

A team effort:

Preventing violence against women through sport



“I believe we currently have an extraordinary opportunity to harness the potential of sport for gender equality. I have faith in our ‘sports-mad’ nation of sportspeople – that together we can build a fairer world – a world where women stand equal and safe both on the sporting field and off.”

Elizabeth Broderick AO, Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner, 2007–2015¹

Introduction

Sport is an integral part of Australian culture. It is woven into the fabric of the everyday lives of many Australian individuals, families and communities. To prevent violence against women, we need to engage and educate people where they “live, work, learn, socialise and play”.² Change the story: A shared national framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia (*Change the story*) identifies sport settings as a priority sector for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia. Evidence also suggests that communities expect sport settings to be safe, and for sporting organisations to work towards gender equality and the prevention of violence against women.³ With appropriate support, sporting organisations – whether at the national, state or local level – can be pivotal in tackling this significant issue and creating lasting change.



What is the link between sport and violence against women?

As with other social institutions such as schools and workplaces, people learn and reproduce particular attitudes, behaviours and social norms through their participation in sport. Sport has the capacity to influence, inform and shape attitudes and behaviours in both negative and positive ways. Sporting environments are places where violence against women can occur directly and, if allowed, can provide a setting for entrenched violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours to be played out.⁴

This doesn't have to be the way. Sport and sporting culture can help to reduce health and gender inequalities in our society.⁵ On and off the field, sport provides the environment and opportunity to set and reinforce positive community standards about respect and equality. It can challenge problematic norms, practices and structures to drive transformative cultural change. For this reason, sport settings have great potential to influence social change and prevent violence against women by creating inclusive, equitable, healthy and safe environments for men and women, boys and girls.

What is included in the evidence guide?

This evidence guide focuses on the work being undertaken in local, regional, national and international structured sport settings and by sporting organisations. It draws on stakeholder consultations and a review of both peer-reviewed academic and grey literature (reports, reviews and evaluations) to collate the evidence regarding sport as a setting for the primary prevention of violence against women. It provides a summary of current prevention initiatives, and draws from an analysis of these and wider literature to outline 10 key elements of promising practice in sport settings.

Our findings

Internationally and in Australia, many sporting organisations are currently undertaking work in sport settings with the aim of preventing violence against women. This work can broadly be understood to fall into the following categories:

- organisational development
- direct participation programs
- community mobilisation and strengthening
- communications and social marketing
- civil society advocacy.⁶

While there is significant interest and activity in this area, with some sports implementing multiple techniques, few initiatives have been sufficiently evaluated and there is currently no published up-to-date evidence showing promising practice that is focused only on prevention of violence against women in sport settings.

Furthermore, primary prevention initiatives in sport settings (those which aim to tackle the underlying drivers of violence against women) are rare and many programs and strategies also incorporate elements of secondary (early intervention with at risk populations) and tertiary (responses to violence and efforts to reduce the risk of reoccurrence) prevention.

In regards to the evaluation undertaken, the literature review found that:

- ‘Direct participation programs’ are the most evaluated technique in violence prevention work in sport settings. Much of the research is international, and is mostly from studies of bystander intervention programs with college athletes in the United States.
- Techniques such as ‘community mobilisation and strengthening’ and ‘organisational development’ are less frequently evaluated in sport settings.
- Despite their popularity and frequent use in this setting, ‘communications and social marketing’ campaigns by sporting organisations or featuring sports people are rarely evaluated for their effectiveness.
- Much of the work sporting organisations do in ‘civil society advocacy’ is in partnership with or supported by external agencies. Elite athletes are often involved as ambassadors for violence prevention campaigns and speak publicly about the issues at events and to the media. These ambassador programs are under-evaluated.

Ten key elements of promising practice

The purpose of this guide is to synthesise and distil the key elements for effective work in sport as a setting for the prevention of violence against women. Below is an overview of the elements that we found throughout our research to be fundamental in promising practice to prevent violence against women in the sport setting.

1. Address the gendered drivers of violence against women

Prevention in sport must tackle all four drivers (see page 26) of violence against women by engaging in essential actions that not only address attitudes, behaviours and practices but also work to change ingrained structures and norms.

2. Adopt a whole-of-sport approach

For cultural change to be successful, sporting organisations should adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach that extends from their executive through the levels of leadership to players, staff, fans and supporters, sponsors and volunteers.

3. Ensure meaningful involvement of women and girls

Sporting organisations must put in place measures for the meaningful inclusion of women and girls by addressing the structures, norms and practices that impact women in sport settings. Women need to be involved in the development, design and delivery of all aspects of work in sport settings that aims to prevent violence against women, and their diverse experiences must be considered.

4. Implement appropriate responses to incidents of disrespect and violence against women

Primary prevention of violence against women in sport settings should be underpinned by clear and consistently applied strategies for responding to incidents of disrespect and violence against women. This includes understanding how to appropriately respond to incidents of violence against women.

5. Be values driven

Effective prevention work can leverage and link to the existing values of the sport and the organisation to help drive positive cultural change towards gender equality.

6. Be underpinned by long-term planning, vision and resourcing

For long lasting cultural change to occur, prevention work should be ongoing core business – not just a special project.

7. Be evidence led

While primary prevention of violence against women through sport settings is relatively new, sports need to pay attention to the growing body of evidence and program evaluations in this area prior to developing their own strategies.

8. Integrate evaluation from the outset

Sporting organisations should contribute to the body of evidence by integrating robust evaluation of their primary prevention strategies from the very beginning.

9. Consider context, difference and diversity in the sporting organisation and wider community

A consideration of the diverse nature of identity, social positions and experiences in the broader community should be considered when developing primary prevention initiatives.

10. Work collaboratively to develop and share resources

To support positive cultural change, sports should share resources, knowledge and experience through their pre-existing and new networks, both inside and out of their own sport.

Conclusion

The sporting field in Australia is seen and regarded as a space where differences are put aside in the pursuit of fair play and ‘having a go’. Our challenge is to extend this notion of equality and fairness beyond the sporting field into the core business of sport and to help influence other aspects of the community.

Sport is an intrinsic part of Australian society and a pivotal and influential mechanism to meaningfully address gender inequality, promote respectful relationships and prevent violence against women. Evidence has proven that sport has the capacity to reach a large number of Australians and influence their attitudes and behaviours to end violence against women in Australia.

This publication summarises the best available international and national evidence to guide future actions by sports organisations in their efforts to end violence against women. The 10 key elements of promising practice address the approaches needed to eliminate violence against women by promoting women’s participation and opportunities, challenging gender stereotypes and roles, challenging violence-supportive attitudes and behaviours, and encouraging respectful, healthy and equal relationships on and off the field.

It is anticipated that this publication will continue to be built upon using new evidence from sport settings, organisations and stakeholders. Similarly, best practice can continue to evolve within the sport environment to support, sustain and increase our collective effort to reduce and eventually eliminate violence against women.

While visionary, the 10 key elements of promising practice provide practical and measurable components that support sports organisations to contribute to Australia’s shared national approach to the prevention of violence against women, outlined in *Change the story*. With sports’ unique potential to influence all Australians, the implementation of these elements enables sport settings nationally to be world leaders in the prevention of violence against women, and meaningfully contribute to an Australia where women are free from all forms of violence.