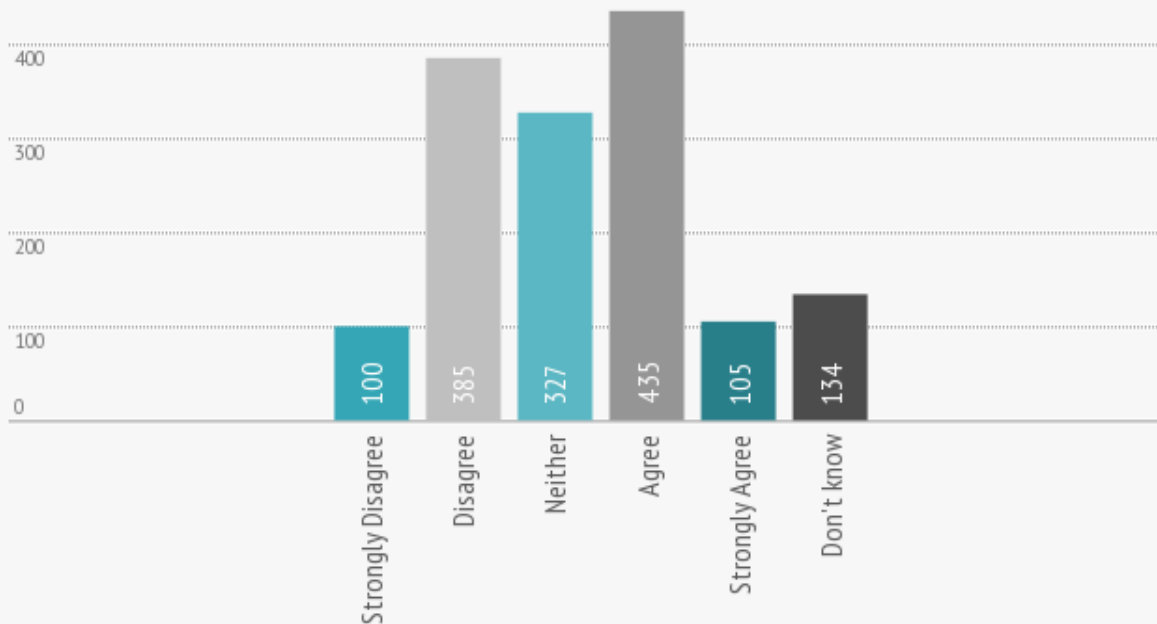
The USA Ultimate gender equity policy is important



I was aware of the USA Ultimate gender equity policy



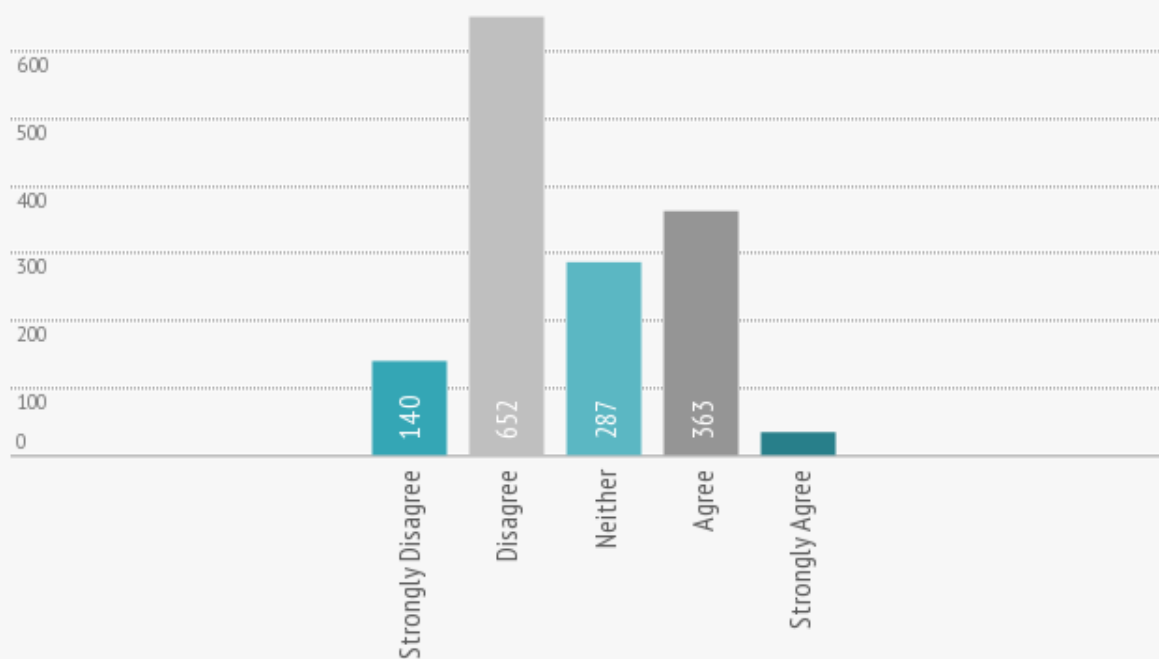
I understand how the USA Ultimate gender equity policy is used in USA Ultimate decision making



18% Knew an example when the USA Ultimate gender equity policy was used

Yes

There are enough playing opportunities for women at every level



It is important for all players, regardless of gender, to figure out ways to increase female participation

