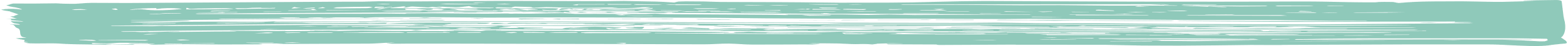
March 2024

Submission to the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the UN General Assembly on violence against women and girls in sport



Our Watch

# Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.’ As highlighted in Our Watch’s national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

# About this submission

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the United Nations General Assembly on violence against women and girls in sport. [Our Watch](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/) is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes and structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, [*Change the story*](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/change-the-story-a-shared-framework-for-the-primary-prevention-of-violence-against-women-in-australia)(2nd ed 2021)[[1]](#endnote-2), [*Changing the picture* (2018)](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-picture/)[[2]](#endnote-3) and [*Changing the landscape* (2022)](https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/changing-the-landscape/),[[3]](#endnote-4) we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

This submission responds to four of the key questions in the invitation for submissions, focusing on sport as a setting for the prevention of violence against women (Questions 4, 6, 9 and 11).

Our Watch would welcome the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance to the Special Rapporteur in relation to issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at [amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au](mailto:amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au).

# Responses to key consultation questions

## 4. What are the principal causes of the violence that women and girls experience in sports, including the structural causes of such violence?

The principle causes of violence against women and girls in sport directly reflect the causes of gender-based violence in our societies at large: gender inequality, discrimination and harmful socio-cultural norms. The gender-segregated nature of sport, the underrepresentation of women at every level, and structural factors, such as poor organisational cultures, can reinforce or exacerbate the root causes of violence against women within sport settings.

Our Watch’s evidence-based framework, *Change the story,* identifies that gender inequality sets the social context in which violence against women occurs and makes clear that the drivers of this violence are gendered. It provides guidance on the primary prevention of violence against women – that is, how to change the underlying social conditions that produce and drive this violence, and that excuse, justify or even promote it.

*Change the story* identifies four ‘gendered drivers’ of violence that arise from gender-discriminatory institutional, social and economic structures; social and cultural norms; and organisational, community, family and relationship practices. Together these create environments in which women and men are not considered equal, and violence against women is both more likely, and more likely to be tolerated and even condoned. The gendered drivers of violence against women are:

* Driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.
* Driver 2: Men’s control of decision-making and limits to women’s independence in public and private life.
* Driver 3: Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity.
* Driver 4: Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

It is important to recognise that violence and gender inequality exist in relation to multiple and intersecting systems of sexism; racism; colonialism; classism; heteronormativity; cisnormativity; homo-, bi- and transphobia; ableism and ageism; and their corresponding systems of power and privilege. These intersecting forms of oppression and privilege are evident in sport. All women and girl athletes are susceptible to violence, but LGBTQIA+ athletes, athletes with disabilities, and athletes from disadvantaged racial, ethnic, migration, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds are at particular risk.[[4]](#endnote-5)

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.[[5]](#endnote-6)

*Change the story* outlines that male peer relations are a feature of any context where men engage with other men (both men they know and men they don’t know), whether that be an interaction between two men, within a group of men or between separate groups of men. Sport remains a male-dominated realm, and women are underrepresented at every level, including leadership roles. As a gender-segregated industry, sport is shaped by hierarchical conceptions of gender and has a strong cultural association with men and masculinity.[[6]](#endnote-7) In men’s sporting contexts, aggression and dominance are seen as player strengths and rewarded, while other character traits that are as important to winning are overlooked or undervalued.[[7]](#endnote-8) Dominant forms of masculinity can be associated with physical prowess, rough physical activity and ‘tough’ contact sports. This can lead to the assumption that boys and men are naturally aggressive or even violent, and development of such cultural norms can lead to condoning, downplaying and legitimising boys and men’s aggression and violence towards women.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Structural factors, such as poor organisational cultures, a lack of effective policies, a lack of cultural leadership and inadequate penalties, can reinforce, support or excuse violence-supportive, homophobic or sexist attitudes and behaviour in these contexts.[[9]](#endnote-10) For example, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that factors that enabled child sexual abuse in these sport and recreation institutions included risk factors such as power dynamics, which can facilitate grooming and the accessible nature of sport, which leaves it open to broader cultural influences; as well as structural factors, including failures in institutional leadership, governance and culture; lack of or inadequate policies and procedures; a lack of education, training and communication of policies; and limited or no recordkeeping and information sharing practices.[[10]](#endnote-11)

These factors can entrench harmful power dynamics between athletes and those in positions of power who are gatekeepers to opportunities and success.[[11]](#endnote-12) Male peer, organisational and institutional cultures can promote men’s control of decision-making, which is itself a driver of violence against women. Institutions or organisations that are dominated by men, particularly at a leadership or governance level, are more likely to be influenced by negative masculine peer cultures. These two drivers (driver 2 and driver 4) can create contexts in which violence against women in more likely to occur.[[12]](#endnote-13)

In summary, the principle causes of violence against women in sport reflect the gendered drivers of violence against women seen in society at large. In particular, two key drivers - men’s control of decision-making and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasises aggression, dominance and control – are reinforced and exacerbated by structural factors, including poor organisational cultures, a lack of effective policies, inadequate penalties, and a lack of cultural leadership, creating an environment where violence against women can flourish.

## 6. What are the responsibilities of State and non-State actors in preventing acts of violence against women and girls in sport, including in adopting measures to investigate it, and to hold those responsible for it accountable, and to provide assistance and protection to survivors of violence?

Both State and non-State actors have a range of responsibilities towards preventing violence against women and girls in sports. *Change the story* outlines eight essential actions that are needed to prevent violence against women across all levels of society, and across settings where people live, learn, work, socialise and play.[[13]](#endnote-14) Sport is a priority setting for this work, as a key setting where dominant masculine stereotypes and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity are often celebrated. Sport settings exert a powerful influence on gender relations, attitudes, behaviours and social norms, and as role models, athletes and sporting professionals can have a significant influence. Sport settings also provide an opportunity to reach large groups and communities (employees, players and their families, sponsors, supporters, volunteers, communities), and an opportunity to reach large groups of men and boys in particular.

On and off the field, sport provides the environment and opportunity to set and reinforce positive community standards about respect and equality, as well as challenge problematic norms, practices and structures. In this regard, in addition to the importance of preventing violence against women *in sport*, there are opportunities within the sport setting to support the prevention of violence against women in society more broadly.

Violence against women is the outcome of interactions among many factors at different levels of the social ecology – the individual and relationship level, the organisational and community level, the system and institutional level, and the societal level.[[14]](#endnote-15) A comprehensive approach to prevention of violence against women needs to address all levels of the socio-ecological model. As such, a whole-of-setting approach is critical to ensure comprehensive, long-term change. For sport, a whole-of-setting approach means that efforts to address the gendered drivers of violence against women must:

* Include policy, practice and structural change within sport and be complemented by the wider policy, regulatory or legislative change that will support and increase the effectiveness work in sport settings.
* Involve all those who engage with sport, including leadership, athletes, volunteers, fans, sponsors and those outside of sport who provide it with services or support.
* Consider the levers or mechanisms that can support, enable and systematise prevention activity across sport, beyond those that exist in individual organisations.

Most developments in preventing violence against women in sport have tended to focus on the athletes; however, prevention efforts need to understand that risks to women and girls exist across the spectrum, from risks to girls in cities hosting mega sporting events, to risks to women employees and contractors, such as referees and physiotherapists.[[15]](#endnote-16) A holistic, whole-of setting approach to prevention needs to address the drivers of violence against women in all levels and roles in sport.

States have responsibilities and obligations under international human rights agreements to ensure the health, safety and equality of women, including in sports settings, as well as a specific duty to take positive steps to eliminate all forms of violence against women. States that are party to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have a duty to ensure women have the same opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education (Article 10(g)) and the right to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life (Article 13(c)).

Australia’s *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* explicitly references sporting organisations as one of the settings that has a meaningful role to play in primary prevention in Australia. Australian governments – at both the Commonwealth and State/Territory levels – support and/or fund a number of initiatives aimed at supporting women’s participation and leadership in all aspects of sport.[[16]](#endnote-17)[[17]](#endnote-18)

Sporting organisations and clubs, from the community to professional levels, and everyone involved in sport (Board members, CEOs, managers, coaches, players, umpires, staff and fans) have a key role in challenging the attitudes and behaviours that excuse or support disrespect, gender inequality and/or violence against women. Importantly, this includes addressing masculine organisational cultures that contribute to an environment where violence against women is normalised and creating a more equitable culture from the playing field to the boardroom. Questions 9 and 11 provide specific examples of what sporting organisations can do to prevent violence against women.

Having strong representation of women and girls in all aspects of sport, including through sports media, is fundamental to driving positive change at both the elite and community sport level.[[18]](#endnote-19) Media stakeholders, including sports journalists, entertainment and advertising, can also contribute to preventing violence against women and girls in sport by bringing public scrutiny to the problem; ensuring media coverage of violence against women is respectful to survivors and challenges gender stereotypes; addressing underrepresentation of women’s sport across the media; represent women and female athletes as leaders; and increase the representation of women in sports journalism.[[19]](#endnote-20)

## 9. Please provide examples of good practice that have been adopted by State and non-State actors with regards to ending violence against women and girls in sports?

There are numerous promising and good practice examples that aim to embed gender equality and prevent violence against women in sport across a range of organisations and at different levels (from community-based sport to sporting codes) across Australia.

Our Watch’s evidence review, [*A team effort: Preventing violence against women through sport evidence guide*](https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/11/07030344/A-team-effort-Preventing-violence-against-women-through-sport-evidence-guide.pdf) outlines 10 key elements that are needed for promising prevention practice in sports to ensure that design, delivery, implementation and evaluation is evidence-led and underpinned by addressing the gendered drivers of violence against women.[[20]](#endnote-21) Building on this, Our Watch’s[*Equality and Respect in Sport*](https://sport.ourwatch.org.au/resource/equality-and-respect-in-sport) outlines five Standards describing what needs to be achieved at an organisational level to embed equality and respect in any sports organisation.The standards are commitment, conditions, culture, support and business.[[21]](#endnote-22) To meet each Standard, *Equality and Respect in Sport* outlines that work is required across three key areas for action: leadership, norms and strategy. Our Watch has been working with sporting organisations such as The Australian Football League (AFL) to build capacity around *Equality and Respect in Sport* across the AFL system.

The Victorian State Government’s [*Guidelines for Preventing Violence Against Women: Taking Action Through Community Sport*](https://sport.vic.gov.au/publications-and-resources/Guidelines-for-Preventing-Violence-Against-Women-Taking-Action-Through-Community-Sport) (the Guidelines) are a good example of how state governments can promote and lead social, cultural and systemic change in sports.[[22]](#endnote-23) The Guidelines were launched in 2022 to support the community sport sector to develop and implement strategies to drive equality and prevent gendered violence. The Guidelines have a clear focus on addressing the gendered drivers of violence against women and girls, drawing on Our Watch’s evidence-based frameworks, *Change the story*, *Changing the picture* and *Equality and Respect in Sport*. The Guidelines are practical, emphasising the need for long-term, ongoing and sustainable action while reflecting that there is no one-size-fits-all, linear model for preventing violence in sports.

The Victorian Government’s [*Preventing Violence Through Sports Grants Program*](https://sport.vic.gov.au/grants-and-funding/our-grants/preventing-violence-through-sport-grants-program) (the Grants Program) provides the government with a mechanism to mandate the uptake of the Guidelines.[[23]](#endnote-24) The Grants Program provides funding of up to $200,000 over two years for organisations to design and deliver primary prevention activities within a community sport setting. Notably, funding will only be provided for projects that implement the Guidelines and build networks and partnerships between community sport and recreation and primary prevention experts. The 12 projects currently funded represent a variety of sporting codes, localities and levels of governance. The Guidelines and the Grants Program demonstrate how governments can support non-government actors to realise the influential role sporting clubs can play in primary prevention and take action to progress gender equality.

There are also promising practice examples aimed at addressing violence in cross cultural contexts. For example, the National Rugby League’s (NRL) [Voice Against Violence](https://www.nrl.com/community/voice-against-violence/) initiative delivers programs to local clubs across Australia and the Pacific to raise awareness of gender-based violence. Future recommendations about the prevention of violence of women who experience intersecting forms of discrimination that impact the severity and prevalence of violence, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, women and girls with disabilities, and LGBTIQA+ people and communities, should be guided by specialist organisations submissions’ and co-designed and led by those communities.

## 11. Please provide recommendations as to how violence against women and girls in sport can be prevented and what needs to be done to better respond to the needs of survivors of such violence?

It is important for international, national and local sporting stakeholders, including governments and regulatory bodies, sporting governing bodies, organisations and codes, and the media and journalists to align work and collaborate effectively to prevent violence against women and girls, including in sport.

Interconnected policies, frameworks and approaches are critical to enable the prevention of violence against women, promote gender equality, and ensure the health and wellbeing of, and accountability to, victim survivors.

*Change the story* outlines examples of policy, regulatory and legislative actions to enable and support prevention of violence against women in sport settings that we recommend different stakeholders focus on. These are:

* Embed a focus on prevention of violence against women in the constitutions and formal policies of national and state leagues and associations/governing bodies.
* Embed behaviours and attitudes that support gender equality and respect for women in codes of conduct (professional sporting codes in particular) and apply national penalties to officials and players who do not adhere to these codes.
* Support all sporting codes to employ, develop and retain more women in decision making and coaching roles.
* Develop a coordinated approach to coaching staff on violence prevention education, specifically for use in sporting clubs teaching young men.
* Set quotas for female representation in Sports governing bodies and the boards of elite sporting organisations.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Specific to sporting organisations and clubs, there are a range of actions that can be taken to prevent violence against women, including:

* Showing leadership by setting the standard of zero tolerance towards sexist attitudes, language and discriminatory behaviour.
* Providing opportunities and pathways for girls and women to participate at all levels.
* Promoting women’s voices and perspectives equally with men’s.
* Using communications, marketing and events to demonstrate a commitment to gender equality – both inside and outside the club.
* Reviewing how safe, welcoming, equal and inclusive the club is for women and developing an action plan to identify opportunities for improvement.
* Being a positive role model to children and young people by showing that both women and men play an active role at all levels of your club.
* Providing training and information to your club so everyone understands their role in preventing violence against women.[[25]](#endnote-26)

The above recommendations for the different types of prevention activities in sport should be adapted to suit different local contexts, to ensure they are fit for purpose and led by those communities to ensure cultural safety and self-determination.

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