

## The VicHealth Gender Equity in Sport Leadership Pledge

### Why was the VicHealth Gender Equity in Sport Leadership Pledge needed?

Sport has been a valuable setting to promote and achieve gender equity. Sport organisations and their participants and members can influence social norms, culture and behaviour. However, sport organisations and their leaders may not always know *how* to generate positive gender equity outcomes.

Providing sport organisations with guidance and tangible actions to undertake can be useful and, through their success, can create role model organisations for others to follow.

### What was the VicHealth Gender Equity in Sport Leadership Pledge?

Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the sport organisations funded through the Active Women and Girls for Health and Wellbeing Program (2017 – 2020) all signed the VicHealth Gender Equity in Sport Leadership Pledge (the VicHealth Pledge) incorporating 4 commitments:

1. Demonstrate progress to achieving a minimum of 40% self-identified female representation on the organisation's governing body.
2. Ensure gender balance on all public panels that the organisation is represented on.
3. Demonstrate progress towards 40% female representation in public facing imagery delivered by the organisation (40% female, 40% male, 20% non-gender specific).
4. Influence and promote equitable use of the organisation's facilities by women and girls.

Organisations included Victorian state sporting associations and national professional sport teams.

### The La Trobe University Centre for Sport and Social Impact research

The Centre for Sport and Social Impact from La Trobe University reviewed the performance of the organisations that signed the Pledge by:

- Collating the strategies and policies that supported each commitment
- Monitoring the performance of each organisation against each commitment
- Interviewing organisational CEOs, leaders and project managers
- Holding workshops to discuss and provide practical advice informed by the research.

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## Key findings

### 1. The sport sector wants practical recommendations on what to do to achieve gender equity.

Organisation leaders were aware of the need for and benefits of gender equity – most (if not all) organisations had taken some action well before signing the VicHealth Pledge. Progress toward gender equity was perceived to have moved beyond promotion and engagement (such as women and girls' breakfast events) and direct action was now required. Leaders wanted evidence-based examples of actions and strategies they should implement, and they wanted practical guidelines to support them through the next phase toward gender equity.

### 2. Gender equity outcomes can be improved with an organisation-wide strategy that has measurable targets (set by either the organisation, industry, or government).

Few (if any) organisations had an overarching gender equity vision, organisational strategy, or policy. Therefore, actions within organisations were often fragmented and employee awareness of gender equity initiatives was low. For example, several employees across various departments may have worked toward the same target (e.g., welcoming environments in sport for women and girls) with no awareness of what each other were doing. A more coordinated response could have strengthened initiatives and promoted a more cohesive whole-of-organisation approach. In general, sport organisation representatives perceived that broad policies were unlikely to achieve sustainable change, and that quotas, strategies with measurable targets, and binding guidelines were needed to counteract unconscious bias from individuals and within systems.

### 3. Gender equity requires strong and genuine leadership (resources, targets, and implementing initiatives).

The VicHealth Pledge provided sport organisations with an opportunity to publicly commit to gender equity and a framework for action. The level of internal commitment to the VicHealth Pledge was highly dependent on the values of the CEO and the patterns of participation in the sport (i.e., more women and girls participating in a sport led to greater commitment). Employees were keenly aware if their leadership *genuinely supported* gender equity (and the VicHealth Pledge). A lack of *genuine support* manifested as: organisations taking very little action toward gender equity; limited

resources or support to implement any gender equity initiatives that did exist; and no accountability for gender equity outcomes.

#### **4. Gender equity requires a proactive sector-wide approach (rather than a reactive insular approach).**

Just over half of the sport organisations that committed to the VicHealth Pledge took a proactive and sector-wide approach. This involved implementing policies or strategies that explicitly supported the VicHealth Pledge commitments internally; as well as leading and influencing other organisations within the broader sport sector. This broader approach considered the whole sport delivery system and how each organisation could influence the system through their interactions (such as refusing to speak on panels that were not gender balanced, educating event organisers about gender equity and recommending women who could speak instead).

#### **5. Gender equity is conceptualised as women and girls' participation.**

Participation was the main benchmark for gender equity – did women and girls have access to opportunities to participate in the sport? Although the 4 areas of the Pledge were somewhat consistent with existing ideas or gender equity initiatives, they did trigger some organisations to make a much more concerted effort (particularly in marketing). Adding a fifth commitment around human resources or workforce would result in a more complete Pledge that mirrored how the sport industry currently conceptualise and invest in gender equity.

Individuals interviewed defined gender equity *success* for an organisation as individual employees internalising the need for gender equity and taking ownership of its delivery, either through conscious or unconscious effort and actions.

## Gender equity in the sport sector

Benchmarking the sport sector against other sectors or providing guidelines to enable organisations to measure their performance was perceived as a potential strategy to support sport organisations to better plan and implement initiatives by identifying gaps in their current performance.

Based on the performance and feedback of sport organisations in this study, the sport sector was benchmarked against the Diversity and Inclusion Pathway and found to be placed around mid-point.

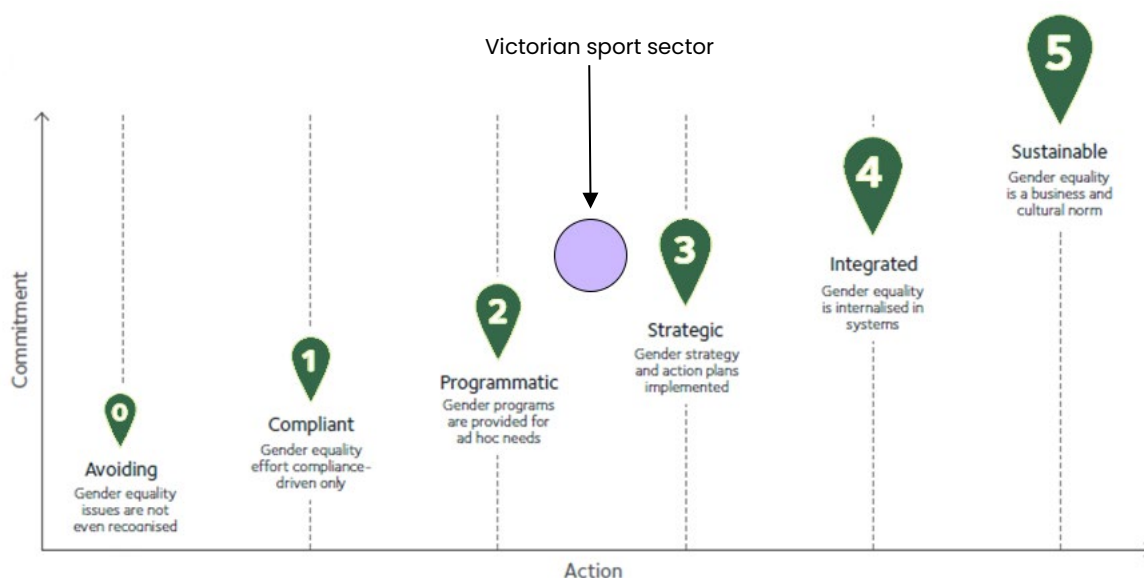
Most sport organisations had:

- acknowledged that gender equity was *the right thing to do*
- moved beyond avoidance
- complied with government requirements
- supported or implemented some gender equity initiatives

However, most sport organisations did not have:

- a clear overarching gender equity vision or strategy
- concise organisational policies
- decision-making guidelines
- written strategies or targets that were measured and monitored

### Gender equality roadmap



#### Reference:

Australian Government, Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2019), Gender strategy toolkit: A direction for achieving gender equality in your organisation, pg 11 (Available at: [https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gender\\_Strategy\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gender_Strategy_Toolkit.pdf))

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## Motivations for moving toward gender equity

The main reasons sport organisations were motivated to move toward gender equity were:

1. **Moral obligation:** Because it was the *“right thing to do”*; women and girls make-up half the general population and therefore should be represented equally throughout society, including in sport.
2. **Lead by example:** Because it was important to lead by example, particularly to community-based associations and clubs; *“we can’t expect them to change if we don’t first.”*
3. **Commercial relevance:** Commercially-minded organisations saw women and girls as a potential fanbase/market that was not fully realised or exploited. Some organisations perceived that engaging women and girls as fans or participants, required them to promote gender equity *internally*. This could create positive change and build a genuine culture inclusive of women and girls that could then be promoted *externally* to their wider fan and supporter base.
4. **Increasing trend in women and girls’ participation:** An increase in women and girls participating in certain sports has led to positive gender equity initiatives. These have included new or improved facilities and providing new or different participation opportunities for woman and girls. Some organisations believed that to attract more women and girls as participants or fans, they needed more diversity within their workforce to understand *“what women wanted”* or needed, and therefore they were purposefully employing more women into their organisation.
5. **Community and government pressure:** Government funding requirements and perceived changes in community social norms were strong motivators of sport organisations gender equity action. The support for gender equity was perceived to be getting stronger and sport organisations reported feeling pressure to improve gender equity to remain socially relevant.

The shift in social norms has affected how organisational leadership perceived the benefits of gender equity and the capacity to link gender equity to participation numbers had increased internal support. An increase in community expectations around gender equity has put it on the agenda for most sports and had provided a stronger platform to discuss ideas and garner support from boards and leadership.

*“The journey started for us in 2005, it started slow and has picked up. I think the key thing for me is having the need for gender equity being understood by the leadership, because the leadership is essential to the strategy. The need to move the sport forward and their understanding that of the place that women and girls playing our sport has in moving the sport forward and for our sport to continue to maintain its relevance. And I think initially it was like dipping your toes in the water and as the snowball has gone down the hill, more and more of the leaders have really started to understand the positive impact that it could have and really started championing it. And I think that's what we've probably seen over the past 4 years. And made a dedicated effort to put the funding against those strategic initiatives of both elite and participation opportunities and creating pathways to growing a group of girls. So, it was really setting aside dedicated resources to actually shift the space that I think has been the biggest shift in positive momentum.”*

**Senior representative from National Sporting Association**

The traditional culture and system within some sports has been predominantly patriarchal. The recent focus of government and sports to increase women and girls' participation has disrupted social norms and facilitated a change in the perception of gender roles and the place of women and girls in sport. For example, there has been a shift from a traditional view that the role of women in the community sport club was to manage the canteen, to understanding and supporting women to be active participants and leaders.

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## Influences on gender equity in sport organisations

There were 6 main influences on how sport organisations made decisions to move toward gender equity.

These can be grouped into 2 main areas:

### 1. Internal decision-making processes

- The organisation's systems, processes and culture that guides decision making.
- The organisational leadership that makes strategic decisions.
- The internal workforce that makes operational decisions.

### 2. Influences on decision-making that are external to the organisation

- The participant and membership base of the sport or team.
- The organisation's image or identity portrayed to the public.
- Government regulations that the organisation must adhere to, or organisational leadership public commitments to gender equity pledges or initiatives.



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## The human factor in decision-making

An important factor when considering the organisation's decision-making processes are the human factor. Humans can have an *unconscious bias* when making decisions. This means that individuals may not have fully consider the needs of women and girls when making decisions unless they are prompted to do so. This in turn may lead to unintentional discrimination against women and girls in some organisations.

Unconscious bias in leaders and the workforce can be harder to identify and address (because individuals may not be aware that they are being bias or had bias attitudes). Organisational gender equity strategies or decision-making guidelines can counteract unconscious bias. However, very few organisations in this review had developed or fully implemented such strategies or guidelines.

***“You need to find the universal rule within your organisation’s system or processes that are excluding women and change that.”***

~James Fazzino, a Male Champion of Change



## Internal decision-making processes

### 1. CEO/leadership

The lack of overarching organisational gender equity visions or strategies meant workforces looked to their CEO or leadership to guide their decisions in this area. CEOs drove the culture, resource allocation and decision making that guided any initiatives implemented. When project managers tried to implement initiatives to support the VicHealth Pledge, the support they received from other departments depended upon the leadership from CEOs.

New employees to organisations tend to perceive that their CEO or leadership did not *genuinely* support gender equity. This was because there was no vision or strategy to demonstrate to them the organisation's stance and, for some, there was a perceived lack of resources or energy allocated to promoting and actioning the VicHealth Pledge. Employees who had been in organisations longer tended to have a more positive perception as they had been part of the journey toward gender equity and had seen positive changes over time. This highlights the need to better tell the story of gender equity within these organisations to new employees and to ensure that a whole of organisation commitment is visible.

### 2. Internal workforce

The internal workforce is highly influential because they are responsible for day-to-day decisions and actions around gender equity. Men and women in this study perceived that women were often left to drive gender equity. This was frustrating for women, particularly when they were involved in day-to-day discussions around strategy and new initiatives that were not specifically targeted at gender equity (for example, discussions on developing a new facility or participation program).

Women sometimes felt that others *begrudged* the fact that they were always the person to *bring up* gender equity. Women were also frustrated because, if they prioritised bringing up gender equity first and foremost during these discussions, they could not voice other ideas or opinions unrelated to gender equity, meaning that their valuable input was not heard and that they could not demonstrate their expertise and knowledge in other areas. Finally, feeling responsible for driving gender equity because they perceived that no one else would, was emotionally draining for some women.

One of the main differences between the perceptions and actions of gender equity was the difference between equity and equality. For example, some men thought that it was enough to provide women and girls with the *opportunity* to participate in sport (equality), whereas



women were aware that genuine equity often required more targeted support for some women and girls to participate.

Similarly, there were examples where women had the *opportunity* to apply for leadership positions or promotions (equality) but they did not feel able to due to perceived or actual structural or cultural barriers (such as not having had similar previous opportunities for education and leadership experience as their male counterparts). Some organisational leaders had attempted to better support women to advance their careers by encouraging and supporting them to apply for leadership roles and by providing leadership training and other upskilling courses to build their confidence and capacity.

### **3. Strategy, policy, systems and culture**

Strategy, policy, systems and culture influenced decision-making and gender equity outcomes. In general, culture was considered to have greater impact than a broad vision or gender equity policy that did not provide direct instruction or measurable outcomes. This was because a vision or policy could be easily disregarded, while a genuine culture of inclusion and equity meant individuals were more likely to have it front of mind and be confident that the whole organisation would support gender equity decisions.

There were concerns however that without appropriate documented strategies and targets, culture could change and the corporate knowledge and history around gender equity could be lost if certain individuals left the organisation (or if a new board or CEO was appointed). Systematic solutions to gender equity that were embedded within the organisation's processes were considered more sustainable and having a gender equity strategy that held an organisation accountable to strategic targets was thought to result in a more secure allocation of resources and internal commitment to gender equity initiatives.

## External actions and influences

### 1. Participants and members

The participant or membership group of a sport or sporting team influenced and drove gender equity action within the organisation. In general, the more that organisations sought to grow women and girls' participation in their sport or fanbase for their team, the more likely they were to engage in gender equity actions across all areas.

As women and girls' participation and membership increased in a particular sport, more support and energy were provided to improve gender equity outcomes. For example, as women and girls began participating and leading in a sport, role models were created, and they were then promoted to encourage other women and girls to engage. Further to this, as women and girls' participation and membership bases grew, women and girls participating in male-dominated certain sports (such as Australian Rules football) became more *normal* and accepted.

### 2. Regulations or commitments

Public commitments made by organisational leadership, such as the VicHealth Pledge or signing on to Male Champions of Change, influenced gender equity action by providing a public declaration that organisations felt accountable for. Pledges and commitments provide a framework for action, and a tool that internal employees used to garner support for gender equity actions (i.e., if a project manager felt they were losing traction on gender equity initiatives or that they were not getting the internal support they needed they could *remind* other employees of the VicHealth Pledge and the organisation's commitment).

### 3. External image

Sport organisations were conscious of how they were perceived externally, and this drove gender equity action (particularly if they believed that a positive approach to gender equity was a strategic advantage to improving their image to women and girls). An organisation's image and gender equity commitment were communicated through events, marketing, and collaborations (who they partnered with or did not partner with, and actions or campaigns supported through partnerships).



## Approaches to support gender equity

There were 3 main approaches to achieving the VicHealth Pledge commitment. Around half of all organisations proactively believed that gender equality was a sector issue requiring a sector-wide response, half took a reactive/insular approach; and one organisation did not perceive they had an issue with gender equity and therefore did not implement any new initiatives.

### Proactive/sector-wide approach

- Planned ahead
- Led the sector
- Aimed to prevent gender inequity before it occurred
- Established and implemented initiatives that improved gender equity within their organisation, and guided and impacted on the sector

### Reactive/insular approach

- Responded when issues arose
- Actions and policies were focused internally on organisation performance

### Unresponsive

- No response or action (no perceived issue with gender equity)

The most successful organisations – those that engaged the most with the VicHealth Pledge and delivered on committed outcomes – took a proactive *whole of organisation* or *whole of sector approach* and supported all stakeholders within their sport system to implement actions. In practice, this looked like:

- 1. Awareness/education:** Raising awareness of internal staff, community sport clubs and the wider sector (e.g., external event organisers) about the VicHealth Pledge commitment and providing ideas about how to achieve it.
- 2. Targets/monitoring:** Developing specific targets that were monitored regularly to assess achievement.
- 3. Policies/strategies/processes:** Developing policies, strategies and processes for each target and embedding them within the organisation.

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- 4. Resources:** Providing the resources required to meet the commitment (i.e., ensuring the marketing budget was adequate to develop the required images and content around women and girls).
- 5. Evidence:** Accessing and using existing resources, platforms, and evidence to support and guide action, such as:
  - Male Champions of Change
  - Office of Women in Sport and Recreation: Communication and Marketing Strategies
  - Female Friendly Sport Infrastructure Guidelines
  - Inquiry into Women and Girls in Sport and Active Recreation

## Delivering gender equity

Taking a whole of sector approach meant that organisations not only achieved the VicHealth Pledge targets (an insular reactive approach) but also proactively supported the wider sector to do better. The following tables provide examples of proactive and reactive actions of organisations for 3 of the VicHealth Pledge topics.

### Gender balance at events and on public panels or leadership roles

#### Proactive / sector-wide approach actions

##### 1. Awareness and education

- Held a VicHealth Pledge commitment launch event for internal and external stakeholders.
- Educated external event partners by raising the issue of gender balance of public facing roles.
- Motivated community clubs to adopt gender equitable event-based policies.
- Held Gender Equity workshops with community sport staff and volunteers to discuss how events can be equally representative.

##### 2. Targets and monitoring

- Developed and monitored targets such as:
  - All internal events (conferences, award nights) organised and held by the sport organisation had to have gender balance in public facing roles (e.g., guest speakers, MCs and players profiled) and in event staff and back-end roles (e.g., promotion staff, casual staff);
  - Guest speaking roles at external events were only accepted if the panel was gender balanced.

##### 3. Policies, strategies and processes

- All relevant event staff within the organisation committed to the VicHealth Pledge and associated targets.
- Prioritised women speakers and MCs for internally organised events.
- When invited to speak at an external event:
  - staff asked about the gender balance of speakers;
  - declined where an equal balance could not be achieved for panels or keynote addresses (i.e., women were underrepresented); and
  - put forward women who could speak or MC.
- Invited women athletes to speak at men's sport events.

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- Nominated men and women for awards and recognition.

#### 4. Resources

- Some leaders took a long-term approach believing that supporting more women to reach leadership or upper management roles would increase the number of women who would be invited to speak at events.

#### 5. Evidence

- Held *Listen and Learn* sessions to provide women with a platform to identify unsupportive workplace conditions or cultural barriers that prevented women from succeeding in leadership roles.

### Reactive/insular approach actions

#### 1. Awareness

- Maintained existing policies or additional strategies but made senior managers aware of the VicHealth Pledge so that they could monitor their own performance.
- Encouraged community sport clubs to consider gender equity and representation at functions.

#### 2. Targets

- Worked toward equal balance on public-panels (i.e., the CEO committed to the VicHealth Pledge, but did not develop or implement a whole of organisation policy or guidelines for staff who were responsible for booking leaders on event panels were. As a result, some staff committed leaders to speak at events that had all male panels).

## Progress towards 40% female representation in public facing imagery delivered by your organisation

### Proactive / sector-wide approach actions

#### 1. Awareness and education

- Promoted facilities as the 'home of women's sport' to provide a platform for publicity.
- Educated staff in roles related to public facing imagery (face-to-face meetings and emails outlining the Pledge commitment and how to achieve it).
- A marketing team representative joined the Women's Committee or leadership team to support the sharing of ideas and improve internal communication about promoting images of women and girls through the sport.
- Promoted the VicHealth Pledge to community sport clubs to prompt awareness and action in the sector.
- Emailed all staff about payment structures and processes when booking female athletes to improve female athlete conditions.

#### 2. Targets and monitoring

- Held weekly meetings with Marketing, Communications and Digital teams to plan how to achieve and maintain the target, and to monitor and discuss performance.
- Used the evaluation results provided by the Centre for Sport and Social Impact to monitor performance.

#### 3. Policies, strategies and processes

- Developed a strategic communications schedule to ensure equal representation across all images.
- Developed internal requirements to ensure event signage and printed collateral was gender neutral.
- Developed a requirement for all public facing imagery, websites, social media posts to have equal athlete representation (women and girls/men and boys).

#### 4. Resources

##### Development of content

- Established an image database to ensure the communications team could access images of women and girls to use in communications and promotions.
- Promoted women ambassadors of the sport and used VicHealth This Girl Can ambassadors.





- Captured video footage of women from events and community sport clubs to use in promotion. This footage was then used at larger events (i.e., professional games and tournaments) and during other promotions.
- Used non-specific gender terms (e.g., instead of using girls and boys, used children, seniors or juniors).
- Improved representation of women and girls, and consciously considered the balance between professional athletes, community players, social players, and fans/supporters to improve representation across genders and to ensure that all those who engaged with the sport were represented.

#### **Platforms used to promote images of women and girls**

- Used gender neutral articles as opportunities to feature women and girls.
- Used images of women and girls during events (such as banners and backdrops at events that were internally organised and those where the sport was speaking or holding a stall).
- Used images of professional women athletes, and women and girl fans in Membership Drive promotions.

#### **Reactive / insular approach actions**

- For sports with more men's than women's teams or athletes, this commitment remained a challenge. There was evidence that sports improved in this area by considering all types of content (e.g. paid and unpaid media, human interest stories and lifestyle stories) and how these could be used to better promote women and girls in sport.

## Influence and promote equitable use by women and girls of facilities the organisation uses

### Proactive/sector-wide approach actions

Proactive organisations took actions to improve welcoming environments for women and girls at their clubs and to increase the number of women and girls participating in their sport to meet this commitment. They perceived that more welcoming environments and women and girl participants would lead to more equitable use of male-dominated facilities.

#### 1. Awareness and education

- Advocated to local Councils and State Government to develop female friendly facilities and provided guidelines for such developments.
- Engaged more women and girls into the sport (and to facilities) by supporting and promoting women and girls as ambassadors and role models.

#### 2. Targets and monitoring

- Set and monitored targets for new or upgraded female friendly facilities.
- Set and monitored targets for an equal gender balance across all roles that were involved in or used facilities (i.e. players, referees, coaching and administrators).

#### 3. Policies, strategies and processes

- Developed Female Friendly Guidelines to guide facility use and the development of female friendly national, state and community facilities.
- Developed guidelines to for multi-sport facility use (e.g., basketball and netball).
- The Victorian School Building Authority guidelines for all new development required indoor facilities to be female friendly.
- Including a Women and Girls Participation Strategy in facility development plans to deliver accessible opportunities for women and girls.
- Inter-sport relationships were established to support the development of multi-use facilities.

#### 4. Resources

- Supported community clubs to access grants to improve facilities for women and girls (such as Local Government grants and State Government grants).
- Created a dedicated position to work across all levels of government to identify and advocate for more appropriate women and girls' sport facilities.
- Recruited a Women and Girls Participation Officer to actively support more welcoming environment, drive greater participation, leadership, support, recognition, and profile for women and girls in the sport that led to greater facility use by women and girls.



- Accessed support from Federal and State Government for new purpose-built facilities to provide greater access to sport for women and girls in regional and metropolitan areas.
- Built high-performance women's only sporting facilities for: professional teams; supporting and growing new talent; providing a safe environment for female athletes and staff; and a platform to engage community groups.

## 5. Evidence

- Developed an online technical resource to provide information for stakeholders who were building or updating venues and sporting precincts ensuring female friendly designs and universal design were considered during planning.
- Completed facility audits to identify gender-related disparities in facilities across Victoria.



## So, what now?

There have been positive moves toward gender equity in sport across key areas including:

1. Board representation and leadership
2. Marketing and promotion of active women and girls participating in sport
3. Women and girls on public panels
4. More equitable access and development of sport facilities for women and girls

There is also evidence to suggest that sport organisations could do more by:

1. Including gender equity in policies and strategic plans. These should include measurable targets that the organisation could be held accountable to and be embedded within organisational processes and employee job descriptions to support sustainable action.
2. Coordinating gender equity efforts across the organisation and collaborating with others in the sector to ensure resources are being used efficaciously and to strengthen actions taken.
3. Having males continue to advocate for gender equity within the organisation and the sector. It is important that women are not held solely responsible for explaining or addressing gender equity issues or actions.

The sport sector understands and supports the importance of gender equity. It has moved beyond the initial stages of change by implementing programs and initiatives that support and empower women and girls in sport.

Continuing to share stories and examples of *how* gender equity can be achieved, embedding it within organisations as *business as usual*, and taking decisive action could best support the sector to continue to lead the community in this area.

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