



# CHANGE OUR GAME

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

# The volunteer capacity of community sports clubs to support women and girls in sport

## Introduction

**Volunteers are vital to community sporting clubs delivering sport. The availability and capacity of volunteers, however, is a barrier to opportunities for women and girls in sport.**

Research on the experiences of women and girls in sports traditionally dominated by men and boys demonstrates that development of club culture and volunteer support is still required to achieve a truly gender inclusive environment.

Further research is still required on the approach of sports clubs to developing and managing volunteer capacity, to deliver sport specifically for women and girls.

The aim of this research project was to investigate community sports clubs' volunteer capacity - including management, retention and recruitment - to engage women and girls in participating and volunteering in community sport.

The Physical Activity and Sport Insights research group, a collaboration between Victoria University and Federation University, undertook the research which included interviews with 16 community sport club administrators. Men and women from the team sports of cricket, soccer (football) and netball, were interviewed, in metropolitan and regional areas.

The interviews were undertaken between February and June 2022 at a time where clubs were resuming participation following the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

The insights from this research can help sports organisations and local clubs identify areas of improvement in growing volunteer capacity to support women and girls' participation in community-level sport.



## Women and girls' participation in community sport

**Between 2015-2019, women and girls' participation in community sport - and specifically in sports traditionally dominated by men and boys - increased substantially<sup>1</sup>.**

The capacity of sports clubs to adapt to the changing needs and demands of their communities is critical to enable more opportunities for women and girls to play sport. Volunteers are essential to boosting community sports clubs' capacity.

While the reasons for women and girls leaving sports are varied and complex, volunteers can play an important role in their retention.

Community sports club volunteer roles are diverse and include club-management roles, such as committee member, team coordinator, and more technical roles including coaching, refereeing, scorer/timekeeper and medical support person.

Research prior to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted that building the quantity and quality of volunteers for girls and women's teams should be a priority for clubs to increase player participation<sup>2</sup>.

1 Eime et al., 2021

2 Casey et al., 2019; Hanlon et al., 2019

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

# Volunteering in community sports clubs

### Volunteers within community sport clubs were generally:



**Parents of players or individuals who have connections to the club**, as partners or siblings, or as current or past players of the club. As such, clubs find it easier to engage volunteers for the younger age groups, due to parental commitment to their children's sport participation opportunities.



**Aged between 40 to 60 years**, with few younger individuals involved in volunteer roles.

## The state of volunteering in community sporting clubs

The research found:

- Volunteering is driven by a core group of few individuals, intrinsically motivated and committed to supporting the sport club often with the extra driver of having their children participating at the club.
- Where individuals take on excessive roles and responsibilities within sports clubs, it increases the risk of losing volunteer capacity for the club, as a result of burnout of individuals (e.g. people taking on multiple roles) and others not wanting to take on volunteer responsibilities due to the perceived workload.
- Time commitment required and the responsibilities that come with senior volunteer positions is a major barrier to volunteer recruitment.  
Roles that prove challenging to fill include those seen as onerous, that involve a lot of responsibilities and that are time consuming. These include coaching and executive roles such as president, secretary, and treasurers which require a large time commitment.
- Potential changing values in society (e.g. more individualistic attitudes) and people not having an awareness of or appreciating what it takes to run a community-led sport club also leads to people not committing or being involved in volunteering.

- A lack of capacity by individuals also influenced people's - and, specifically, women's - capacity to volunteer in sport (e.g. women with multiple children or caregiving responsibilities.)
- Women's capacity to volunteer may have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, as a result of increased household and family responsibilities.
- Volunteer recruitment and management is largely ad hoc and an informal process, and peer mentoring is not generally performed.

**Volunteers generally take on roles they feel comfortable with, and which align to their profession or skills.**

**Volunteer positions require skills such as strong interpersonal skills and, increasingly, skills and expertise in other areas like participant welfare (e.g. safeguarding, mental health).**





## RESEARCH FINDINGS



# Sports clubs' volunteer capacity to support women and girls

## Women and girls playing community sport

The research found:

- There are varied attitudes of club volunteers towards supporting opportunities for women and girls to play sport.
- Supportive behaviours from men at clubs (including players) are important in enabling women to play sport, such as men taking on roles on game day (e.g. scoring or running the canteen).
- Parents play an important role in supporting girls to play sport, in particular dads with daughters, who seemed enthused to fill volunteer roles for girls' teams, to enable opportunities for girls.
- Some clubs display deep-rooted gender stereotypes, where boys' player pathways are perceived to be more important than girls' pathways.

This can hinder equity in sports performance pathways for girls, and also in women and girls feeling of belonging, as these stereotypes can reinforce beliefs and attitudes that girls and women are not as capable as the boys and men.

- Inequities in resourcing teams, for example clubs' focus on the category with the highest number of teams (i.e. having more men's/boys teams).

**"I've got a good group of volunteers that are very supportive of the women and girls' game. And are big advocates of it.**



**And equally, I've probably got a group of volunteers that are a bit old school, what I would call our 'boys club'. And the women's game means nothing to them."**

*- Interviewed sporting club member and volunteer*



## Women as volunteers in community sport

The research found:

- Women's willingness to volunteer, and the volunteer roles they perform in local sports, are influenced by many societal, organisational and individual factors, with gendered roles and stereotypes continuing to be one of the biggest barriers.

For example, women generally volunteer in team manager roles rather than coaching or executive committee positions. This is particularly the case in sports traditionally dominated by men with few women volunteers.

- While there is generally support and desire for more women to volunteer, there are still negative attitudes, particularly amongst older men, which makes progress difficult.

For example, women are still not widely accepted to be president of a club, nor coach of a men/boys' team/sport and are thus reluctant to put their hand up.

- Representation of women on the executive/general committees of clubs is increasing, with some clubs reporting equal gender representation on their committee.
- Women felt a lack of support from men in taking on volunteer roles, in particular, senior roles such as club president.
- Women and girls who have not played the sport previously, can show reluctance to volunteer in a coaching capacity.

**There was a perceived lack of credibility towards women in coaching positions, in particular, women coaching men's or boy's teams and in sports traditionally dominated by men and boys.**



# Recommendations



The research found that there are a range of recommended actions sports clubs can take to engage and retain volunteers, and to enable women and girls to play and volunteer in community sports.

## To engage and retain volunteers in community sports clubs

- **Breaking down volunteer roles** by ensuring workloads are realistic for one volunteer or by recruiting two coordinators to oversee one big team - this can decrease the overall individual burden and risk of loss of capacity, especially when parents/individuals transition out of the sports clubs as their child moves on.
- **Consider payments for some skilled positions or reimburse volunteers** to support volunteer recruitment and retention.  
Payment for roles that require certain skills, such as canteen manager, game day operations, club administration and coaches can increase capacity and professionalism as there are greater quality expectations.  
However, payment is not an option nor a sustainable solution for many clubs, and payment should be carefully considered as it could impact the community ethos and values of local clubs.
- **Provide incentives, such as subsidising or waiving registration fees** and have other small incentives, such as a club meal, financial contributions for subscriptions and apparel to attract and retain volunteers.
- **Provide visible recognition and acknowledge the work of volunteers**, particularly at club events such as presentation nights, during National Volunteers week, through life membership, and the club's social media and informally throughout the season.
- **Provide peer mentoring to volunteers**, particularly coaches, to upskill volunteers for specific roles.
- **Consider a range of approaches** to engage and retain volunteers within clubs

## To support women and girls in community sports clubs

- **Address inequalities in team resourcing between women and girls' and men and boys' teams.** At a minimum clubs should try to provide the same services for women and girls as they do for men and boys. Approaches to support different groups with different needs within a club should be considered to achieve equity.
- **Develop specific strategies to increase the number of women in volunteer roles**, rather than focusing only on filling vacant positions. Women need to be actively recruited, promoted and supported to volunteer in community sport.  
Consider running information sessions specially for women, run by women; and in parallel, have discussions with men to gain their allyship. For example, men should challenge other men expressing negative views towards women and girls in sport. This could be done at the end of a board meeting in a one-on-one discussion, when a man has expressed negative views in the meeting.
- **Have policies to support women in leadership roles in the club**, such as targets for gender representation on club executive/general committees.
- **Support younger women and girls to build their confidence and capability** to take up roles other than those traditionally occupied by women (e.g. team managers).
- **Create a welcoming and inclusive club culture** where people can socialise and feel valued, to facilitate volunteer recruitment and retention through opportunities for people to connect, hang out and socialise together.

# References

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We acknowledge the ongoing leadership role of the Aboriginal community on gender equality and the prevention of violence against women. As First Peoples, Aboriginal Victorians are best placed to determine a culturally appropriate path to gender equality in their communities.

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