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Final Report¹:

**The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup: human rights legacy and
impact for the Australian grassroots sports gender equity
agenda: a pilot study²**

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COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Summary of Findings

A pilot study was conducted to explore how the official documents governing and guiding women's football expressed the rhetoric of gender equity aspirations in the period leading up to the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup.



The main findings of the study were:



- There was a 'blind spot' within the policies, codes, frameworks and procedures examined. While there was some focus on child safety, there was no mention of women and girls.
- The documents did not acknowledge existing problems with bullying and harassment of women and girls in the sport, nor engage with effective actions to affect culture change. They provided a mostly superficial, distant approach to the issues, such as stating that everyone should feel comfortable to report abuses and clubs should support them.
- A naïve perception was proposed by study informants that the increased number of women in leadership roles within clubs and associations was an effective deterrent against discrimination and harassment towards women and girls in the sport.
- The documents did not reflect meaningful consultation with football communities about women's or girls' views or experiences of bullying and harassment.
- An evidence-based educational response was required at the grassroots level to influence culture change in order to improve safety and empowerment of women and girls in football.





Introduction

The Australian Government ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1983. Launched in 1979, the CEDAW is one of the most relevant human rights documents to not only protect but also improve the lives and the rights of girls and women across all dimensions of their social, cultural and educational lives. The Convention unequivocally confirms in its article 10, that State parties will take all appropriate measures to ensure women equal rights of men in the field of education, and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women that boys and girls should have ‘the same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education’ (CEDAW, article 10, item (g)).

The right to participate in sport in a safe manner was identified by the International Olympic Committee as an immediate global imperative as early as 2007 (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Its importance for sports organisations continue to grow, particularly when gender inequities still undermine the safe participation within the sports realm of girls, women and transgender people (Knijnik & Costa, 2022).

In relation to the forthcoming 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup (co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand), there are great expectations that it will leave further legacies in the field of gender equity for the country (see the Legacy’23 paper in <https://www.footballaustralia.com.au/legacy23-overview>). Indeed, gender equity narratives were central to the bidding process for the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup (Desjardins, 2021), which mobilized nations from South America, Asia and Oceania. All bidding nations regarded the event as a turning point for the achievement of the gender equity UN Sustainable Development Goals. Australia and New Zealand, as the tournament rights’ winners, managed to secure their bid as the greatest event that would inspire millions of young women and girls from a range of cultures to live a healthy lifestyle through the game of football, empowering them to obtain meaningful objectives they have in life. However, while this narrative is a significant starting point



it does not account for what will actually happen on the ground. This study explored whether this emphasis on gender equity was effectively translated to the anti-bullying policies and frameworks at the grassroots levels of football clubs and associations in NSW.



Methodology and Methods



The study was guided by a qualitative methodology, using content analysis of documents published by grassroots football organisations. Twenty relevant websites, consisting of 18 football club sites and two peak body sites (Football NSW, Football Australia) were searched for anti-bullying and harassment policies, codes, frameworks and procedures that targeted the protection and empowerment of women and girls in the sport. Eleven relevant documents, ranging from 2006 to 2022, were found and analysed for use of terms related to bullying and harassment like verbal, speak, language, welfare, gender, bully* and harass*. In addition, the clubs were emailed a request for baseline information about the policy documents they used in their organisations to manage complaints and grievances related to gender equity issues. Two female officials currently involved in women's football in NSW responded to the email.





Findings

There were three major themes stemming from the investigation:

1) The language used within the policy and framework documents had no mention of bullying and harassment towards or by women and girls, which represented a “blind spot” (Mountjoy et al., 2016, p1019) about non-accidental violence and abuse in sport. The policy documents referred only to the abuse and safety of ‘children’, thereby displaying a lack of awareness of the specific issues and experiences of women and girls related to bullying and harassment.

2) The structure and focus of the documents explored was usually generic in nature, lacking the ‘voices’ of women and girls. This could be explained by a lack of grassroots membership input, particularly by female members. There was also a tendency for positive, generic statements promoting an inclusive and safe culture for everyone, without providing practical mechanisms for clubs and associations on how and when to manage real-world challenges to such a culture when they arose.

3) A naïve perception was suggested by informants that the mere presence of women in leadership roles within their clubs created a culture that was safeguarding women and girls from bullying and harassment at club-level. Without speaking of the quality of these leadership positions, there is a belief that women by themselves would stop harassment, without any further need of systemic changes.

Analysis

Language Use theme

The language used in policy documents examined could be considered as evidence of a continuing lack of awareness and engagement with gender equity issues in light



of the development of women's football. One football association's Rules of Association document referred to discriminatory words or behaviour by reason of 'sex' rather than gender when discussing the bases of discrimination, others did not include sexual or gender-based types of discrimination at all. The language displayed a perception of the audience as gender-neutral participants, by using generic descriptors such as person, people, member of a football entity, player and constituent. In fact, an informant of the study perceived the generic language in anti-bullying policies was appropriately not oriented towards male or female, but to all members. Further research could reveal more about the extent to which football community members felt represented and were 'voiced' by the policy documents governing gender equity issues.

A recent study by Victoria University (Pankowiak & Woessner et al., 2022) found that women were more likely than men to have experienced violence while participating in sport as children; there was a definite gendered aspect to violence in sport. From their results, the researchers concluded gendered abuse was likely occurring in potentially every football club or association and was perpetrated by peers, coaches and parents. Therefore, discussion and action that targeted such negative attitudes and behaviours was urgently required. The invisibility of bullying and harassment in general, and significantly against women and girls, was apparent in this study by the fact they were not mentioned in the policy documents assessed. These policies govern the sport and presumably guide the football community. This finding concurs with previous research findings that stakeholders either feared losing their reputation and prestige if they engaged with and acknowledged gender equity problems, or they were ignorant of the negative impacts of club cultures that allow bullying and harassment to persist (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The outcomes in this baseline study suggested, as have others, that cultures of secrecy and deference to existing power dynamics at the organisational level sustained perceptions amongst stakeholders that



bullying and harassment was perpetrated in ‘other’ clubs by the malignant few (Pankowiak & Woessner et al., 2022). These findings attested to the prevalence of the view that transparent discussion of the safety of women and girls in football and real action on culture change would still be considered untenable, even in an environment of imminently hosting the FIFA Women’s Football World Cup.

Generic structure and focus

An example of the generic nature of the policy documents was the discussion of speaking out or speaking up as part of promoting and maintaining a culture in football of zero tolerance towards bullying and harassment (Football NSW, 2020). The document states that “everyone involved in football should feel comfortable and be encouraged to speak up in accordance with the Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy (p 3),... and should be supported by a Football Entity” (p6). Reporting incidents was described as an important mechanism of prevention, yet the policy statement lacked depth and clarity in relation to how the mechanism would work effectively to protect and empower people, especially women and girls.

Impact of Female Leaders on Safety

The sensitive nature of this research topic possibly caused potential respondents to avoid the request for information. However, two informants chose to respond, reporting there were no problems with bullying and harassment of women and girls in their clubs. They had faith in the current complaints handling processes, such as the involvement of Member Protection and Information Officers (MPIOs), if anyone was to speak up about gender equity issues. One informant thought her club’s procedure of contacting any family or player who left the club for ‘an exit interview’ ensured the



club received feedback about any issues. These informants believed such reports were extremely rare; one recounted her only knowledge of a bullying complaint was carried out by an older, male coach towards a young female player. Her view was that the incident was caused by divergent generational expectations of acceptable speech and behaviour; therefore the coach's behaviour could be partially condoned. She was satisfied that the matter was dealt with effectively 'in-house' when the coach was told not to speak that way again under threat of official action. She felt sure the coach would not behave similarly again.

The main reason put forward in this study for the non-incidence of bullying and harassment was the even ratio, or better, of female representation in leadership and governance. One respondent expressed the view that if any male players, coaches or officials considered using bullying and harassment tactics they came up against women wherever they turned in her football association, which effectively stopped issues before they began. They thought this knowledge provided an effective protection for women and girls against traditional power imbalances that might have operated previously to hide discriminatory attitudes and behaviour in football communities. The perceptions gathered in this study were contrary to previous research, which argued that a turn-around in abuse and harassment in sport would depend on the quality and knowledge of leaders, rather than the quantity of female leadership roles (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Ryan, 2022). Club officials, coaches and leaders play the major role in directly minimising the risk of abuse and harassment of football community members; they need to firstly comprehend and accept the problems so they can identify and resolve them competently. A broad response across societal institutions is also required to raise awareness of the negative impacts on victims and change attitudes about group behaviour and the appropriate use of power (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Ryan, 2022). It would seem likely that both the quantity and quality of female leadership within a whole-of-system approach to bullying and



harassment may be important to confront the necessary structural and cultural changes to football organisations. Further research could reveal richer insights about the impact of female leadership on the protection and empowerment of women and girls in football.

In addition, the respondents' views did not account for the same-sex aspect of bullying and harassment in women's football, evidenced by several recent historical complaints lodged by high-profile female football players against senior female players and coaches (Rugari, 2022; Steele, 2022). Current research showed that children, LGBTIA+ persons and people with disabilities, as well as women and girls, were most likely to experience physical violence, psychological abuse and neglect while participating in sport (Pankowiak & Woessner et al., 2022). This finding suggests the need for greater clarity in anti-bullying and harassment policy documents that truly reflect contemporary understandings of the problem and include the contributions of community members with real-life experiences of gender equity issues.

Recommendations

This exploratory study found there were few means of implementing culture change from using the anti-bullying and harassment policies and frameworks in place at present. The lack of awareness of the scope of the issues and lack of rigor in the remedies provided in the policies suggested an educational process would be required to affect real change.

Therefore, the primary recommendation of the study would be continuing educational responses which target developing awareness at the grassroots level of football communities. These educational initiatives should provide evidence-based knowledge about bullying and harassment in sport and information about best



practice steps to combat it. The current knowledge gap at the organisational level pointed to the efficacy of initiating programs that ensure participants critique the nature of abuses that may be occurring in their club or association, so it is more recognisable and acknowledged by everyone.

There is a need to break down the hesitancy towards perhaps bringing negative attention to one's club and sport, by acknowledging that problems related to the protection and empowerment of women and girls in football exist. An effective mechanism to change the culture of silence could be introducing "speak up champions" to raise awareness of how and when to "speak up" about bullying and harassment.

It is essential that more community members, including women and girls who are current or past players, referees and coaches, sports researchers, together with associations that work specifically to develop women's football, are deliberately engaged in the creation and review of policies, codes, frameworks and procedures. There should be opportunities for transparent discussions that include female perspectives about ways to embed policy frameworks in club activities. Women and girls need to be confident their 'voices' and perspectives resonate through the policy documents used to guide their sport's culture. They should be involved in enshrining practical steps for creating cultures within clubs and associations that will protect and empower everyone.

These recommendations, when implemented, will see football in Australia at the forefront of the country's pledge made in the CEDAW, as well as in the UN SDGs, in particular #5 – Gender Equality.



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