




WOMEN AND GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN MALE-DOMINATED SPORTS

Research outcomes – a project
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Research Grant

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A woman with long dark hair is smiling broadly while sitting on a grassy field. She is wearing a dark t-shirt and light-colored leggings. In the foreground, the hands of several other people are visible, suggesting a group activity or team huddle. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and what appears to be a stadium or outdoor sports area. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red dot pattern, similar to a halftone or dot grid.

**“PEOPLE JUST THINKING
IT’S NOT REALLY A
SPORT FOR WOMEN.”**

INTRODUCTION

Historically, women and girls have not been afforded the same opportunity as boys and men to be involved in sport, and the culture of sport has traditionally been very masculine ^[1-3].

Despite challenges faced by women and girls, the growing opportunities influenced by targeted initiatives from governmental and sport organisations, and greater social accessibility, has facilitated the increased involvement of women and girls in sport. For example, our research on participation trends in Australia highlighted the growth of women and girls' participation in some traditionally male-dominated sports such as Australian Rules Football, soccer and cricket, mainly within the 5-19 year age group ^[4].

While sporting opportunities for women and girls are increasing, participation rates are lower than for men and boys. The gendered context of sports, especially of male-dominated sports, potentially creates barriers that need to be understood and removed for women and girls to access these sports and enjoy the many benefits of sport participation.

Research aim: To gain an understanding of women and girls' participation and experiences in traditionally male-dominated sports.

This research consisted of two parts:

The first study investigated the participation patterns of women and girls playing sport and the trends into specific sports and across sports, including male-dominated sports. The analysis included five sports including three male-dominated, one gender-neutral and one female-dominated.

In the second study 15 Victorian women and girls were interviewed and asked about their experiences playing traditionally male-dominated sports.

- What are the main motivations for women and girls to play traditionally male-dominated sport(s)?
- What benefits do women and girls gain from playing traditionally male-dominated sport(s)?
- What barriers or negative issues have women and girls experienced in male-dominated sports?

For this study, the socio-ecological model was used to identify the multi-level factors influencing women and girls' experiences in sport ^[5, 6]. This model depicts that human behaviours and experiences in life, in this case participation in sport, are influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, community/organisational and societal factors.

The key findings of these studies are summarised in this paper, along with recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

Study 1: Trends in participation

- There were 513,270 participants in year 1, 160,178 females and 353,092 males.
- Over three years there was considerable increase in the number of female participants, a rise of 15,646 compared to a decrease of 13,397 males participants.
- In year 1, females playing male-dominated sports were most likely 'new' to sport and not transitioning from other sports.
- Many female participants transitioning into male-dominated sports came from female-only, or gender-neutral sport.
- Female participant retention was much lower than for males.

Study 2: Experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sport

- Women and girls' participation in male-dominated sport is especially affected by gendered issues, which manifest at different levels of the socio-ecological framework.
- The relationship between factors influencing participation and experiences of women and girls playing male-dominated sports is presented in Figure 1 below.

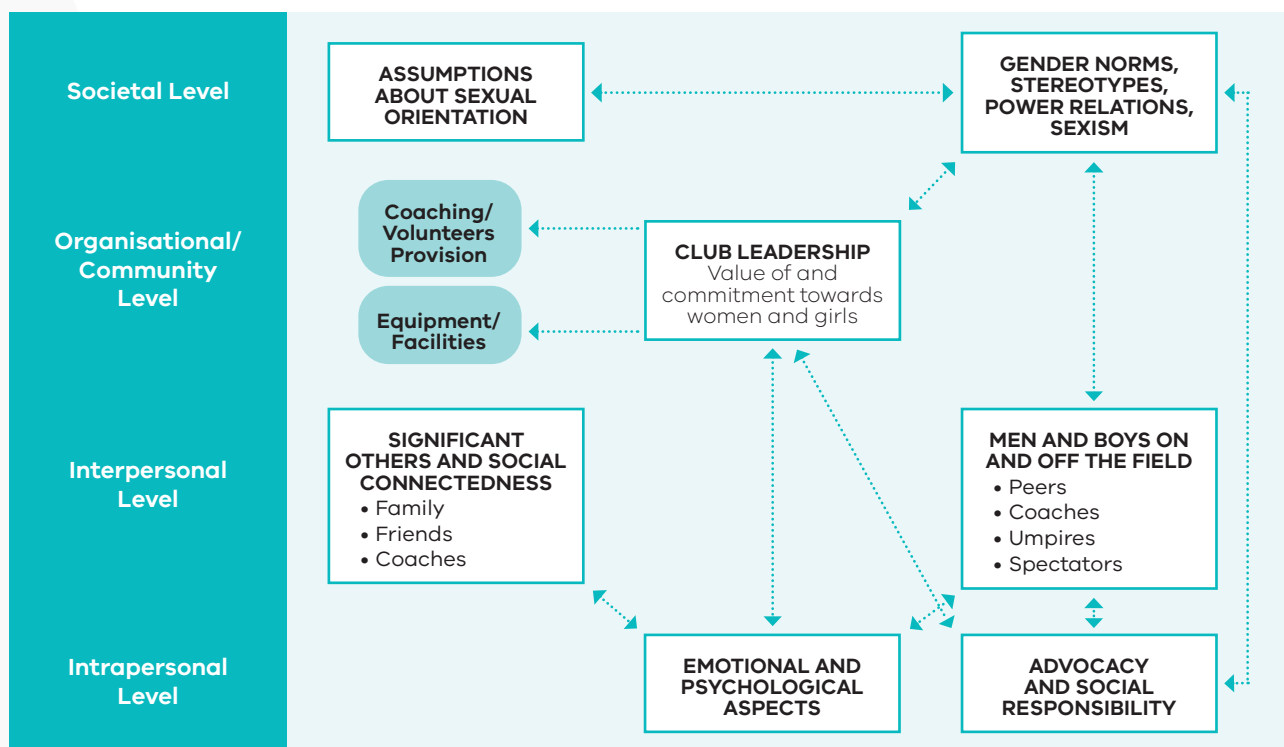


Figure 1. Relationships between factors influencing the participation and experience of girls and women in male-dominated sports

Societal level factors

Gender norms and stereotypes negatively impact participation for women and girls. Stereotypes about what constitute 'girls' extracurricular activities and gendered roles in the family unit limit opportunities for playing.

“People just thinking it’s not really a sport for women. That’s an overarching one.”

Women and girls’ participation tended to have strong reference to gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, inappropriate comments referenced their sporting choice, physical appearance and/or performance to an assumed or real gender identity and sexual orientation.

“Harassment kind of language about them and making the assumption that anyone who plays is a lesbian.”

Sports club environment and sport organisational factors

Sports clubs and organisations can have both positive and negative impacts on women and girls’ experiences. Many of the negative impacts were connected to gender norms and stereotypes prevalent at the societal level.

“We [senior women] trained on the same night as the boys. I think it was the under-15s or under-13 boys. So they would get priority over the nets, so we either only had one net or we had to train on the oval without nets.”

Club leaders often valued the inclusion of girls’ and women’s teams, but some lacked a commitment to the provision of resources for these teams (e.g. volunteers, access to facilities and equipment) and/or club practices did not always support a female-friendly environment.

“... the running of the club, and no sanitary bins, and the boys are using that facility before we are and then it’s disgusting.”

Women’s membership to club committees was important for representation and advocacy for their needs:

“The committee members don’t care, no. Unless I’m advocating for upgrading the facilities, or the other girls are advocating for it, it’s not going to happen, no. Especially with the president we have now, we have to keep advocating to be heard. I don’t think we’re at a point where we could stop or take a step back now. It’s always a fight, I guess.”

Interpersonal factors

The positive influence of significant others and social connectedness were strong motivators of participation.

There were strong gendered power dynamics in the relationships and interactions between boys/ men and girls/women.

“So we had a group of the boys who we used to train with and when they finished training, they used to stand on the sidelines and they used to make fun. Every time I ran past, they used to bounce their heads in time with my bouncing boobs.”

In a broader context of gender inequalities, women and girls perceived that they can be seen as less serious players, and the type of language and communication to and with them can be demeaning and disrespectful, from a wide range of groups including male peers, club members and spectators:

“They were drinking on the sideline, yelling out to one of the players saying, ‘Number 10, give us a twirl. Number 10 get up and go faster.’ Little things like that, that can really affect someone’s mindset.”

Some men and boys involved with governing and delivering sport did not understand girls and women’s motivations to play:

“Even though the men at the club say they support us, which they do, they’re never rude to us or anything like that, or demeaning in any way, but they don’t realise that women are different and there is a different way that you have to go about things, and we play cricket for different reasons. So, I guess their mentality sometimes is quite different to ours, and I need to be there to sort of let them know that.”

There were also empowering relationships and interactions by boys/men positively influencing girls and women’s experiences:

“The men are all really, really welcoming. They’ll even come and join into our training sessions sometimes if we need some extra help...”

Intrapersonal factors

There were a range of motivations to play including physical, emotional and social reasons. However, there were a range of gendered intrapersonal factors that impacted women and girls’ psychological motivations and experiences.

For some, the physical aspect of playing male-dominated sports allowed them to play contact sports for the first time and being physical was something that many of them enjoy:

“Also, that physical aspect where you can tackle people whereas you can’t do it with most womens’ sport. Yeah, that’s why I started that.”

“Being able to be more physical, I think that’s what’s driven me into consistently play”.

Others perceived to lack confidence to play male-dominated sports particularly because of the influence of societal gender norms and lack of visibility of women and girls in male-dominated sports.

“Men are brought up like you’re brave, you can do this, you can do anything you want. Women are like oh no, you need to be careful, make sure you don’t do this and that. We are brought up to not make mistakes, you have to be perfect, so I think that’s the element of confidence and self-sufficiency that is missing in terms of barrier.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The context for the recommendations that are formulated based on the interview data collected during this project, has been provided by a working party of sport industry experts. In consultation with the Office for Women in Sport and Recreation, it was deemed prudent to reflect on the research outcomes with experienced industry professionals. This to triangulate the research findings, and ensure that recommendations would be anchored in the realities of sport in Victoria, to deliver maximum impact. To that end we would like to thank Kate Palmer, Rana Hussain, Kimon Taliadoros, Karen Pearce and in the Office for Women in Sport and Recreation; Sarah Styles, Kerry Harrison, Samantha Culbert and Lauren Ahern, for their insightful and considered input.

The research outcomes make very clear that there is still a long road to travel in regard to making women and girls feel welcome and included in sport as equals to men and boys, in particular in male-dominated sports. To that end it was felt important that a picture of the 'ideal' future was to be painted, so that those in charge of, and delivering sport, and those playing could envision how a welcoming and inclusive sporting environment might look. The working party agreed that a 'system approach' was required, engaging beyond the clubs where sport is played, including a wide range of stakeholders and organisations. This in turn would require a partnership structure so that various stakeholders can work in concert towards maximum impact.

With an envisioned future (point in time), a roadmap could then be created in which important milestones could be set. Various milestones will break down a process, that requires patience and persistence, as much of the work to be done requires attitudinal, behavioural and organisational and societal culture change.

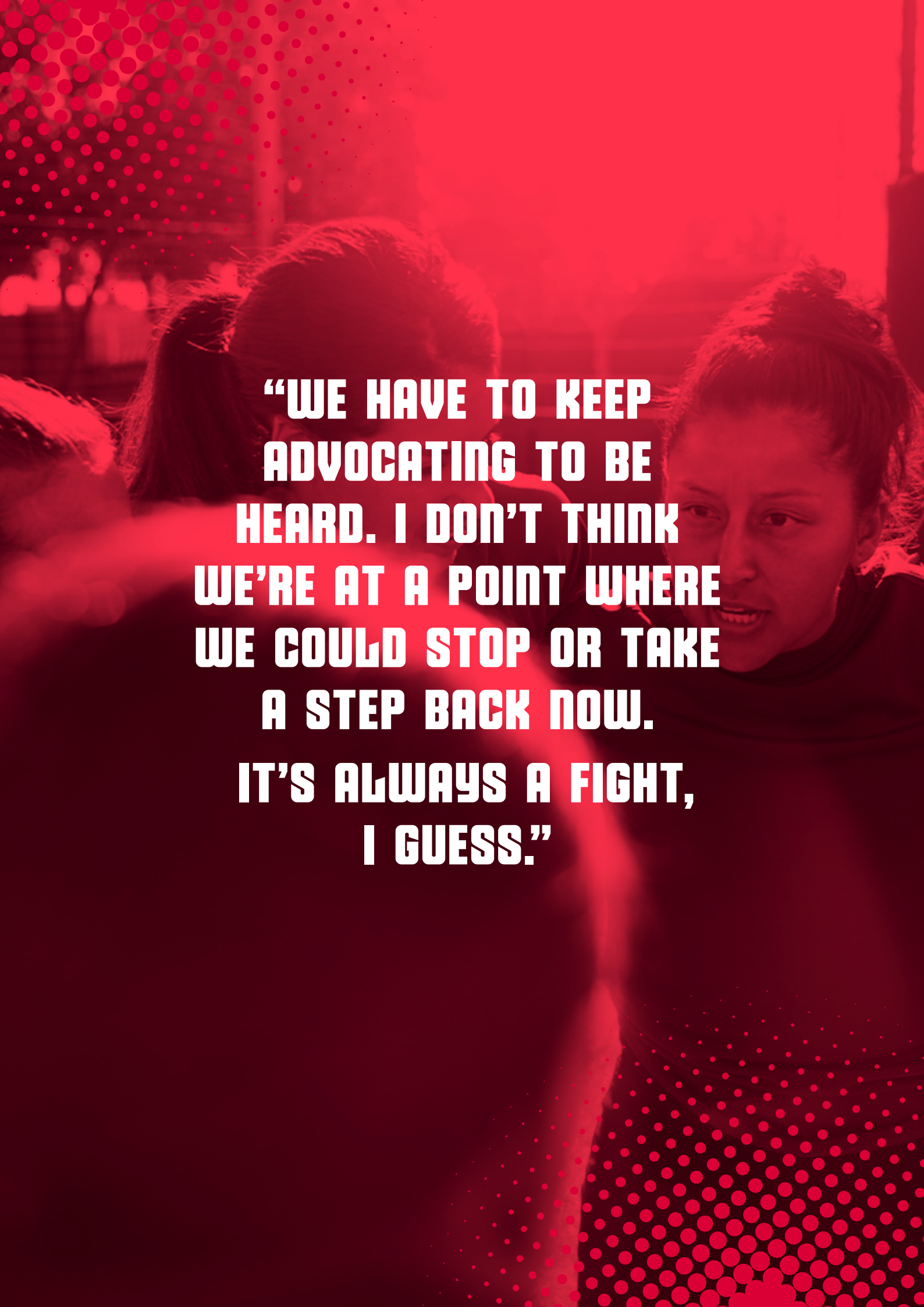
Another important observation was that club sport governance remains the domain of a majority of older males in Australia, for whom it seems more difficult to drive cultural change. The new generations of club committee members have grown up in an environment that has been actively working towards transitioning into a more equal and inclusive society.

It is the younger, up and coming generation of sport governors that we may need to specifically focus on as the agents of change. Men and boys in that regard, can be powerful voices too, next to the increasing number of women and girls that need to become part of those who run the sport organisations.

Although the focus in this report is on making clubs more welcoming and inclusive for women and girls, across all genders there are various reasons why people want to play sport and want to become part of a club. To that end there will not be a 'standard' solution to what it means to be welcoming and inclusive – some women or girls may want to play as the men and boys do, others want their own 'women or girls only' safe space(s) and competitions. This may of course, also be the case for men and boys.

The fact that a 'systems/partnerships approach' is preferred more broadly refers to the fact that change at the club level alone, will not be enough. There are various levels of (organisational) stakeholders and these include National and State Sporting Organisations, Local Government Authorities, Regional Sport Associations, sporting clubs, and a range of primary and secondary educational settings.

Ultimately, cultural change needs to be owned by the clubs, and other organisations governing and delivering sport. This can only be achieved if indeed, those who run the clubs and other organisations are involved in the change process. A most urgent part of that is to directly consult with the younger generation of (potential) sport participants and to ask them directly – how do you want to play sport in the future? What does sport look like for you in the future? How do you want to be involved in sport organisations? How should sport be organised so that it fits with your preferred lifestyle?

A woman with her hair in a bun is speaking at a public event. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter and a pattern of white dots of varying sizes. The text is centered over the image in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**“WE HAVE TO KEEP
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RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The researchers propose the following recommended actions:

- To define/identify what are the most critical (and measurable) elements of a welcoming and inclusive sporting environment for women and girls.
- To identify the key stakeholders in the Victorian sport delivery system, and describe what would be their critical role in developing and facilitating a welcoming and inclusive sporting environment for women and girls.
- To develop a roadmap (with quantified milestones) across the Victorian sport delivery system and establish partnerships that will actively drive cultural change in sport organisations towards a welcoming and inclusive environment for women and girls.
- To develop a sport club resource, derived from the roadmap targets, to implement change actions across various domains such as governance, recruitment, coaching, facilities, etc.
- To pilot the sport club resource in a select number of sports and their clubs across Victoria.
- To continue the Victorian Sport Participation Research Project – and specifically focus on the longitudinal measurement of participation and retention of women and girls in male dominated sports – and complement this with qualitative research to determine how women and girls perceive the progress of change.
- To co-commission a nationwide survey among young sport participants and non-participants (all genders) to determine how they feel about the future of sport participation and how they want to be(come) or remain involved in organised sport.
- Ongoing and targeted investment by government at all levels towards fully 'equalising' sport facilities in regard to access and purpose of change rooms, bathrooms, meeting spaces and playing facilities.
- To develop targets across all sports in regard to equal gender representation on governing boards, committees, working groups and playing committees of sport.
- To develop and deliver bespoke education programs and resources to support gender appropriate and equitable provision of resources and what are acceptable club practices and behaviours.
- To develop and deliver community awareness raising/education media campaigns – with a focus on what is (and is not) appropriate language and behaviours towards women and girls in general and in sport.

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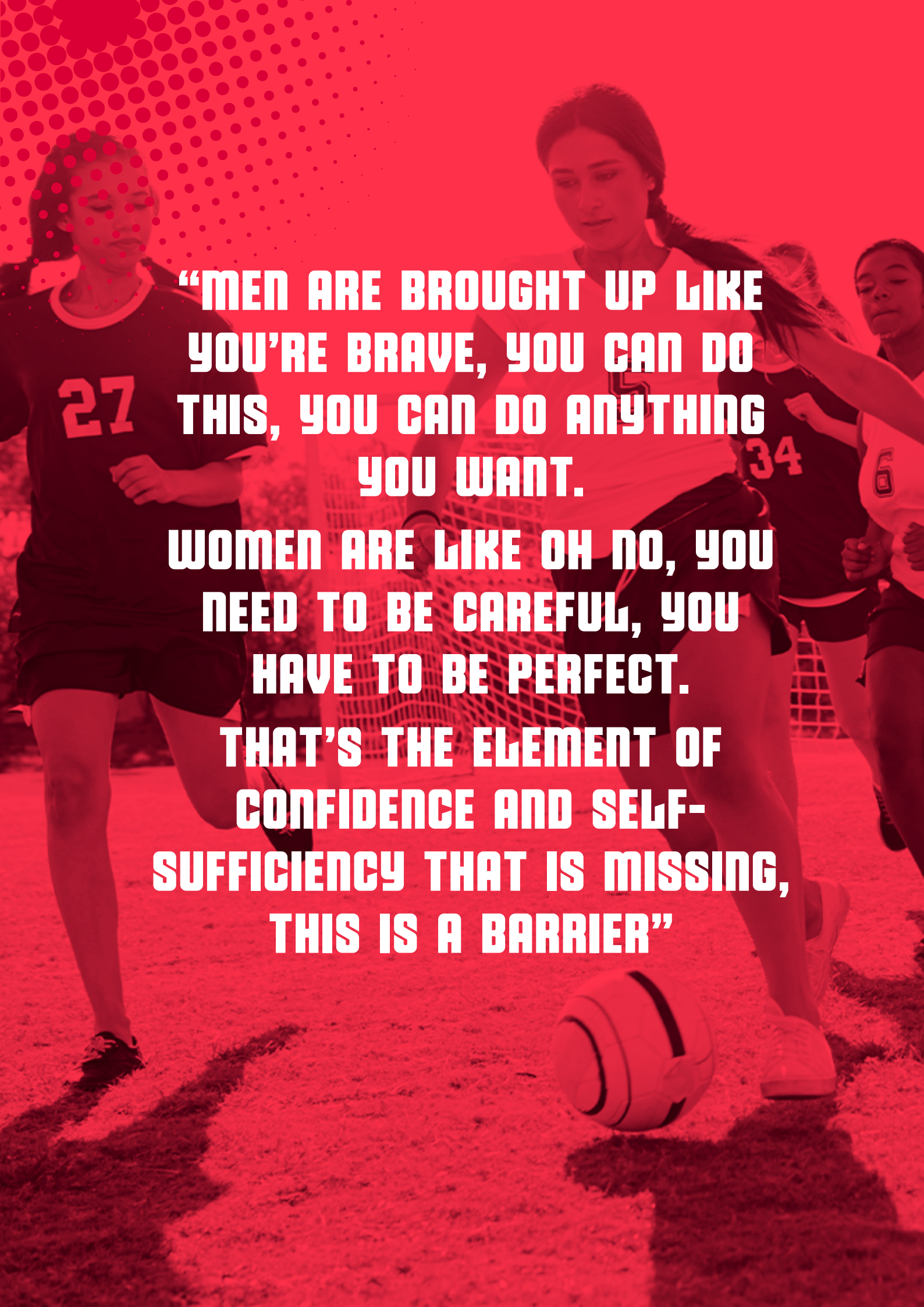
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**THAT’S THE ELEMENT OF
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THIS IS A BARRIER”**

CHANGE OUR GAME