

Historic WBBL derby at the MCG gives women's sport a boost - January 2 2016

Today marks a significant day in sport.

In particular, it's an important day for women's sport.

Today the Melbourne Stars and Melbourne Renegades cricket teams will battle it out for the Lanning Elliot Cup as part of the inaugural Women's Big Bash League season currently underway.

It will be played at the MCG as a curtain raiser to the men's match and thanks to Network Ten, will be televised nationally on free to air.

It's an exciting development as we strive to increase the profile of women's sport, to encourage more women to participate in physical activity and organised sport and to see more women in sports leadership positions.

It is disappointing though that in 2016 we still have such a long way to go matching the coverage of men's sport, both in Victoria and nationally.

Despite an increase in women's sport coverage being supported by majority of Victorians, women's sport receives less than 10 per cent television sports news coverage. A recent VicHealth survey revealed strong support for increased women's sports coverage with 62 per cent of Victorians believing women's sport doesn't receive enough media coverage.

It's not only important for women's sport to get more coverage in the mainstream, it's also important that the coverage depicts women's sport in an equal way. Female athletes have previously been subjected to commentary about their appearance and uniform.

Women are also paid significantly less than their male counterparts across the majority of sports and they get a fraction of the sponsorship opportunities, meaning many female athletes need to hold down a part time job on top of their sporting commitments.

Last year the wage gap was made abundantly clear when it was revealed that players in Australia's national women's soccer team, The Matildas, each received just \$500 in match fees in the lead up to their historic knockout game with Brazil to land them in the World Cup quarter finals, while their male counterparts receive \$7500 for doing the same thing.

These inequalities send a damaging message not just to our female athletes but to all women and to our society as a whole.

It paints a grim picture of the value and worth of women's sport and serves as little inspiration for the next generation to strive for their own sporting success and get appropriately recognised for their achievements.

Given that more than two-thirds of adult Australian females are classified as being sedentary or having low levels of exercise, this is particularly concerning.

Over a third of adult women are sports spectators at events, which demonstrates that women are passionate about sport, however for a variety of reasons women participate less in sport or recreational clubs than men.

We know that the costs associated with inactivity are incredibly high, including the impact to the economy, cost to employer and impact on our physical and mental wellbeing.

Participating in physical activity can help to prevent chronic disease, increase health and fitness, reduce risks of mortality, increases social networks and boosts mental health and wellbeing.

Increasing women's participation in both club sports and non-organised physical activity across all demographics is crucial and providing inspiration on the sporting field to encourage this is an important part of the solution.

The good news is that there have been many positive steps forward in recent times to promote women in sport and reduce the divide.

All four tennis Grand Slam tournaments now offer equal prize money and for the first time last year, Australia's most historic footrace, the Stawell Gift, offered equal prize money to male and female runners.

In 2015, Channel 7 broadcast an AFL women's football match live on free to air television. It was hailed a resounding success and attracted more Melbourne viewers on average than one of the men's AFL games did the same weekend. In another exciting step for female AFL players, a national women's league is set to begin in March 2017 with at least six clubs likely to be on board.

The Women's Big Bash League is another prime example of the continuing progress being made in promoting women's sport.

Because of Cricket Australia's momentous decision to host the world's first WBBL, and the commitment by Network Ten to broadcast some of the games, today women and girls across the country will get the opportunity to see inspirational female athletes like Meg Lanning and Sarah Elliott, on their TVs in their lounge rooms. These are some of the best athletes on the planet – regardless of gender.

VicHealth is proud to partner with the Melbourne Stars and Melbourne Renegades teams in what is an exciting opportunity to raise the profile of women's sport, encourage more women and girls in Victoria to get involved and increase the number of women in leadership positions at sporting clubs. The partnership is part of VicHealth's Changing the Game initiative which aims to get 25,000 more Victorian females to become more regularly active.

We've still got a long way to go but together we can change attitudes, ensure equal footing for women in the sporting arena and promote women's sport for what it is: high quality, fun, exciting and inspirational.

I encourage you all to attend the game if possible or tune into the WBBL broadcast today and check it out. You'll be impressed with what you see.

Jerril Rechter is CEO of VicHealth.