



The implications of female sport policy developments for the community-level sport sector: a perspective from Victoria, Australia

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Background: Historically females have participated in sport at much lower rates than males. There is much research in sport highlighting the social construction of sport and the gender inequalities and power differences between men's and women's sport.

Recently, initiatives across sport and health policy have focused on increasing participation in sport for females. In Victoria this includes organisations such as VicHealth and State Government – Sport and Recreation Victoria. These initiatives have included specific gender policies and strategic investments.

Aims/Methods: This study investigated the trends in female participation in sport over 6 years across five popular Australian sports. Secondly, this study investigated the perceived future challenges community sport faces in terms of improving female participation in sport and specifically in regions of low socio-economic status.

Results:

- Female participation levels in sport increased over the 6-year period and mainly amongst those aged 4-9 years.
- There were notable increases in female participation in traditionally male-dominated sports, with growth in the number of teams especially for those in under 15s, 18s and 19s aged competitions. These are ages, where opportunities had not previously existed for females in traditionally male dominated sports.
- Retention of females in sport during adolescence and adulthood remains a challenge, with participation levels more than halving after peaking between the ages of 10-14 (2016: 42%) and drop between the ages of 15-19 years (18%) and again for 20-24 years (7%).
- Overall, regional and rural Victoria regions had greater growth in female participation than metropolitan Melbourne.
- In some regions, sports infrastructure was currently at capacity: *“We’ve got a massive infrastructure issue across the region because clubs are just growing so fast and they don’t have facilities to have two or three teams.”*
- There were also issues of capacity of facilities in terms of the ability of male-dominated sports to create female-friendly facilities such as including female change rooms: *“It is very expensive to upgrade facilities”* and *“It’s going to take a while and a lot of work around auditing all our facilities and prioritising which ones need to be upgraded first.”*
- Community-level sport face challenges to accommodate growth in female participation specifically related to infrastructure and volunteer capacity. This includes both human resources to deliver sport and organisational capacity to devise and implement strategies to recruit and retain females. They also face challenges associated with the social construction of gender within sport and club environments.
- There is a need for specific education on coaching females and creating female-friendly club environments to support female participation in sport.
- A lack of volunteers was identified, particularly to cope with the increased of females playing traditionally male-dominated sports.

Conclusion: Female participation in sport has increased over recent years, however retention still remains an issue. The key challenges for community-level sport to accommodate female sport participation growth were the availability and quality of sporting infrastructure and volunteer capacity in terms of both human resources to deliver sport programs/competitions and organisational capacity to recruit and retain females.

Further growth in participation is likely to be hindered by a lack of infrastructure.

Sport policies that encourage female participation in sport also need to consider the supply of sport for example maximising infrastructure usage, gender equity facility usage policies and developing volunteer capacity.

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