



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

In partnership with



**Girls and women  
in Australian  
football umpiring:  
Understanding  
registration,  
participation and  
retention**

August 2021

**Dr Victoria Rawlings  
and Damian Anderson**



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We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.

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# Foreword

Like many young girls and boys, I started umpiring because I loved football, I liked to keep fit and wanted to earn some pocket money. I never thought about umpiring AFL football; umpiring was just a way to be involved in the game that I loved.



Throughout my umpiring journey I have faced and continue to face obstacles as a female in a traditionally male-dominated environment. While umpiring juniors through to state league level, I've worn uniforms that don't fit, used change rooms that impose segregation and have had my ability to perform questioned due to my gender by spectators, players, coaches, the media, umpiring peers and umpiring coaches.

As an umpire, there is an unspoken understanding that the external support is limited but it is the internal support of umpires and their coaches that is the key driver in retention and ultimately umpiring success and enjoyment.

As a 13-year-old girl, I was surrounded by only boys and men, but this never bothered me, because we all shared a passion for footy. Although I have experienced umpiring peers and coaches who have doubted my ability and believed my appointments were based on gender and not merit, I have also been fortunate along the way to have had peers, coaches, family and friends who have supported me and given me confidence and strength to persevere.

I had never considered umpiring senior state league football or AFL until I was beginning to be successful at Reserves level and then appointed to officiate in an underage National Football Carnival. I was inspired watching Chelsea Roffey umpiring AFL matches as a goal umpire, but still wasn't sure I would ever see a female in the role of field umpiring at the highest level.

After being invited to be part of the AFL Female Field Umpire Pathway Initiative, I made my AFL debut in 2017, the same year as the inaugural AFLW season was

played. Like many others, I thought that young girls seeing women playing elite level football, and many more girls starting to play football, would lead to a natural increase in female umpiring numbers too. However, five AFLW seasons have now been played and although there has been significant growth in females playing, with 32% of Australian Football participants being female, only 10.8% of umpires nationally are female.

Through this significant and unprecedented research undertaken by Dr. Victoria Rawlings, we can identify the key challenges and obstacles experienced by girls and women in umpiring and provide the recommendations to those who have the power to make changes. In reading this research, I felt frustrated that girls and women in umpiring roles are still facing the same obstacles and challenges that I faced almost 16 years ago; I had hoped things would have improved. They certainly should have.

Umpires face many challenges- and these challenges are even more complex and compounded for girls and women in umpiring. This research shows clearly what we know through experience- that the umpiring club environment is critical for recruitment and retention of umpires, and more importantly, for their mental health and wellbeing. Implementing the recommendations that Dr. Victoria Rawlings and Damian Anderson have proposed will make umpiring clubs more inclusive for all; this should not only lead to greater female umpire numbers but also increase retention and enjoyment for all umpires.

**Eleni Glouftsis**

First female AFL field umpire

As a woman, and a Queenslander, I was never expected to reach the pinnacle of Australian football officiating – the MCG stage on Grand Final day.

Umpiring was a symptom of my lifelong obsession with Aussie Rules, rooted in South Australia and cherished following a childhood move to rugby heartland. While my brothers excelled in playing, I was content to watch my beloved Crows on TV, kicking barefoot in the backyard until my feet were red and raw.

Answering a call to wave the flags for the boys' teams in high school was a no-brainer. If you'd asked me to picture an AFL goal umpire at that time, I would have described gruffness decked out in a white overcoat and Merv Hughes moustache. I'd spent my early days wandering country football fields where moustaches on goal umpires were as much a part of the game as Cornish pasties and yelling "Ball!" for holding decisions.

Soon after, I learned that umpiring was in my blood. My grandfather, Leonard Gardner, had been a field umpire in the South Australian country league after returning from the Second World War. He regaled me with stories of being attacked by umbrella-wielding old ladies and marching disgruntled spectators off the field by the scruffs of their necks.

I loved the challenge and reward of the goals. It was adrenaline-charged, demanding concentration and precision in positioning. Training kept me fit and active after leaving the sports of my high school years. The variety was exciting – every decision was unique and required split-second decision-making. Plus, umpiring was the ideal part-time job to complement my studies in clarinet at the Queensland Conservatorium, as both activities called for dextrous index fingers.

Being appointed to the AFL panel at the age of 22 was one of the highlights of my life. After receiving the AFL embossed tracksuit in the post, despite my men's uniform being ridiculously oversized, I wore it around

the house with pride. Media weren't interested in my love of football, my history or family background that led me here. Headlines spruiked the novelty of gender; the narrative didn't stem from an innate ability, but the grit, determination, desire and dedication to succeed in a male-dominated field.

While the narrative was true in some respects, it was also one-dimensional in its focus on barriers. The scrutiny could be a source of elation or frustration. I knew from the beginning that any successes, or failures, would bear the burden of the gender lens. My ability to overcome self-doubt and insecurity when it arose, to turn barriers into opportunities, and to manage the politics behind-the-scenes would determine whether I would make it.

It took energy to withstand these pressures. But over time I came to realise I had more to give than resilience and ambition. Strengths overlooked in the traditional sense became apparent – from the discipline learned through athletic and academic pursuits to the fancy footwork from countless ballet, tap and jazz classes, to the performance skills learned as a conservatorium-trained musician. They translated into meeting strict training benchmarks, agility and change-of-direction, the body language to sell my decisions, focus of reading the play, and centimetre-perfect decision-making expected at the elite level.

My experience has not been without challenges, but I take heart in the personal recognition of these strengths brought as both female and individual. They are the lessons I seek to impart on others finding their way in non-traditional domains.

The research conducted by Victoria Rawlings for this report encourages me to reflect on my journey from local footy in Brisbane to the AFL panel – a



pathway dotted with mixed emotions. Looking back, scenarios that related to my gender ranged from those I regarded as innocuous, waved away as signs of ignorance rather than ill-intent, through to those that made my blood boil. My response at each stage was carefully considered, a matter of playing the game and choosing battles wisely.

This research legitimises and reflects many of the thoughts and emotions I've experienced. It is fascinating to read *Girls in Australian Football Umpiring: Understanding Registration, Participation and Retention* and see much of this enquiry come to life in tangible and personal ways.

In the following pages, this report provides crucial insight into the psyche and motivations of girls and women in umpiring. Targeted, evidence-based experiences identify factors that can make or break an umpire's ultimate success. Its insights cast both light and shade, encouraging a nuanced consideration of what helps versus hinders progress of females in umpiring, and why.

It highlights the big things that imbue purpose and reinforce a sense of being valued, as well as the little things, their accumulation and impact on an umpire's sense of belonging.

While its honesty is confronting at times, it is also reassuring in promoting understanding which, hopefully, can transcend tokenism and lip service in optimising umpiring environments.

This report identifies the need for meaningful action if female umpire numbers are to increase. But its recommendations not only improve the landscape for girls and women; they serve to make umpiring a truly inclusive space, a better space for all. In doing so, they bring umpiring in line with the expectations of broader society and best practice.

The following pages present an invitation for committing to an end game that fosters progress in all sectors of Australian football, so everyone can share in its heritage and possibilities.

**Chelsea Roffey**

First female AFL Grand Final umpire



# Executive summary

The AFL has stated that Australian Football “is a game for everyone, no matter who you are or where you’re from” (AFL, 2019c, p.117). A critical part of the game and its sustainability into the future is umpiring.

Recent data on umpiring illustrates that despite the rapid growth in the participation of girls and women<sup>1</sup> playing football, similar growth is not being experienced in umpiring. While girls and women make up 50.2% of the Australian population, they represent only 10.8% of umpires in Australian Football, and only 2.6% of umpires at AFL level (AFL, 2019).

Little research has been conducted into the social and cultural environments of officials in Australian Football. Indeed, this research is the first investigation to focus on the experiences of minority officials of any kind. As such, this research took an exploratory approach, collecting in-depth, qualitative data from community and state league umpires in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. To further understand these cultural and social contexts, State Umpiring Managers from these regions were also interviewed.

Data analysis uncovered participants’ positive and problematic experiences of umpiring including selections, infrastructure, coaching, and harassment. The findings indicated that there was systemic, institutional issues with supporting girls and women in umpiring, regardless of the region that participants were housed.

## Key findings

In this study, girls and women in umpiring:

- Experienced social and cultural negativity around umpiring selections, especially when being selected to umpire in higher grades. This negativity was often enacted by fellow umpires and took the form of suggestions that they were not deserving of appointments and had instead only been selected due to tokenism or undeserved affirmative action. These experiences often decreased the enjoyment of participants when being appointed to games. It also resulted in social marginalisation from the group as they were collectively identified as ‘different’ to other umpires. Results showed that over time, girls and women internalised doubts about their ability to umpire games and whether they ‘deserved’ appointments to particular games or grades, which significantly impacted their confidence.
- Experienced exclusion due to the material environments of change rooms due to the cultural protocols that operated in these spaces. In limited circumstances, umpires indicated that positive protocols were in place that increased their feelings of comfort and inclusion. In most cases, however, participants reported feeling uncomfortable, awkward, and sometimes at risk due to a lack of these protocols. Participants also, however, did not want to be excluded from change rooms as these were important sites for collaboration, communication, and teamwork.
- Experienced exclusion due to language use from key personnel, in administrative forms and in policy or other documents. This included language that made them feel excluded through referring to umpires as (only) men.
- Experienced discrimination through gender-based harassment that suggested that their ability as umpires was essentially and consistently lower

<sup>1</sup> We have used the terminology ‘girls and women’ throughout this report rather than ‘female’ in the recognition that gender identity is separate from biological sex. We acknowledge that not all umpires that identify as girls or women would have been assigned ‘female’ at birth.

than that of men's. Almost all participants indicated that they had experiences of having their umpiring questioned without any basis except for their appearance. This came from spectators, player coaches, fellow umpires, and umpire coaches, and for many participants in this study, caused them to question whether to continue umpiring.

- Experienced sexual harassment from spectators, umpire coaches and fellow umpires. This included unsolicited sexual images being sent to umpires multiple times; sexualised comments from spectators and fellow umpires; and repetitive unwelcome approaches from fellow umpires and umpires coaches. These incidents compounded already problematic experiences and made some participants in this study question their involvement in umpiring.
- Identified coaching strategies and approaches that were helpful and harmful. Participants reflected on the ways that coaching impacted their experience in multiple ways, through setting cultural agendas for whole groups of umpires, as well as influencing their individual experience of umpiring through individual attention and feedback.
- Articulated that the best coaching was that which provided balanced feedback with a focus on improving umpiring, built strong relationships through care, and clearly communicated decisions and criteria around selections. A key element of good coaching for girls and women was the articulation of confidence and support in their ability to perform well in their appointments. This was particularly important for this group due to the broader experiences of negative feedback around selections.
- Indicated that social connectedness and friendships created a feeling of supportiveness, community and a genuine sense that they were valued as umpires and people. These exchanges proved to be a strong factor in reasons for participants enjoying umpiring and returning each season. This connectedness was threatened or undermined by negative social interactions including gendered harassment, negative commentary about selections, and problematic language use and change room protocols.

- Referred to the dominance of prevailing masculine cultures, and the requirement for girls and women to 'fit in' to this culture if they wanted to succeed in umpiring. This required sacrifices or self-regulations including ignoring or not reporting things like discomfort or personal harm that came from exclusion or gendered harassment.
- Experienced significant mental and physical health challenges as they tried to 'fit in' to the prevailing culture, especially when they felt that they had to ignore or go along with problematic or harmful incidents.
- Were reluctant to seek support from coaches or fellow umpires about the problems that they faced with gendered harassment, coaching, selections, or other parts of their umpiring.

In this study, State Umpiring Managers:

- Recognised that umpiring was historically male-dominated, and that culturally this dominance continued into contemporary experiences of umpires;
- Did not refer to most of the experiences that were raised by umpires in this study, or suggest that they may be occurring;
- Were able to suggest some strategies that would address a small proportion of issues experienced by participants in this study;
- Did not substantially engage with discussions about meaningful cultural change.

The following report presents detailed findings from this research project. The authors of this report recognise that this process of knowledge gathering and understanding represents a preliminary evidence base. Further investigation, research and evaluation is required to more fully understand and address many of the issues identified.



# Recommendations

In reflection of our findings, we have developed the following recommendations. These recommendations represent steps to creating positive cultural change across all levels of umpiring.

- 1. Education initiatives to a range of different stakeholders that focus on gender equity and preventing gendered harassment, violence and sexism.** Initiatives require bespoke development and roll out for different, specific groups, including State Umpiring Managers; State League Coaches; and state league umpires. These groups are employees and representatives of the AFL and as such have a direct responsibility for ensuring that umpiring is a safe and inclusive environment for all umpires. We also recommend bespoke education resources for community-level umpire coaches as these coaches have clear effects on culture building and the individual experiences of umpires in their care. Resources for coaches should focus on holistic approaches to umpire management, and support coaches to recognise and build on the multiple skills and abilities of umpires, without focusing only on traditional assumptions of physicality. We recommend that any resource that is developed utilises data from this report to draw attention to the environments and connected experiences of girls and women in umpiring and utilise best-practice educational designs and pedagogies to be delivered. In producing these resources, we recommend that the AFL employs expert consultants to design, deliver and evaluate these education resources, and considers building this into an ARC Linkage application to obtain funding that can be directed towards this output. Education resources that are designed through this research and design process may be able to be customised for use at various levels of umpiring and beyond, into player, player coach and other stakeholder education initiatives.
- 2. Research into the implementation of a centralised procedure (reporting tool).** We recommend that this tool be implemented to report 'lower-level' discrimination to identify trends and take subsequent remedial action. It would include options for reporters to be

identifiable (or not) and to talk further about the issues with a staff member. This would also require associated education for umpires about what is an inappropriate comment or action and how to intervene or report the incident. We also recommend further investigating the potential for 'cultural temperature checks' that survey umpire groups at regular intervals in order to build ownership and accountability into the environment. These temperature checks would audit various aspects mentioned such as language, incidents, and facilities. The investigation of this could be led by the committee as indicated in Recommendation Nine.

- 3. The adoption of inclusive change room policies at State League and Community levels.** While physical infrastructure can make a difference to how individuals experience change room environments, what is far more important are the cultural practices, expectations and protocols that are in place. We recommend that at state and community levels of football, umpire change room protocols at training and game venues are clearly articulated and regulated to reduce confusion, uncertainty and a variety of applications. These protocols should work on the assumption that all umpires get changed and/ or shower in a cubicle, and that common areas are not suitable for open changing or showering, regardless of gender. Where this is not possible, umpires should be directed to arrive to and depart from the venue already changed. Supporting these protocols through clear incentives will contribute to change in contexts where these practices are not being implemented. These practices will support the comfort of all umpires and support social integration regardless of gender.

**4. The use of gender-neutral language in all correspondence and coaching, as well as the use of diverse examples of gender and race in coaching imagery and examples.**

Gendered language in umpiring such as ‘boys’, ‘gents’ or ‘girls’ can produce experiences of marginalisation and exclusion. All umpiring departments at community, state and AFL levels are recommended to adopt gender neutral language in both official and unofficial verbal and written communications (for example, ‘umpires’, ‘fieldies’, ‘goalies’, ‘everyone’, ‘team’) to avoid these outcomes. Both state managers and umpire coaches should encourage umpires to use this language, and ‘call out’ gendered language when they hear it. We also recommend the development of resources for umpires that illustrate great umpiring, difficult decisions, tricky situations etc., and use these to showcase female and diverse umpires excelling in umpiring.

**5. At State League level: Employment of all support staff including physical conditioning staff with appropriate training/experience with female athletes or mixed gender groups.**

It is crucial that staff appointed to State League level and above have experience and training to work respectfully alongside girls and women in umpiring. This will help to reduce gendered discrimination in this environment.

**6. Investigate the feasibility of a parallel umpiring talent pathway for girls and women across State League & Talent Pathway competitions and the AFLW competition.** Since its inception, the AFLW has been the most visible representation of women in Australian Football. What has changed, however, is the commitment to have women umpires in the AFLW. The representation of women umpires at this level remains important both symbolically, and as an incentive for high-achieving State League umpires. We recommend that the AFLW pathway for girls and women in umpiring be re-articulated and strengthened. This would have far-ranging, long-term effects on umpire visibility, recruitment and retention. The AFL should strongly consider establishing

a Working Group to undertake consultation to establish the best pathway and model for women and girls in umpiring at State League and Talent pathway and elite levels. There is also the potential for the AFL to consider a quota system across various leagues as a means of improving participation, representation and success.

**7. Investigate the feasibility of a parallel umpiring participation pathway for girls and women across community football.** Findings from this project indicate there may be benefits in having gender-segregated training groups for girls and women<sup>2</sup> within community football settings. We recommend that investigation of the feasibility of models of umpiring and umpire training like this be considered and investigated, possibly within a larger research project or partnership

**8. Consistently performing exit interviews and/or anonymous feedback forms with umpires who are discontinuing.** This would provide vital data around retention and cultures of umpire groups, particularly for minority group umpires.

**9. Investigation and implementation of active efforts to recruit more female umpiring coaches.** This study demonstrated the importance of women in leadership roles as a symbol of women’s expanding place in football and umpiring. While we captured only a small amount of data around women in umpire coaching positions, this did emphasise that the participants in this study who encountered women coaches experienced a greater sense of inclusion and support. Based on broader participant accounts, we would suggest that the increased presence of women coaches could contribute to cultural change through demonstrating women’s expertise of umpiring and coaching; women’s power over selections; and the ability of women to set clear rules and boundaries around group expectations (culture setting). In addition, women in coaching positions may encourage umpires to come forward with their concerns about cultural exchanges, infrastructure, coaching or gendered harassment that they encounter.

<sup>2</sup> For anyone that identifies as a girl, woman or other gender identities including non-binary.



**10. Implement a committee as an independent consultancy board to have regular, timely discussions to monitor the progress of these and other umpiring inclusion recommendations.** While a related taskforce/ advisory committee has already been assembled, with recent changes in the AFL it has not been sufficiently resourced. The group will provide independent accountability to the recommendations of this report, as well as initiate, lobby, advocate and assist in driving social inclusion initiatives in umpiring. Resourcing this group would represent continuity in carriage of these recommendations, and any forthcoming developments around umpiring inclusion. We recommend that this committee is open to periodic, meaningful engagement with girls and women in various umpiring settings in order to obtain feedback about their contexts and any change initiatives that are being implemented. The committee may also consider ongoing responses to this feedback and inclusion strategies that are not detailed in the recommendations of this report. Activities of the committee could include, for example, the design of a structural template to assist umpire groups with monitoring and accounting for commitment to inclusive practices.

**11. Investment of time and other resources into further research about the social and cultural environments in umpiring and initiatives and strategies to support social cohesion and equity in these environments.** The findings in this report represent in-depth, qualitative findings about key contexts. Future research has the potential ask research questions that expand from these findings at scale. An Australian Research Council Linkage Project, for example, could produce findings from larger numbers of umpires across all regions, with the potential to extend research into multicultural and Indigenous communities of umpires. There is also the potential to expand this project's focus on gender by systematically investigating other sport and league practices in officiating, including their successes and challenges. Beyond research on current contexts, we recommend that future research builds in exploration of inclusion initiatives in different contexts and their challenges or successes.

# Background to the study

Ensuring that Australian Football is a game for everyone is an admirable goal for the AFL. Girls and women are key to achieving this ambition.

Girls and women have traditionally been positioned as ‘peripheral to the game’ in roles that serve male participation (Hess, 2000). Even in the professional era, women have often been regarded as supporters or volunteers rather than players or potential leaders and influencers in the sport (Richards, 2018; Frost, Lightbody & Halabi, 2013).

In order to meaningfully redress this marginalisation, the AFL launched a Gender Action Plan in 2019. This plan substantively iterated the AFL’s renewed commitment to equality and inclusiveness, one that has resulted in the conception and significant investment in the AFLW, which launched in 2017, as well as grassroots female programs to support pathways for female players to elite competition. The rapid growth of female players in Australian Football represents the efforts of the AFL to address issues of participation over the past five to ten years. In 2017 alone, there was a 76% increase in the number of female teams competing in competitions around Australia (AFL, 2017). At the conclusion of the 2018 season, females made up 32% of Australian football participants. These figures demonstrate significant female interest and participation in Australian football and suggest it is well on track to becoming a genuinely gender inclusive code at player level. However, this transformation is not reflected in recruitment or participation of females as officials.

Indeed, despite these priorities and several initiatives to encourage female participation in umpiring, parity with male representation (or female player representation) remains an elusive and distant goal. While girls and women make up 50.2% of the Australian population, they represent only 10.8% of umpires in Australian Football, and only 2.6% of umpires at AFL level (AFL, 2019). This represents a pressing issue for the AFL as it embarks on a push into new territories and audiences.

Although there has been somewhat consistent if slow growth in female umpiring participation nationally over the past four years, the same cannot be said when numbers are considered according to regions. Different regions demonstrate intense variation in success of recruiting and maintaining female umpires (See Table 1). NSW/ACT, for example, has had steady increases over the period, while South Australia produced large hiccups of growth, almost tripling their female umpiring cohort in four years. Conversely, Victoria represents a slow growth state, adding only an additional 18% of female umpires to their list in the same period (AFL, 2019a).

	National		QLD		NSW/ACT		NT	SA		Victoria		Tasmania		WA		
2015	1,079	8.2%	104	8.5%	99	6.1%	51	11.1%	60	4.8%	660	10.0%	27	6.1%	78	6.1%
2016	1,240	8.9%	110	9.3%	148	8.6%	56	15.2%	103	5.8%	741	10.5%	26	5.7%	49	4.0%
2017	1,434	9.5%	118	9.6%	195	10.0%	81	17.7%	103	5.3%	791	10.9%	35	8.0%	110	5.9%
2018	1,553	9.9%	151	11.5%	206	9.7%	77	18.9%	155	7.0%	782	10.7%	38	7.7%	144	7.2%
2019	1,658	10.5%	179	14.1%	224	10.0%	90	20.1%	112	6.1%	851	11.3%	45	8.7%	157	7.9%

Table 1: Female umpire registrations by state and by % of total umpire numbers



These statistics demonstrate that various contexts—including locations, coaches and managers, produce different environments and subsequent experiences for the umpires. However, these comparative rates fail to provide a complete picture of the reasons for continuing or leaving umpiring, or a detailed picture of the experiences that female umpires face. While it is

well recognised that the experiences that individuals have in sport impact their willingness to continue to participate (Dixon, Warner & Bruening, 2008; Hill & Green, 2008), almost no research has been done on the experiences of female umpires in any sport, let alone the context of Australian Football.

## Previous research

Broad research on the experiences of Australian Football umpires has been undertaken previously by Kellett and Warner (2011), who investigated umpiring communities in Victoria and the ways that these supported or threatened umpire retention. While goal, boundary and field umpires from AFL, VFL and rural Victoria were included in the study, all 22 interviewees were men, meaning that female perspectives and considerations of experiences were excluded. The study found that a ‘sense of community’—also understood as social connectedness—was vital for ensuring retention and enjoyment. A sense of community was considered important to umpiring, because it improves retention, participation, performance and wellbeing. One finding indicated that the sense of community for women was likely to be eroded or broken down by the nature of the umpiring environments that were investigated. It must be noted that this finding was not collaborated by any female voices. Another critical finding was that the biggest threat to a sense of community for the participants was the notion of inequity. While this study only included male participants, and this inequity was seen as relating to inequity in remuneration and allocation of resources, it is likely that the perception of inequity would be exacerbated for female umpires due to their immediate positioning as a minority group.

While writing their report over ten years ago, Kellett and Warner (2011) concluded that:

“In the case of Australian rules football, a male-dominated sport and umpiring environment... targeting resources into recruiting females to umpire is a poor strategic choice unless the management of umpires is changed dramatically. In the case of other sports that are not as gendered, or more skewed to female participation, this may mean that managers and administrators are required to revise programmatical and promotional strategies so that a more inclusive ... environment is fostered. This might not only increase women in the profession, but may also prove to be beneficial to current umpires.”

Their argument illustrates that research into the experiences, knowledge and understanding of existing female umpires is crucial to the improvement of retention rates for all umpires, as well as producing an increased and sustained registration of new female umpires. Without understanding the specific circumstances that promote inclusion of female umpires, it is impossible for new ‘programmatical and promotional strategies’ to be established in umpiring groups around the country.

Only one study has investigated the specific social, cultural and institutional experiences of women in Australian Football. Richards (2018) conducted qualitative research into women who were working or volunteering in Australian Football. While participants were not limited to umpiring, only three umpires were included in the study. Richards’ research indicated that women in umpiring faced considerable challenges

including increased scrutiny on social media, in mass media and through AFL in-game commentary. Their minority status as women in a sport that is coded as masculine makes them inherently more visible and specific targets of crowd derision, including in online contexts, a theme never more evident than in Round 8, 2019, when Tayla Harris became the subject of intense, vitriolic, and violently sexualised public commentary, simply from the publication of a photo of her kicking a goal (McClure, 2019).

While the gaze on community and state league umpires may be less intense, it is likely that female umpires at these levels feel intense pressure from operating in a high-stress, high-responsibility position for which they are often positioned as lesser or inadequate due to their gender. In addition, they may face 'microaggressions' of sexism that are often excused for being nonthreatening. Women who face microaggressions due to their presence in a masculine domain like umpiring "may experience far more stress than their male counterparts who mostly contend with the pressures of the sport itself" (Kaskan & Ho, 2016).

Richards noted that the umpires in her study routinely came up against scepticism, gender bias, and institutional failures to recognise, celebrate and support women. While her findings represented the first foray into understanding the unique experiences encountered by women in the AFL, as there were only three AFL umpires, the project did not present scaled, systematic, expansive results that could represent female umpiring at different levels. This study illustrates in a far more broad and specific way, the ways that girls and women encounter umpiring in multiple contexts across Australia. To achieve these aims, this study asked one primary research question:

- What social, cultural and institutional factors play a role in female umpire registration, participation and retention in Australian Football umpiring?

To answer this overarching question, two contributing research questions guided data collection:

- How do girls and women experience community and state league umpiring?
- How do State Umpiring Managers understand their role in relation to registering and retaining female umpires?



# Project overview

To answer complex questions about cultural contexts and mediated individual experiences within them, qualitative research methods represented the most suitable mode of enquiry.

This is because qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups allow participants to articulate their experiences in flexible and dynamic ways that are not restricted to closed answers. While this does not allow for large numbers of participants, it does allow a deep understanding of a smaller number of participants, and to draw connections between participant accounts, giving a broader illustration of common or disparate experiences. In addition, as this is the first research of its kind, qualitative research presents more opportunities for participants to voice their experiences, rather than quantitative research that already presents constrained response options.

As such, this project utilised an entirely qualitative research approach, but implemented this at scale to ensure that a diversity of accounts were recorded and analysed. To ensure this contextual diversity, four regions were included in the study- New South Wales/ Australian Capital Territory (considered to be one representative region due to the overarching governing body of AFL NSW/ACT), Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. While the research originally budgeted for just the former three regions to be included, travel restrictions and associated reduced budget allowed for the inclusion of Queensland. The inclusion of these four regions with different managing bodies enabled a diverse reflection of the different contexts around Australia that girls and women umpire within. This process does not, and did not intend to, directly compare the differences between states. To do so would ignore the different and dynamic forces at play within each region, and the diversity within the regions.

For example, this study included umpires from rural, regional and urban areas; umpires of different ages and abilities; racially and religiously diverse umpires; umpires that have only just begun their careers, and those that are concluding them. This project did not seek to draw conclusions about the broad oversight of these umpires dependant on region, but to identify the particular conditions that these umpires faced in their daily and weekly experiences. We note that these conditions were not region dependant, and that the challenges and opportunities that umpires faced were not restricted by borderlines. We do, however, recognise that different regions had substantively different historical and contemporary approaches to supporting and encouraging the recruitment, participation and retention of girls and women in umpiring.



## Research design

In each region, data collection was conducted through one focus group with female community umpires, one or two interviews with state league female umpires, and one interview with a State Umpiring Manager. While initially we intended to travel to the locations of participants to conduct interviews and focus groups, the Covid-19 pandemic eliminated this possibility. As such, all interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom.

### Participants

Community and State League umpires were recruited to this study through a direct email invitation from the lead researcher. Email addresses were obtained from data from the 2019 national umpiring database and invitations were sent between August 2020 and January 2021. Recruitment involved providing information about the project, and participants could respond if they wished to take part.

There were different response rates for participation in focus groups depending on the state- as can be seen in Table 2.

	NSW/ACT		Victoria		South Australia		Queensland	
	Emails sent	Final participants	Emails sent	Final participants	Emails sent	Final participants	Emails sent	Final participants
Focus groups	18	7	24	5	44	4	43	3*
State umpire interviews	2	2	2	2	4	2	2	1

**Table 2: Recruitment and response numbers by participant state. \*One community umpire took part in an interview rather than a focus group. The total number of community league participants from Queensland was four.**

## Participant selection and recruitment

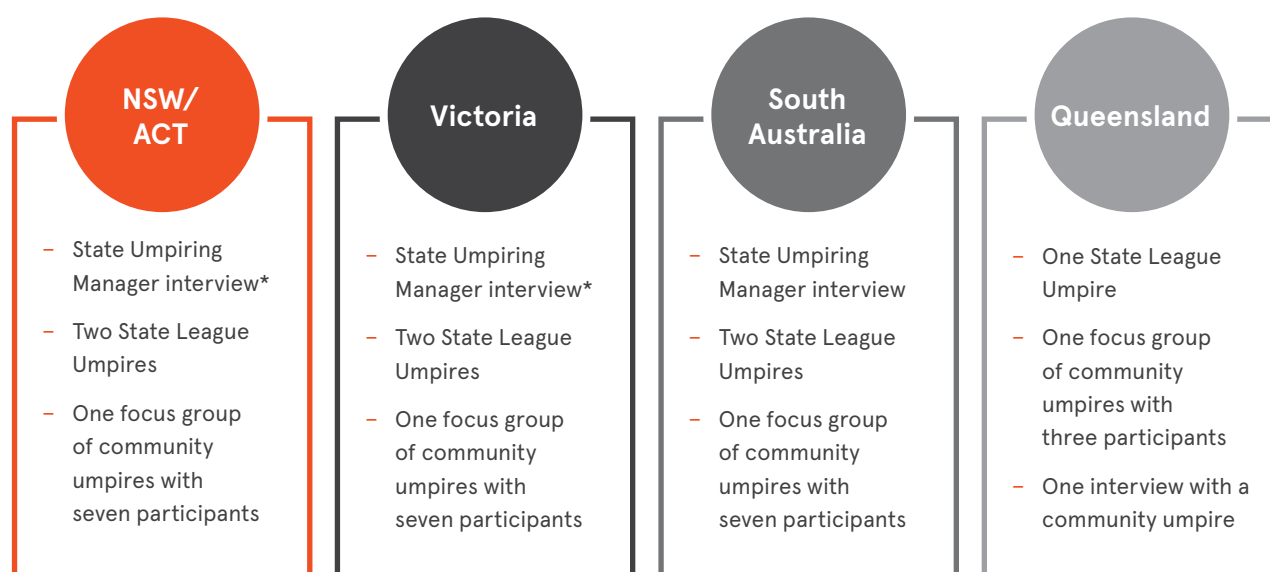
As can be seen from Table 2, some regions had greater response rates than others. On some occasions, focus group participants would initially say yes, and then unexpected events prevented them from attending the focus group. In this study we sustained data integrity through ensuring that all focus groups had between three and seven participants which meets recommendations for best practice. As this was not a quantitative or statistical study, the data from each states was not compared, and instead all of the data was analysed as one dataset.

In each focus group, goal, boundary and field umpires were represented. In this study of 27 umpires, participants were of diverse ages and ethnicities. While 26 participants identified as female, one identified as non-binary. We note that in a study like this, it is easy to work with binary gender categories, but

non-binary, transgender and gender diverse umpires also participate across the country, and any future initiatives should recognise this diversity.

In 2020, due to the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent industry reset, the AFL restructured its workforce. Through this restructure, certain State Umpiring Manager positions were made redundant. This impacted the selection criteria of this study, which was initially articulated as recruiting current State Umpiring Managers. From all four state/territory bodies, the most recent or current State Umpiring Manager was invited to participate. For NSW/ACT and Victoria, this meant participants that were no longer in the role. The Umpiring Development Manager- Queensland declined the invitation to participate in this study, citing that other areas and activities were prioritised.





**Figure 1: Research design and participation rates. \*The former State Umpiring Manager was interviewed.**

## Data analysis

In total, over 19 hours of audio recorded data from focus groups and interviews was collected, resulting in over 117,000 words of transcribed data. This represented an enormous amount of data to manage, and as such, the qualitative data software program

NVivo was utilised during analysis. Data was analysed using an inductive approach where themes emerged from the data themselves, along with a deductive approach which searched for the prevalence of expected themes within the qualitative data.

## Ethical considerations

At the conclusion of the interviews, a 'member check' was conducted, where interview transcripts were shared with participants who had elected to receive them, with an invitation to suggest amendments and additions should they feel it did not adequately or accurately reflect the discussion in which they participated. Though most umpire participants elected to take part in member checks, only one participant elected to make changes to their transcript- and this was to add greater detail to some of their reflections. Member checking was not possible for focus group participants.

A key ethical commitment in this study was to protect the identities of participants. Due to the comparatively small number of state league umpires, we have excluded their state identification in this report. While we recognise that some readers of this report may wish to know this information, this was an important consideration for taking part of many participants, especially as they felt that their contributions may impact their umpiring prospects and/ or careers.

Ethical approval for this project was obtained from the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. An ethics modification was granted from the University of Sydney to conduct research via Zoom. When conducting ethical research, an important consideration is the potential benefit of participating. Some of the umpires in this project reflected that they valued the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences, especially with the hope that it might create positive change. Holly, for example, said this at the conclusion of her interview:

"Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to talk and give you my story because although they won't know it's me, it's just also really good to be heard."

We acknowledge the commitment of all the umpires that took part in this research. In the following findings we have shared their words and experiences with the aim of allowing their stories and voices to be heard.

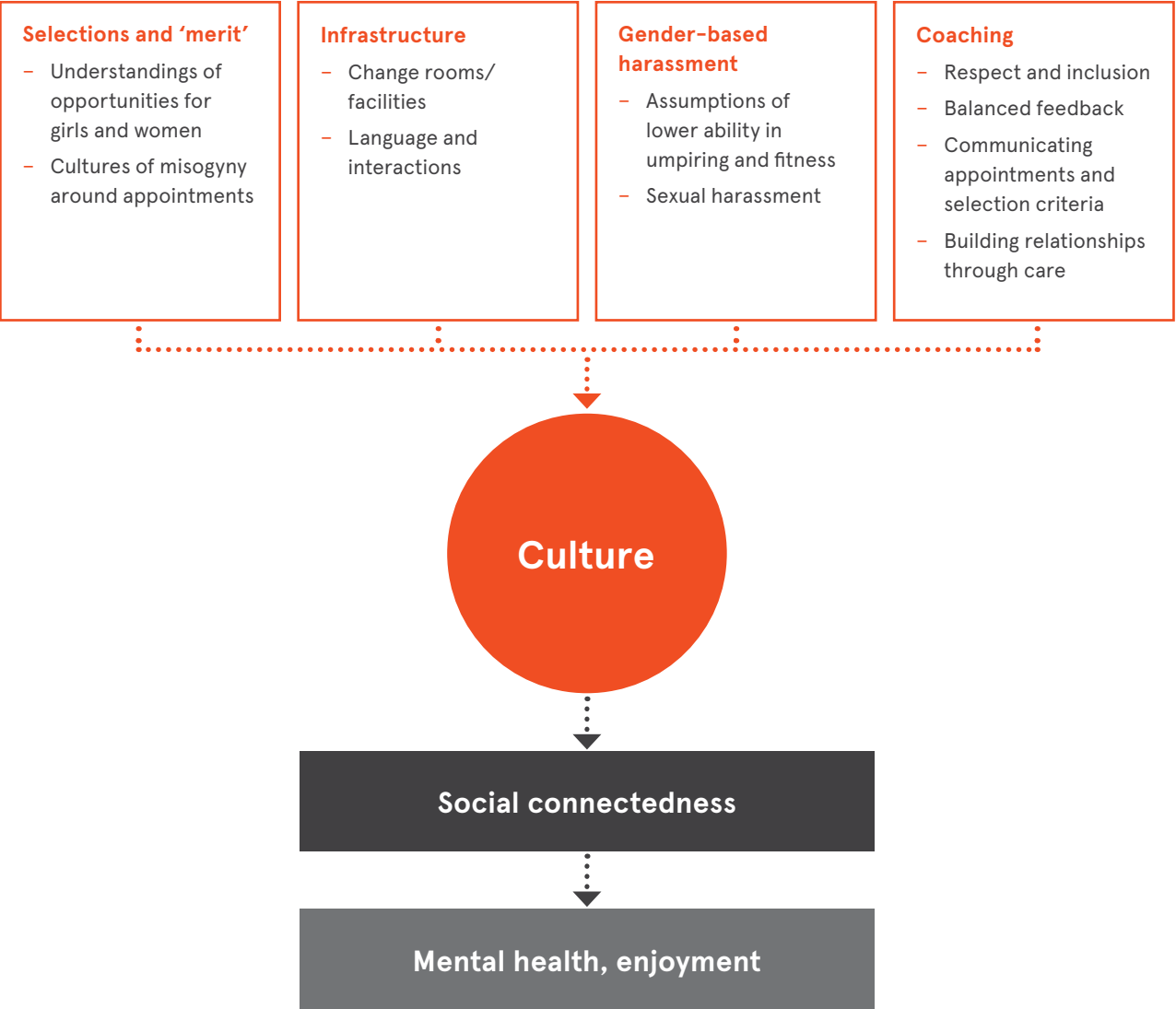
# Findings: Umpires

## Research Question 1:

### How do girls and women experience community and state league umpiring?

In this project, we determined that to understand retention and participation in umpiring, we needed to understand the reasons that girls and women became umpires, what sustained their motivation to continue umpiring, and what diminished or eliminated this motivation. Data collection questions in interviews and focus groups ran parallel with these themes. We asked umpires about how they began umpiring, the benefits that they received from participating, and the things that were challenging for them or that they wish they could change. Some of these questions related specifically to their gender, but most of the time we asked these questions openly.

While most of the umpires in this study were still umpiring, many had experienced disruptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic, where football seasons had been shortened or cancelled. For some umpires, this distance or disruption had provided them with an opportunity to think more about what umpiring meant to them, and what might play a role in their decision to return to their group post-pandemic, or not.



Although we initially planned to answer this research question highlighting the positives or benefits of umpiring, the negatives or challenges, and the possible solutions raised by the participants, this conceptualisation did not adequately reference the complexity of umpiring for girls and women. Data analysis instead indicated that while there was a diversity of experiences, these could be broadly classified in four different themes: Umpire selections and 'merit'; Infrastructure; Gender-based Harassment and Coaching. These four themes were drawn from the accounts of all participants, and they directly inform their experiences of umpiring. While these themes are not wholly discrete in that there are certain ways that they overlap and interchange, in this analysis we utilise them to give a sense of the extant challenges for umpires.

While the experiences within these themes were complex, each participant's experiences in umpiring and subsequent enjoyment was influenced by the social and material exchanges within and between these themes. Together, they formed the overall culture of umpiring that we report on. We utilise this word 'culture' here in recognition that while we obtained detailed data about individual experiences, these experiences were not unique. Problematic or challenging moments were not constrained to individuals or community groups in nature nor extent, nor were they uniquely experienced within particular states. It was therefore clear that borders or state management did not make a significant difference to the experiences of participants. The overall culture within football and specifically within umpiring determined their experiences as a collective. While they were passionate about and dedicated to umpiring, they often experienced disrespect, marginalisation, exclusion or hostility that related to their gender in subtle or overt ways. As such, this broad and complex culture directly impacted their social connectedness—their relationships with umpires, coaches, players, clubs and spectators.

In this section, we focus solely on the voices of the participant umpires, while in the following section we review the responses and data from State Umpiring Managers. We detail the individual and collective stories that participants shared with these four themes as guiding conceptual architecture, and in doing so, draw attention to the changes required to improve the conditions that girls and women currently encounter in umpiring.



Image credit: PollyannaR

# 1. Umpire selections and ‘merit’

This theme was a dominant production for all umpires. While on the surface this theme may seem to represent a relatively simple element of umpiring, for girls and women the fundamental experiences of appointments to games took on entirely different meanings.

Umpiring in Australian Football operates with the understanding that the more experienced and skilful the umpire, the more senior the game that they will be umpiring. For umpires starting out, this manifests in umpiring junior games. As their experience, confidence and skill level increases they will then be appointed or selected to umpire higher grades and/ or finals. As such, the general understanding of appointments is that umpiring works under merit-based selections. While the understanding of merit-based appointments may seem straight forward, the process is not simply applied in practice. A significant complication around selections is the construction of gender, and the ways that women experience appointments and talk around

these appointments differently to men. While in this report we do not have the capacity to disentangle why or how this cultural experience has come about, the data indicated that there were distinct differences of umpiring selections and constructs of merit between women and men. This predominantly took the form of the bulk of umpires, men, being certain of their identity and ability as umpires, and overtly expressing that women were ‘taking’ appointments from them. These ideas were circulated freely in groups, both in the presence of women and without them present, and talk like this took place universally, regardless of level or region.

## Participant understandings of opportunities for women

Most participants understood that men dominated umpiring groups at all levels, and that the AFL, State Bodies- and Umpiring Clubs were undertaking some efforts to recruit women. Most umpires genuinely reflected that positive cultural change would occur when more women were in umpiring, and that the presence of other girls and women would help them to share some of their concerns and build a stronger, more inclusive community of umpires. They also reflected that in some cases, the efforts of groups and state management to recruit women sometimes resulted in positive opportunities and pathways for them to progress. This was particularly the case for community umpires:

“Definitely had a lot more opportunities. I’ve been picked out a lot more to do photoshoots or umpire rep games, not necessarily rep games because I’m a girl, but I feel like I’ve been – The interleague girls’ games I’ve got to do more, whereas the boys don’t get picked for that. They want umpire girls – Girls on umpire, girls are playing football. So, I think opportunities, I wouldn’t have half the things I’ve had through umpiring if I wasn’t a girl. That’s just that.”

Deepa, community umpire, VIC

“I also think that because there’s a lot less girls, there’s also a lot more opportunities for us. [We’ve had a special] umpiring session and you got more one-on-one training I think and I think to some extent, part of it is harder but there’s also an element that is a bit easier because there’s so much less of us and they still need girls umpiring.”

Caitlin, community umpire, NSW/ACT



While these accounts indicate positive attitudes around affirmative action around recruitment and pathways for women in umpiring, other umpires indicated that the benefits were less tangible.

“... especially when I joined and even now, but especially when I started, those first three years, they were really pushing for female umpires and to get them recognised... I got to do a photo shoot and things for [the local league] group, just like with captains and the players and stuff like that. And I do have a feeling that sometimes it’s because I’m a female and got the long hair and it’s quite obvious, but it still meant that I got to do that kind of thing... But otherwise, I don’t really think it gives that many extra benefits comparatively. Like apart from that you may get recognised more I don’t feel like it really gives me an edge in any other kind of way.”

Claire, state league umpire

## Cultures of misogyny around appointments

Despite this diversity in reporting about the benefits of affirmative action on female umpiring inclusion, there was consistency in the reporting about significant tensions around messages around these efforts in umpiring groups. All state league umpires at some points spoke about the attitudes and comments that they faced from other umpires and coaches about their selections. They reflected that each time they or other women were appointed to games, public judgements were undertaken by other umpires as to whether or not they deserved it, and most commonly these judgements resulted in disparaging comments about their ability and ‘quotas’.

“I have had someone say, ‘You got this because you’re a girl’ sort of thing. So just looking at that, it’s almost like that reverse sexism in a way of just like, ‘Well, they wanted to make it like – give you this opportunity so it looks better for them’ or whatever it was. So in terms of sometimes I’m quite concerned about getting opportunities that people are going to think it’s because I’m a girl.”

Claire, state league umpire

Others reported that there were no tangible benefits for them, and that their opportunities were the same as any other umpire, or sometimes worse.

“I feel like my opportunity has been pretty equal. I don’t want to sound cocky, but in my immediate group of umpires, I would say I’m definitely in the top half of the umpires and so, I get a good amount of games a week, and I get the age groups – And I feel like I’ve progressed a lot faster than other people have, but I don’t really think it was because I was a girl.”

Mikayla, community umpire, VIC

“...we just were so new to it and they always say, ‘it’s so good to have a girl here’, that’s what they would say but then they didn’t treat us like we were royalty, it was treated like we were the peasants at the back.”

Holly, state league umpire

“In a perceived male dominated field that due to your gender you are considered not good enough or do not have the right to be there because it’s perceived that only the opposite sex is good enough to do the job, therefore it’s the perception of you need to work twice as hard and be twice as good to prove that you deserve a seat at the table.”

Emily, state league umpire

“I guess there’s a stigma that females just get the games, or they get the opportunities. So [you need] to prove to them that you’re able to work hard and to do the job properly, and they can see that you’re a good umpire rather than just there for – just to fill numbers or to fill a quota of females, that’s how I feel it works in the group dynamics.”

Ella, state league umpire

For umpires of colour, this occurred not only about their gender, but also about their race:

“...people saying, ‘Oh, you only get this because you’re this.’ I’ve definitely heard that hundreds of times, ‘You only get this because you’re a girl,’ or ‘Because you’re black.’ So, I’ve definitely heard them thousands of times, but all I can see is that there’s never been a time I got something because I was either black or a woman, it’s only because I had the opportunity, the exact same as everyone else.”

**Fatima, community umpire, VIC**

However, even for state league umpires who had been umpiring for several years at high levels, critique was a common experience. Umpires were likely to hear comments regarding both their own appointments, and those of other women from their group or others, including those appointed at a higher level.

“I vividly remember hearing that [an umpire had been elevated to the AFL only because she was a woman], to this day they still say they are better umpires than her.”

**Emily, state league umpire**

The perpetuation and dominance of talk around women not deserving appointments was common and extreme across all states. The intensity of the talk around this, and the resulting culture, meant that some women expressed their own forms of misogyny around women obtaining appointments. Attitudes that assumed women to be generally inferior umpires and less deserving of appointments than men were unveiled in one interview in this study, for example.

“I think this really all started around the same time that AFLW did when the AFL was really pushing to get women into sport... there wasn’t much consideration for putting people that had the skills and the experience over people that were female. So even two of my best friends from football got heavily screwed over because they basically didn’t have vaginas... It’s not just women but a lot of guys have left umpiring as well because they

know they can’t get anywhere because they’re always going to be picked second to women. The equality is not really there because they’re still picking women over people that are more qualified and more experienced to be doing that particular level.”

**Amelia, state league umpire**

This account showed that misogyny about merit-based appointments were not restricted only to men. These attitudes were cultural, informed by language and interactions over time, and exceptionally problematic to the chances and opportunities for women when deployed. Coaches and umpires were both guilty of publicly enacting the ideas that women do not deserve their appointments, and that some kind of reverse sexism is operating when they are appointed to prestigious matches. This has deep, chronic effects on girls and women in umpiring. Data in this research indicated that they experienced significant stress and pressure about appointments and that in turn they felt disconnected from their umpiring group due to open and masked hostility from peers and coaches. As Emily and Ella have above, many spoke about the intense pressure to ‘prove themselves’. While this could be interpreted as a motivating factor, potentially generating additional training and efforts to be better umpires, we also must recognise that in this current cultural environment, no amount of training would be possible for this outcome to occur. Even state league, senior umpires were continuously doubted regarding their commitments, abilities and endurance for umpiring, interactions not experienced by male umpires.

For one umpire, the resultant feeling of ‘imposter syndrome’ was so strong, and the group asserted that men were a more worthy appointment than her on so many occasions, that she publicly apologised to those in her umpiring group following a particular appointment.

“I was really surprised – When [my coach] asked me to come early to training, he wanted to talk to me about something, I thought he was going to tell me, ‘Look, you’re not really going to get on the list this –’ I was just – And he was like, ‘Oh, we want to give you a run for

a practice match.’ And I was just like, ‘Oh, this has put me in a really hard spot. This is a big deal, and I don’t think I deserve it. And I don’t know what everyone’s going to say, and I just want to nip it in the bud, people gossiping and whatever.’

So at the pub after training, I said that and – I just was really honest. I said, ‘It’s really hard for me. I know where I’m at with my umpiring, I know everyone wants to do some games, so I feel bad. But I’ve been selected’ ... one of the umpires is great. He was just like, ‘Don’t apologise. You deserve –’ Because the thing is that we just come from different worlds. None of them would even think about apologising. They’re just like, ‘It’s a great opportunity, just grab it.’ They don’t – And [he] did say, ‘Maha, there’s been thousands of years of gender inequality that you’re having to deal –’

He literally gave that speech in front of all the umpires. He was just like, ‘Of all of the years of gender inequality that you have to deal with, you don’t need to apologise for doing one game. You deserve it,’ blah, blah, blah. But then, for everybody else – I don’t know. And one umpire made a comment to me, they weren’t supportive, and that really threw me. And I think it’s because they are a better umpire than me, so they felt – When I say they weren’t supportive, what they said is, ‘People are not happy about this. You should know that this is – People are not happy that you’re doing it.’”

**Maha, state league umpire**

While this account is long, we have included it here in its entirety because it shows the level of psychological and social burden women umpires carry around appointments- work and stress that men umpires do not experience. Maha indicated that she felt she was going to be dropped from the list, where instead she was given an opportunity for a practice match at another level. Immediately she doubted her ability and potential, and questioned the reasons behind her appointment, despite being a senior state league umpire for



several seasons. Her level of self-doubt was so intense that she felt the need to publicly apologise to her colleagues in the umpiring group. During and following this apology she experienced two reactions- one supportive that reassured her that she deserved the appointment, and another that reinforced her existing anxieties about group judgement- asserting ‘people are not happy’ about the appointment. Later in the interview, Maha further articulated that she wondered whether the umpire that did approach her with this attitude was ‘sent to’ her by other umpires, which led her to ruminate on the group’s overall level of support for her or celebration of her achievements.

Interactions and group cultures like these actively erode the performance, enjoyment, and mental health of umpires by creating internalised questions about their ability, effort level and belonging in the group. Almost all the umpires in this research described the continual doubt that conversations and moments like these created, and how they also made the umpires consider leaving umpiring. Maha and other participants reported that these exchanges and the overall environment that actively disrespected and invalidated women in umpiring eroded their capacity to continue umpiring.

“I wasn’t imagining it. There’s backlash about me doing it, and I was happy when the season got cancelled [due to COVID] and I didn’t have to do one of those games. It was stressing me out... I didn’t do the game, and I was relieved. And then, I was like, ‘Maybe I just don’t come back.’ It’s really stressful because you work yourself up as well, to do the game. If you make any mistakes, then it just all compounds all of your – like, ‘Yeah, right. I shouldn’t –’ And you just start spiralling.”

**Maha, state league umpire**

While these circumstances are hostile for women umpires, there are certain aspects that make a positive difference. One of the main factors that makes positive difference in this space is the personal affirmations made by the coach, and the ways that coaches actively shape group cultures. While we expand on this somewhat in the section about coaching, here briefly we wish to draw attention to the significant things that can begin to disrupt the overwhelming messages about women's (lack of) legitimacy in umpiring. In Maha's case, she reflected that the thing that made the greatest difference was:

"... knowing that your coaches have your back, having your coach explicitly tell you that they support you, believe in your abilities, and that they will promote and create an environment where other umpires don't feel emboldened to question your pathway and what's happened... That really helped, just to know he had my back. And just that thing of just hearing again, 'We wouldn't put you in these positions if it wasn't for your ability. We believe in your ability.'"

**Maha, state league umpire**

Coaches that understood the capabilities of umpires and the requirements of games, and then asserted confidence in appointments of women began to undo the deep doubt that made many umpires reconsider their place in umpiring. Sometimes these were rare or singular voices in the crowd, but they were always impactful. This was also relevant for community umpires:

"it's good to know that your coach trusts you and can rely on you because let's say someone can't make a game and it's an hour away and he's like, 'Can you please come? You're the person I can call on because it's an older age group, I knew you'd be able to do it, I know that you can do it.' It might not be an age group that I usually do but to know that he has trust in me and that I can do it is definitely an important thing. It just makes you feel like, 'All right, there's trust that I can umpire.'"

**Taylah, community umpire, NSW/ACT**

The trust and backing of a senior umpire and coach was unmatched in terms of ensuring umpires felt confident enough to accept appointments, to perform at their best during games, and to maintain connection to the group despite sometimes significant push back from other umpires. In addition, the cultural work of some coaches in groups reframed the presence of women:

**Vic:** Other umpires have said things like, "She only got that selection because she's a girl," or something like that. Have you guys ever experienced any language like that?

**Deepa:** Nope.

**Shania:** No, nope.

**Mikayla:** It's very – We want other females to umpire, we want to extend it to that, and so when we do – When we have events like that to promote umpiring or to get people to join, it's always a female on the front. That's who we're trying to attract now, not just umpires in general. So, older and younger, I find that it's like it's something rare, umpiring with a female, but not rare as in bad, rare as in treasure kind of thing, and so they're very like, excited almost, that they get to have that opportunity. I've never ever been, I guess, discriminated from someone within my Umpiring Club.

This data from the community umpires in Victoria demonstrates the benefits of putting women 'to the front'. In her group, Mikayla had the sense that the AFL was framing that umpiring with women is like 'treasure'. While there was a distinct difference between community level umpires and state league umpires in their encounters of misogyny around appointments, this data does indicate that there is the potential for coaches and administrators to successfully present women as valued umpires.



## 2. Infrastructure

This theme referred to the material objects or environments that meaningfully featured in participants’ experiences. This ranged from change rooms and facilities to forms and administration.

It also took on less tangibly material forms such as the language used in official or unofficial communications, and human forms in personnel. This collection of objects, people and outputs represented tangible features of umpiring, often influenced by the managing local, state or national managing body. In all cases, data in this section refers to actions, spaces or materials that umpires were required to navigate to participate in umpiring.

### Change rooms and facilities

Change rooms at training and match day venues featured in all focus groups and in four of the state league umpire interviews. Change rooms are significant in this study because they are sites where gender directly impacts on interactions with other umpires. For some, change rooms were a particularly negative part of their umpiring, and a site that represented their difference and exclusion from the group purely in relation to their gender. This often manifested when men changed in front of them:

- Vic: Has there been any times where you’ve felt aware of being a female umpire, rather than just being an umpire, maybe in the group or anything like that?
- Shania: Definitely in the change rooms.
- Fatima: Oh, yeah. It – That place sucks.
- Vic: Change rooms suck?
- Shania: Definitely when you’re umpiring with older goal umpires.
- Fatima: Yes, that’s what I mean.
- Vic: Did you say older goal umpires?
- Fatima: Yes, you’re getting undressed with grandpa. That’s not normal anywhere else.
- Shania: Yep, yep, that’s the big one.
- ...
- Fatima: The worst part is with people who don’t wait for you to leave or sort yourself out. Old guys or old umpires just strip and they don’t give a shit. That’s kind of – That’s so – I find that so strange for people of their

- mannerism to do something like that. They always have such – They’re so polite, so it’s just like, “How is that possible?”
- Vic: Getting naked.
- Fatima: Yeah, then you take your clothes off in front of me? Anyway, yeah, that’s the worst bit.
- Vic: That’s the worst bit?
- Fatima: Hands down the worst bit.
- Deepa: Yeah, easily.

#### VIC focus group

To avoid these situations, some participants spoke about their strategies.

“... mine have all been really respectful. Maybe it is because I am younger, I mean I only just turned 18, so I’m still a kid basically. They kind of wait till I leave before they get unchanged most of the time. I kind of be quick so that they can do that.”

#### Rose, SA focus group

Others mentioned that their groups had either formal or informal protocols about change rooms, and that these affected their experience in complex ways. Holly, for example, felt supported by her State League’s directives around changing in front of other umpires.

“they’re so strict with certain aspects... it’s like you can’t get changed in front of a girl because that’s not appropriate, you must change in the toilets, you must do this or that which is so good for us, we are so supported. You can’t have your shirt off, it’s not appropriate.”

**Holly, state league umpire**

For the community umpires in Victoria, their lack of directives about change rooms resulted in uncertainty about protocol, and discomfort about what to do and when:

- Mikayla: I definitely feel like it’s like a lot of our change rooms there’s always a single stall shower, a single stall toilet and then the changeroom, and all the guys will be like – strip then and there, and then you’re like, “Oh, I don’t know if I should. Is that okay? Or should I go into the bathroom and do it?” Yeah, it’s all a bit awkward.
- Deepa: I just ask them to leave. I just say, “Can you please step out?” They’re more than willing. They’re nice about it, they step outside for five minutes.
- Shania: Yeah, and a lot of them suggest it first. A lot of them are like, “Oh, we’ll get out so you can change.” A lot of the time I’m just like, “Nah, nah, it’s fine. I’ll just – ” I actually, most of the time, feel more comfortable going to the bathrooms...
- Fatima: Yeah, me too. Me too. Just don’t want to cause a stir, just do it, that’s it. Leave.
- Mikayla: I don’t want to delay them getting ready because it takes them 10 extra minutes.

#### **VIC focus group**

We can see here, for example, that for Mikayla was conflicted about what she should do in change rooms. She saw the men that she umpired with simply get changed in the larger change room, not in the stalls provided. As a woman, she was not sure if these customs applied to her, or if she was comfortable doing so, and felt ‘awkward’ in change rooms as a

result. Deepa navigated this uncertainty by asking men to leave while she changed, and mentioned that umpires were ‘willing’ and ‘nice’ about doing this, but not all girls and women felt comfortable taking initiative in this way, and again separating themselves from the group. Fatima and Mikayla mentioned that they don’t want to ‘cause a stir’ or ‘delay them getting ready’, so they had to come up with other strategies. Claire, a state league umpire, also spoke about the other issues of gender separation in change rooms. She mentioned the negative outcomes of when women or men were ‘pushed out’ of rooms:

“I personally am very, very fine all being in the same – like one change room sort of thing, because when they try and push you out, it’s – you know, I know that they mean well, but you’re like, ‘Well, no, I’m an umpire. I just want to be with everyone else.’ And I think there are lots of similar experiences of that with the others when they try to push you out to different rooms, it’s just like the one girl or the two girls there and we can all just relate to those very little things that aren’t necessarily like people going, ‘You’re a girl, get out of here.’”

Claire went on to say that while initiatives to give women their own change rooms were well intended, they failed to make girls and women feel included in umpiring communities, and instead made them feel excluded and as a minority.

“you speak to someone else and they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s actually quite a nice thing that they’re doing to check that you’re okay, you know, putting you in a different change room so you’re not uncomfortable.’ Well, yes, but no, because I want to be part of the group who’d just be umpires not the female umpire in the corner.”

This reflection speaks to the valuing of connectedness between umpires, and that crucial and meaningful conversations and interactions occur in change room environments. As such, any initiative to improve cultures of change rooms should ideally support umpires to co-habitat gathering areas together before and after games, but also move towards facilities that

enable privacy for changing and showering away from the group. A successful example of this came from Charlotte, another state league umpire:

“...it always depends on what stadium, what ground we’re at, but most of the time there’s always at least one toilet and people just take turns getting changed really. That’s pretty much what it is, and then we all sit and chat about the game and just things in general and stuff.”

Contexts and protocols like these ensure that no umpires feel segregated, excluded or singled out, and allow interactions about the game and a building of community through connection. Importantly, they also erase the cognitive work and stress that minority umpires encounter before games and training. Some of this stress might be compounded by well-meaning coaches who are trying to do the right thing, but sometimes not listening to the umpires wants or needs. This was the case for Morgan, a nonbinary umpire, who was often offered a separate change room because of their gender.

“...my coach was like, ‘I’ve gone through a lot of trouble to try and get this extra change room organised, and I couldn’t organise it. I’m so sorry.’ And I’m like, ‘I’ve told you five times, I don’t care. I would rather just be in the same change room, because all I’m doing is changing a shirt essentially.’”

This data shows the importance of not attempting to segregate umpires when they do not ask for that particular outcome, and that for some umpires, change rooms are not an issue at all when it comes to changing, but culturally they still represent tensions and difficulties. The data also shows that segregation can be additionally stressful for umpires of all genders because they feel that they are causing ‘trouble’ to coaches or their umpiring groups by requiring different facilities. For many umpires, they were conscious of the burden of their presence on other (male) umpires—that their readiness would be delayed, that they would need to leave the room, or that they would feel put out for any other reason relating to the presence of girls and women in the change room area.

All in all, change rooms represented a symbolic place for the umpires where they felt included or, more commonly, excluded due to their gender.

“It just seems to be particularly change rooms, the old stance of it’s a boy’s club and we’ll go and shower and walk out in a towel. That’s not acceptable under any circumstances, whether it’s young boys or young girls, it’s not okay. But trying to get it through to them that’s not okay and having to usher women or girls out of rooms all the time or kids out of rooms all the time because you’ve just walked out in a towel. Trying to change that has been a big issue and I’ve been involved for seven years and it’s still an ongoing issue now.”

Laura, SA focus group

For the girls and women in the Victorian focus group they all agreed that change rooms were the worst part of umpiring.

- Vic: So, would you say that the changerooms is the biggest negative about being a female umpire?
- Deepa: Yep.
- Fatima: Yeah, of course. Especially because like, yes, we understand that we’re trying to have diversity men and women and everywhere, but at the end of the day people still want their privacy to get changed, it’s pretty ridiculous that you have everyone in the same room. And not even just everyone, it’s everyone, all ages, all genders, everyone.
- Mikayla: Absolutely everyone.
- Fatima: Just to strip, so a bit. Yeah, literally everyone.
- Vic: And multiple people, so many people.
- Fatima: It’s just not what you want.
- Deepa: Yeah, it’s the only time I feel like I don’t like umpiring.

VIC focus group

This collection of data shows that change rooms can produce some of the most negative experiences for girls and women in umpiring. There is significant work to be done to ensure that change rooms do not add additional burdens to these umpires, and arguably any

umpire that experiences discomfort around changing or showering at grounds or training. By establishing clear protocols around all umpires changing (regardless of gender), and improving infrastructure over time, these outcomes may be improved.

## Language and interactions

The data around language and interactions encompassed a range of participant responses about how umpiring was administered by managing bodies and key personnel. This included communications with key staff, and forms and administration. The depth of some participant accounts indicate the need for change in the everyday operations of umpiring bodies, and the effects that existing, often unconsidered procedures and interactions produce for umpires.

Language is a key factor in culture building. While those in the majority group may feel that certain words hold little or no power, those on the margins may experience these differently. In umpiring, this is particularly relevant for girls and women. For many participants they were the only girl or woman in their umpiring group, and at times key interactions diminished their presence even further. This was the case for Maha, a state league umpire, on two key occasions in her previous season.

Following her experience with selections (detailed in Finding 1: Umpire selections and 'merit'), Maha decided that it might be helpful for her wellbeing and for her umpiring performance to seek guidance from a sports psychologist. She had done this in previous seasons and found it helpful, and was considering consulting her group's psychologist. However, one simple word in a contact email from the psychologist eliminated her hope in this opportunity. She showed the email to me during our interview:

Maha: I thought, "Oh, the [league] has a sports shrink for us." ... So during COVID lockdown, I was like, "Actually, maybe I'll talk out all of the things that have been happening with the [league] sports shrink. I'd like to get his perspective," whatever, whatever.

Anyway, the email is during off-season. This is the email, literally, from the sports shrink. And I'm sharing my screen. This is the cut-and-paste from an email I sent him. "Gents." See this middle here?

Yes.

Vic:

Maha:

From the sport shrink to all of us on the list. Look at this. See that? Do you know what I mean? So it's just like – That's the email from the sport shrink. When I'm thinking, "Oh, okay. Maybe I should talk to them about all this," it's like, "Gents." And I'm like, "That's not a safe person for me to talk to about some of the gender-related stuff that I was thinking about, why I might not come back next season." It's just a sticker, I get it. And I get there's only a few on the list and that yes, 99% are gents. But that doesn't give me confidence that someone – No.

In this example we can see the impact that the use of a non-inclusive language can have. While she was grappling with a number of issues related to umpiring, and specifically her place as a woman in umpiring, Maha thought about seeking help from official support personnel, but the greeting in an email of 'Gents' stopped her considering this option, and made her feel even more isolated from the group and potential support.

This was not the only experience that Maha had in her league about the erasure of female umpires. During her registration for the season, she was asked to fill out a contract. This form had been edited to exclude any titles except for 'Mr', thereby asserting that the only umpires that could register as umpires in that group were men.



Image credit: SDJFUA



“The only box I was able to tick was ‘Mr.’ on this fillable form... And I was humiliated, I couldn’t – It wouldn’t let me advance through the rest of the contract. It’s like, ‘You haven’t completed.’ And I’m trying to tick ‘Ms.’, and it’s just like – Men sail through their lives just being ‘Mr.’ We have to define ourselves either as a rampant feminist ‘Miz’, or ‘Miss’, unmarried, left on the shelf, or belonging to - ‘Mrs. John Smith’. I couldn’t even have that, I had to be a ‘Mr.’ So I just had to tick ‘Mr.’ and continue the form. So it’s just those little things that I feel like are actually easy fixes, if they got a consultant to actually just go through systems and processes that have literally just been set up for men. So those things don’t help.”

As Maha identifies, processes like these erase and subsequently humiliate girls and women in umpiring. They feel as if the systems and procedures have “just been set up for men”, and as an effect as if they have no place in umpiring at all. In Maha’s words, “these are actually easy fixes”.

While these accounts may seem only relevant to two specific situations, we have included them in this report as illustrations of the simple, seemingly minor yet intensely damaging moments that language and interactions can have on umpires- especially those in minorities. It’s crucial that leagues begin to consider how interactional language (written and verbal) can produce feelings of humiliation, erasure and marginalisation for umpires. These moments accumulate over time and can diminish the confidence and enjoyment of girls and women in umpiring, introducing and increasing the idea that they are not welcome or acknowledged in their leagues.

### 3. Gender-based harassment

This theme presents crucial, critical incidents that affected the experiences of the participants to different extents.

In all cases, data in this theme indicated moments that were unique to girls and women, and as such they emphasise the ways that sexism and misogyny manifest in football environments – during training, games, or outside of these environments. For some of the umpires these incidents made it clear that they did not and would not be accepted as equals by their peers in umpiring. These events often went unreported due to their common practice, as well as the commentary

and contexts around them (often emerging from things like infrastructure and ‘merit’ selections). Gendered harassment for many umpires was something that became accepted and expected, part and parcel of the game. For others, it represented the end of their umpiring pathways and careers. There were two major themes of this harassment across all umpires: ability (including fitness and umpiring skills) and sexuality.

#### Gendered harassment relating to ability

Participants experienced interactions with other umpires, umpire coaches, player coaches and players that subtly or overtly questioned their ability as umpires due to their gender. Almost all participants indicated that they had experiences of having their umpiring questioned without any basis except for their appearance. This took a number of different forms. For Taylah (NSW Focus Group), this was a persistent experience:

“I’ve had a lot of people saying, ‘You can’t umpire because you’re a girl, you don’t know it as well, you’re not going to be loud enough, you’re not going to be able to dictate all these little boys.’”

This included at one game, where a player coach approached her during a match:

“I was umpiring one time and I had this really rude coach who ended up coming on the field and saying, ‘I don’t want you to umpire, you’re a female, you can’t umpire. I want these boys to be umpired by a proper umpire,’ and all this kind of stuff and these were under-11 boys and getting so angry and he was like, ‘You can’t umpire, you’re a girl.’ My mum is standing there, going, ‘You can’t be saying this to my daughter.’

It was horrible and it ended up - he started saying really sexist things to me and so, it

ended up with me having to red card him and send him off and he couldn’t coach for the rest of the season but it’s just rude that he thought he had the authority to do that over me just because I was a female. I can guarantee you, he wouldn’t have done that if it was a guy.”

This attitude and its overt display on the ground was not limited to coaches, but also extended to players. Paige picked up on this:

“...if my dad takes me umpiring, most of the coaches will know him and they know to not saying anything to me because they don’t want to get on my dad’s bad side but one time when my mum took me to umpiring, I was umpiring with another female umpire and we were actually pretty good... but then these coaches, they were losing pretty badly and they were - everything was our fault.

Even though it wasn’t us, it was the players, but everything was our fault and then as we were walking off, they all started abusing us and saying, ‘It’s all because you’re women,’ and all of that. So, we ended up putting an incident report in and they got banned from coaching for three matches but I was just shocked because I wasn’t expecting it.”

Paige, NSW/ACT focus group

In this account, we can see that even Paige experiences legitimacy and protection in umpiring from the presence of a male figure, her dad. In this example, she felt that the reaction of the players was exacerbated by the presence of two female umpires and her mum.

For Julia, another community umpire from NSW/ACT, she felt that the persistence of moments like these made her significantly question her involvement in umpiring, and whether she could maintain her role as an umpire:

“I think you get a bit sick of it. By ‘sick of it’, I mean like one, not seeing a clear pathway, having either gendered comments directed towards you and the chat back from general games being an umpire and having that - what Alex was saying before, just generally being looked down upon as an umpire and you just wonder why you’re doing it and then you have to figure it out yourself whether that’s something that you’re willing to either be a spectator and just enjoy the game of footy or be a part of it. I don’t know if the other girls feel similarly but I think you just get sick of it a bit.”

Julia, NSW/ACT focus group

While these direct comments had an impact on umpires, other forms of language at games also indicated that girls and women were seen as inferior or less ‘serious’ umpires, such as infantilising or feminising language.

“I did a skills Schools Cup last year and I remember walking off and like you would shake hands. Well actually we didn’t shake hands because Covid, but walked past and I had a couple that were like ‘Oh, thanks sweetheart.’ And I’m like yeah, okay, that’s not really necessary mate, I’m just, like, another person... It’s just like, well first of all it’s really awkward, it’s like, ‘Why? Why did you say that?’ But I guess it makes you feel like - because when you’re out there you’re an umpire, you’re part of the game you’re officiating and whatever. When they make

comments like that it kind of puts you out of what - like it puts you out of being an umpire, like they’re treating you differently and I’m like, it’s just so odd.”

Mia, QLD focus group

This data has so far focused on games including spectators, club players and player coaches- but this is not to say that umpiring groups were free of these attitudes. As the previous themes indicated, girls and women also experienced language and interactions around their (lack of) ability and welcome within their training and umpiring teams, including from coaches. For Ella, a state league umpire, this manifested around fitness expectations, and that these were lower for women compared to men. Following a running session, her coach (described by Ella as ‘old-school’) determined that the group hadn’t run hard enough, so devised a beep-test style endurance activity for the umpires. Ella, who was a strong runner, persisted:

- Ella: And we’re all dead, and he made us run on his whistle. So we had to make it by his whistle, run on a beep test sort of thing. And people were really struggling, but I don’t know, I just was running normally and I was dead. And then, people dropped out because they couldn’t do it, people were throwing up, people were passing out. It was awful. And then, I was one of the last ones left with someone else, and he stopped it and he just -And my dad was like, “Ella, just run. Just go. You need to run,” and I was so confused. [I left to do a cool down lap around the oval] And he got the group together, and -
- Vic: So the rest of the group were boys, right? The rest of the group were guys?
- Ella: There were some girls in there too, but mainly guys, State League guys, as well. And he was just like, “You should be working harder. You should be beating Ella,” like - And he was very confused as to why I was beating the rest of the guys.

In this example, the coach held Ella's gender up as a yardstick for the other male umpires to beat. When she was about to show that she was the best runner in the group, the coach's recognition of these gendered categories was disrupted to the extent that he stopped the activity and expelled her from the group, then berated the other umpires, suggesting that they 'should be beating' her, simply because she was female. This was one of the clearest examples that this study found of coach expectations around gender, and the stereotypes that all girls and women would be less able (especially around fitness) than all boys and men. While this incident is particularly illustrative of this problem, there was a promising and compelling conclusion to it, where other umpires in Ella's group recognised the injustice and falsehoods in the coach's presumptions, and stood together in rejecting these.

Ella: ...there was a few of the senior guys in that group that were like, "Hey, that's not okay. We're going to create a group and we're going to go and let him know. And we got a few of the coaches involved and just let him know and take it further". I don't know what the outcome of that was, but he was fired the next year.

Vic: That was just so amazing, that all of the umpires recognised how bad that was, that behaviour, and came through for you, as well.

Ella: Yeah. And I guess from that point on, having the leadership group there, and also for the guys to actually realise, "Hey, that sort of gender stuff is not okay." And I do believe that from that point on, we had some more females come through the group, a few boundaries and stuff. And a lot of them were really supportive, and they were probably more supportive than what they were, previously.

It was clear from this positive intervention of male umpires that Ella and other girls and women in umpiring felt more supported and less excluded from the group. Moments like these produce positive impacts and show the difference that support from umpire colleagues can make to individuals and group cultures.

Aspersions about ability that resulted in gendered grouping were not only articulate by Ella. Holly, another state league umpire also experienced this when she moved to state league training:

"... from the second we walked in it was like girls on this side, boys on this side, 'you'll never be as good as a boy, you're constantly going to lose to them in a race. No matter what, the girl's always going to be at the back.'

It just was so, so hard to go to training every week and there was two trainings a week. But on top of that you were training every single day by yourself and no matter how hard you trained you constantly were never as good as a guy and you were constantly compared to a guy."

While Ella had the advantage of being an exceptional runner- an advantage that changed her status- for Holly, her experience was not so positive. We can understand this as being linked to umpire selections and 'merit'. As the common positioning of girls and women in umpiring was that they were inferior in ability and fitness, their status in the group as outsiders remained when their fitness did not match or beat other umpires in their group. For Ella, she excelled in running and umpiring, and as such experienced accolades and acceptance from the group. For Holly, however, her group culture sustained her as an outsider, and she was constantly positioned "at the back", regardless of her efforts. This data from both Holly and Ella shows the problems with gender expectations at both ends of the scale. When girls and women are presumed to be of a lower ability or standard simply due to their gender, their capabilities, potential and passion for umpiring are overlooked. This was further compounded with harassment around sexuality.





## Sexual harassment

While the harassment detailed so far related specifically to umpiring ability, there was similar numbers of experience relating to sexual harassment—that is, harassment that related to umpires’ sex or sexuality. This harassment often manifested in an aggressive masculine heterosexuality, and again was produced in multiple sites— games, training and outside of these contexts— from umpires, umpire coaches, and spectators. Once again, these incidents compounded already problematic experiences, and made some participants in this study question their involvement in umpiring. Emily, a state league umpire, detailed one incident she experienced at training— a comment from another umpire that she heard in passing as she was walking to the training oval from the change rooms:

“I openly overheard a group of guys talking about my boobs at training one night... I was walking up the stairs, and I overheard them being literally like, ‘Oh my god, have you seen Emily’s tits?’ And I turned around and I looked at them, and I was like are you serious? Like that’s what you’re going to say? That’s what you say at training? And it freaked me out a little bit to be like my god, what do you say like as a group behind my back?”

For some umpires in this study, sexual harassment was more direct— sometimes, like for Anna, coming from coaches:

“at training, there was one of the coaches that would always try to talk to me and meet up with me outside of training and stuff and it was clearly really uncomfortable for me and I ended up having to tell... one of the coaches, not the head coach, so I had to end up going and talk to him which was really uncomfortable as well because I know him pretty well. So, I just stopped going to training after that so that was probably the worst experience I had when I was targeted.”

Anna, NSW/ACT focus group

For Elektra, it was enacted by other umpires, and happened outside of training and at games:

“I used to receive messages of nudes that other umpires would send to me. And umpires during games would inappropriately touch me, like when we’re umpiring together and things like that. So, that’s what made me quit that level of umpiring [state league] because I thought it was too inappropriate and I didn’t know what to do about it at the time.”

Elektra, state league umpire

Spectators were also common sources of sexual harassment:

“I’ve also had some people say some really inappropriate stuff like something about riding me or something... But I try and focus as much as I can on the game at hand, I guess... You might know some of the people behind that you could probably say, ‘Oi, that’s enough.’ But if it’s people you don’t know, you’re kind of reluctant sometimes to stay stuff because you don’t want that backlash.”

Rose, SA focus group

The sexual harassment that umpires in this study faced sometimes intersected with other parts of their identity, such as race:

“... when I used to run and I was a boundary umpire, a lot of people used to be like, ‘Run n\*\*\*\*r [redacted] run!’ And they often scream that from the side of the thing. And I have big hair, if you can tell. When I had big hair and I was umpiring, people used to scream like, ‘Oh, you’d run so much faster if you’d cut that off!’ Or, I heard a lot of things, is all I can say. So, I just, kind of, live in fairy land... footy is a very white culture background and I’m very well aware of that... my parents... they’re like, ‘Yeah! Go join footy!’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah!’ And then you hear these really ugly words and you’re even like, ‘What’s going on? Mum, Dad, you

told me this was a good sport.’ So, it’s just – it has an ugly side, but it’s generally from people – This probably sounds bad, but it’s from lower socio-economic areas that people speak like this.”

**Fatima, VIC focus group**

While few of the participants in this study were umpires of colour, it is crucial to recognise that race and gender are often intertwined in moments of sexism and harassment. When crowd members abused

umpires, the umpires’ minority characteristics often formed a key part of that abuse. As such, it becomes crucial to recognise the intersectionality and minority status of diverse umpires- people of colour, girls and women, trans or gender diverse umpires, and umpires with a disability. In a culture that has traditionally been formed for people that do not belong to these categories, direct acknowledgement and programs around celebrating this diversity is needed to support and sustain these umpires as they encounter harassment and abuse.

## Rejecting ‘female’ labels

From these experiences of harassment, and the combined tensions from other aspects of being girls and women in umpiring, it is easy to understand why many umpires in this study felt that they did not want to be seen as ‘female umpires’, but just as ‘umpires’. For many coaches and umpiring staff, the refrain of ‘treat us like anyone else’ may sound familiar, often partnered with suggestions that there should not be ‘special treatment’ for female umpires. Taylah articulated this during her focus group session:

“I umpired one of the grand finals for the juniors and it ended up being they were blaming me for being a female umpire and that’s when it got to the point where I was like, ‘I don’t want to umpire anymore,’ and this was only a few weeks ago. I was like, ‘This is just frustrating me. I’ve had enough of it, just because I’m a female, I can’t do this, it’s really frustrating me.’ ... I wish we weren’t known by our gender because I feel like they don’t just call us an umpire, they call us a female umpire. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that but the terms that they use it in can be wrong, the way that they say it. So, I think it’s more just we’re umpires, just call us umpires, we do the same things the boys do.”

The data represented in this study so far shows, conversely, that the cultural conditions of umpiring are significantly impacted by gender stereotypes and histories. The effects of these stereotypes are that girls and women in umpiring overwhelmingly experience poorer quality connections with their coaches and groups, experiences with selections,

and game day experiences. The participants in this research regularly encountered gender specific harassment based on broad and incorrect assumptions about their ability as well as sexual harassment. It is no wonder that there is a hope that by simply erasing their identifiers as ‘female’, that these experiences will subside or disappear.

Morgan, a non-binary umpire, had a distinct understanding of the gender relations at play in umpiring due to their gender identity existing outside of the binary. Morgan suggested that for girls and women, they had their own ‘coming out’ process, because umpiring was so male dominated, and there was a sense that emerging as a female umpire may produce negative reactions.

“... being a female as an umpire has its own coming out process. It’s nerve racking, it’s scary. There’s not many other non-male umpires and it’s terrifying and you don’t know how you’re going to be treated.”

The uncertainty over treatment relating to gender, and the accumulation of experiences of harassment did produce behavioural and attitudinal outcomes in the participants in this study. Over their years of umpiring, they became more accepting of certain behaviours, for example. When talking about players looking them up on social media, and then texting them after games, some of the members of the Victorian focus group had this discussion, for example:



- Mikayla: ... The carefree attitude is so common among female umpires that you rarely find an umpire that would be hurt by that, and I guess that's something that a female would go into the sport and try and be like, "I don't like that." And then leave. And I guess that's another reason why there's not as many female umpires, because they don't want to experience that when a lot of the female umpires that are out there, they're – I don't want to say, 'used to it', but it doesn't bother them.
- Vic: They accept it, yeah. Because if they didn't, then they wouldn't be able to continue.
- Mikayla: Exactly. And I think it's just – It's more, not necessarily accepting it, but taking it for what it is, just boys messing around and being idiots, and a lot of girls wouldn't really understand that, I guess. And so, I think it all depends on what their view of the situation is.
- Deepa: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, it depends on the girl. I've grown up in a boys' environment, playing cricket and umpiring my whole life, so I'm just used to it. It's just boys being boys. I don't really care, though there are girls that pedantic about the way boys are acting towards them.

This exchange shows us the requirements of female umpires beyond their official on-field skills, or their fitness performance. The 'carefree attitude' is one that girls and women in umpiring must assume to cope with the specific, multiple pressures on them. The expectation to go along with these problems, and not necessarily attempt disruption means that it becomes exceptionally difficult for girls and women to 'call out' behaviour that makes them uncomfortable, in case they are seen as 'pedantic', or not accepting that these moments are just 'boys being boys'.



Mikayla recognises that many girls and women who continue umpiring have a 'carefree' attitude– but we can interpret this as a requirement of umpiring under these particular conditions– conditions that are rife with sexist and misogynist assumptions and behaviours. To not be carefree, to not accept these kinds of infringements, would mean not being able to continue with umpiring. In this environment, even other girls and women may not support those that come forward with complaints– possibly labelling complainants as being unable to cope with the accepted pressures of umpiring. We contend that these pressures should not be accepted, and instead require significant cultural disruption– to encourage all umpires to recognise and speak out against gendered harassment and sexism when it occurs.



## Seeking support (or not)

The pressures on girls and women to remain 'carefree' and to sustain their mental health and umpiring performance despite gendered abuse and harassment also emerged in their practices for seeking support- or not. In other words, for the girls and women in this study, it was not always obvious or possible for them to seek help from coaches, staff or other umpires. Elektra, a state league umpire, was reasonably young when she encountered sexual harassment. It consisted of unsolicited nude pictures being sent to her, and jokes from umpires about her uniform fit and her general fitness. She said that she told her dad what was happening in order to try and obtain some support:

"I started with the [state league] academy and was there for 2-3 seasons I think. In the second season I'd made 'friends' with a group of guys my age. One of them ... added me on social media and was always messaging me. I received unsolicited nude photos from this person, as well as comments about what I was wearing at training that night, constant messages asking me out on dates after I'd said no (I actually ended up going on one to try and get him to stop, that didn't work unfortunately). When we umpired games together, he would always touch me and grab at me. The thing that really stings about this is that there were other umpires around when this happened, but no one ever said anything. There were always the constant misogynistic comments I received from multiple members of the academy group, which added to my discomfort... I told my Dad at the time and he didn't know what to do either. I don't know if he ended up ever telling someone about it or not, but I just thought quitting was probably the best way to go about it because I felt like there was nothing I really could do."

**Elektra, state league umpire**

Elektra's account shows the multiple factors around her that she needed to navigate when considering seeking help. Firstly, she had made a group of friends in the academy- a crucial sustaining factor in umpiring, especially for those that feel culturally disconnected or excluded. When one of these friends started

acting in disrespectful and harassing ways, it would have been difficult for Elektra to report this to other friends (who were also his friends) or coaches. Telling her dad felt like her only option, and neither of them really knew "what to do". Beyond that, Elektra felt that there was "nothing I could really do". This shows the importance of literacy and discussions around sexism and harassment in umpiring groups, and knowledge building around the distinct pressures and experiences of girls and women in umpiring.

Umpires also sometimes encountered moments where they expected something to be done around this harassment, and when it was not, they quickly lost faith in the governing body that purported to support them. This showed the precarity in their commitment to umpiring- a tenuous connection that was strained by multiple systems and interactions. Deepa had an example of this:

"I was field umpiring down at the lower social economic side of town, and I was running, and I went down to the boundary to do a throw in ... Someone from the crowd, a supporter yelled out, 'Why don't you open your eyes instead of your legs, you stupid slut!' And then I swore off umpiring, because I was like, I get you can abuse the uniform, that's fine. I don't care if you yell at me because I'm a girl, I don't. I can cop it. But that was just too far, and then I took it to the league and they didn't even cop a fine or anything, so I moved to [another league]."

**Deepa, Victoria focus group**

For Deepa, the lack of action from the governing body showed her that she would not be supported despite aggressive misogyny from a spectator. Her immediate shift to another league acted as a protective measure, where she hoped to avoid that situation again.



There was also complexity around seeking support and existing cultures around gender. For Emily, this related to the cultures around umpire selections and ‘merit’. When sexism and misogyny was happening to her from her coach, she was reluctant to disclose this to other coaches in case umpires interpreted her actions as requesting a kind of special treatment:

“I feel as though I had to be so careful in what I said as well, because again, I didn’t want to be seen as complaining. I didn’t want to be seen as oh, you’re not getting what you want, therefore you’re just complaining because yeah, this person’s kind of had a better season than you. Therefore, they’re going to get rewarded for it. That happens, it’s happened so many years. I’ve been around for ten years; I know that fucking happens. And so, I was terrified just for people to think that’s why I was so upset, and why I was complaining.”

Emily, state league umpire

This data shows again how interconnected these cultures around gender were. For the girls and women in this study, no individual or personal choices about their umpiring- even around seeking support when encountering clear and direct sexism- was uncomplicated. Emily felt ‘terrified’ that her umpiring colleagues might interpret her as complaining, or seeking some special treatment around selections, even when her complaint would have referenced multiple problematic (discriminatory) encounters with a coach in the group. In the end, other umpires around her encouraged her to seek help.

“I think everyone else pointed it out to me, maybe I was just too blind to see it. They were like, ‘Emily, you have to say something. There is something going on here, you have to say something.’ Or maybe I was too terrified that the ramifications of speaking out would lead to me losing my spot on the state list.”

Emily, state league umpire

Like Ella’s earlier example, the presence of supportive umpires around Emily made a difference and enabled her to seek support and help from a senior coach who then assisted her to resolve the problem. Without this support, however, the dominant cultural constructs of gender, merit and the ‘carefree’ female umpire may have prevented her from addressing the sexism that she was encountering.

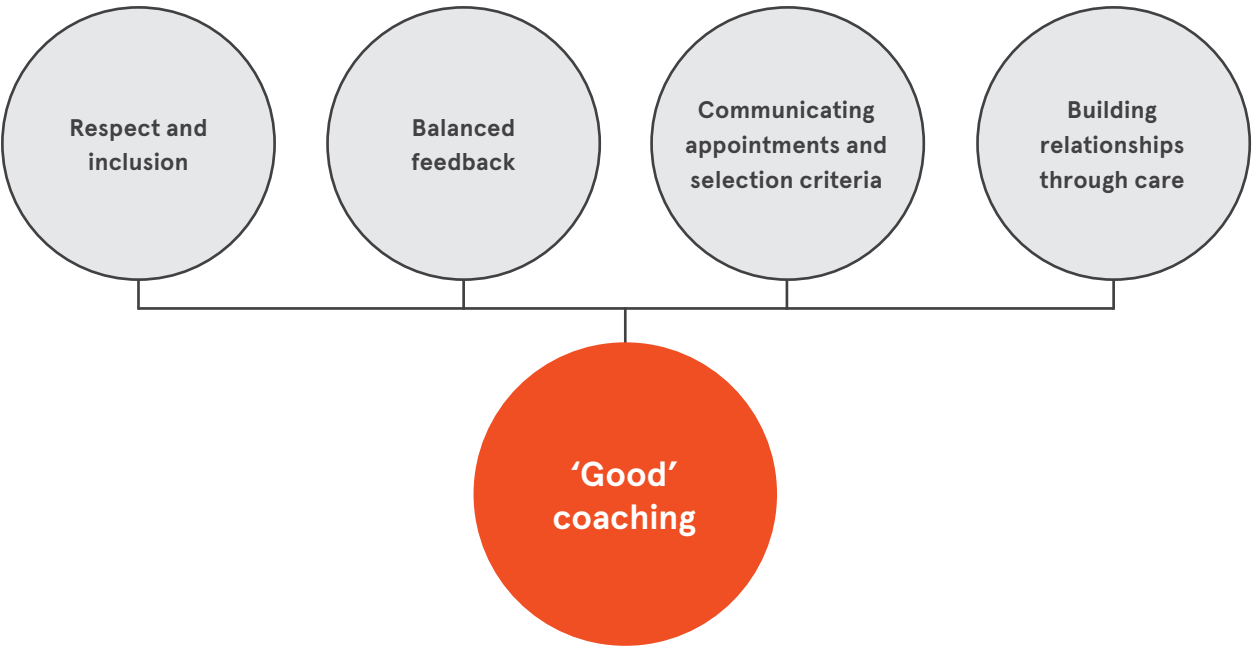
# 4. Coaching

Apart from gendered harassment, the theme of ‘coaching’ represented the most common negative articulated by umpires in this study.

It was also, however, the most commonly articulated positive experience that umpires had. There were a similar number of references to positive (26) and negative (29) accounts of coaching. This theme referenced any times where participants reflected on uplifting or detrimental exchanges with coaches, with many responses touching on gender in relation to these exchanges. On other occasions coaching experiences were not explicitly related to gender, and we have reported these here too as they present broader messages about successful and unsuccessful coaching that is relevant when planning ways that all umpires can feel supported, challenged and included.

The data that we collected and analysed around coaching affirms that the best coaching can bring out the best performances from umpires, during games, at training, away from football and throughout umpiring careers. It also illustrates that coaching can produce moments of distress and deep unease, at its worst causing participants to leave umpiring.

Coaches are a key contact for all umpires. They determine the individual pathways of umpires, selecting them to games, guiding them on training programs, and encouraging their focus on areas of performance. They also, more broadly, influence the directions attitudes and performances of others. Coaches can influence entire groups, fostering inclusive and supportive attitudes, or competitive and non-inclusive cultures. The findings included here demonstrate that coaches that were focused on building positive relationships with umpires, that were approachable, professional, transparent, and provided balanced and supportive feedback made genuinely positive impacts on participants, however the opposite was also true.



## Respect and inclusion

Participants in this study indicated that the best coaches were those that treated them with respect as umpires. They had a sense that there was no preferential treatment (or the opposite) relating to gender in their groups or teams, and that the focus of the coach was that of improving them and their capacity for good umpiring.

“Even if they weren’t sure I was going to make it, they didn’t care, they just wanted to see me do the best I could and I think having that support was great, especially being one of the only girls. They didn’t care that I was a girl- they saw that I could do it and they wanted to see me get through it and work hard to get to where I am now which I’m really thankful for.”

Isabelle, NSW/ACT focus group

Part of being respectful, motivating and encouraging as a coach, was about ensuring that all umpires felt that they were valued and being supported to improve- regardless of experience, ability or gender. This happened both in aspects of skills/ performance coaching and fitness coaching.

“[They] Look after us, I think that’s definitely a big part. They would always go, ‘Okay, so tell us what happened on the weekend? Did anything happen that you wanted to talk about or discuss with the group?’ and then help the other people in the group improve on it and everything.”

Taylah, NSW focus group

“One of the coaches, the fitness coach, would make things timed rather than distance because he knew that not everyone could run the 800s in the same time so he says ‘run for four minutes, do that’. He wouldn’t look at me but he’d go ‘I know not everyone can run the same distance’ and that’s obvious because not everyone can. So it made it really, really supportive and you felt like oh it’s okay like he’s not going to tell me off if I can only run 800m.”

Holly, state league umpire

These two examples showed that small efforts by coaches to promote inclusion were noticed and appreciated by umpires. They felt included and less vulnerable when group discussions of games took place, or when fitness activities were made inclusive of all abilities.

In contrast, some participants reflected on what it looked like when respect and inclusion were not present from coaches. For Amelia, this emerged from a sense of favouritism- where she indicated that others were being treated preferentially because of personal relationships or other factors.

“It became immediately clear that if you weren’t – I don’t want to say like one of his best friends – but if you weren’t buddied with him you didn’t have much of a chance to do anything... You can’t be best friends with everyone and I’m not saying that people should be best friends with everyone, but you form good working relationships with people and when you’re in a position of that level you can’t be carrying those forward into your new position. It’s been really hard watching some people get way further than you’d ever think they should based on how their relationship is with someone else... [The coach] has this saying, we’re one team with one set of values, and I forget what the other one is and I just went pfft, we’re the furthest thing from one team up here.”

Amelia, state league umpire

For Emily, in a different state, coaches sharing information with other umpires in inappropriate ways due to personal friendships made her feel that the culture of the group became ‘toxic’:

“[He] pit you against each other, like he was really negative. Like, he would go and tell one person, because he had a different relationship, like more of a friendship relationship with them, like all this stuff about the rest of the group, who then would come and tell the rest of us what he was saying behind our back. It was just this such this



negative, toxic environment that they were kind of fostering, and it was slightly evident that they kind of preferred certain people over others. And it was pretty clear that was an issue.”

Emily, state league umpire

As Emily indicates, these kinds of interactions can impact on whole groups of umpires– not just minorities. As trust in coaches declines, and umpires feel that they are pitted ‘against each other’, connections and teamwork can erode. This data also illustrates that coaches are key actors in positive (or negative) culture building. Part of this culture building also related to providing umpires with balanced feedback.

## Balanced feedback

Several participants in this study reflected on what positive and negative feedback consisted of and the types of outcomes that these elicited. At its best, feedback was considered as balanced and fair– providing umpires with positives about their performance, and areas that they could work on. When umpires received feedback like this, they appreciated its value:

“We’ve got one senior field umpire coach and he during this season and most seasons tries to get to everyone’s game at least once and he provides very personalised feedback as well, obviously to your game but I suppose in wanting to develop you, he also asks you for what you hope to achieve for the season and what kind of games you want to be umpiring and whatnot... Then just last week, he went out and wrote 150 emails to every single umpire about how they went during the season and thanks and how we could improve and whether we wanted to come back next season, so investing in that side of things and also, you never really thought it was gendered comments. I just felt like it was really fair and equitable for everyone involved and tailored to whatever skill level or how long you’ve been umpiring for and whatnot.”

Julia, NSW focus group

“I really love the coach that we have... he’s super, like, it’s hard to explain. He’s both really supportive but he’s also honest and I think that’s really important. I don’t want to hear, ‘Yeah, like you’re so amazing, you’re doing great.’ Yeah okay, but like he’s also like, ‘Oh, you’ve got to work on this but you’re still doing good.’”

Mia, QLD focus group

For Julia and Mia, feedback came in different forms– an end of season email, for example, or a conversation about goals and strategies. For both of them, however, they felt as if they received feedback that would help them to develop as umpires, and that gender was not a factor that influenced their experience. For other umpires, their experience of receiving feedback was not as positive. Shania, for example, encountered feedback that she thought was ‘interesting’ from a coach about how she touched and adjusted her hair during games:

“I had one interesting thing a few years ago. I had an old-ish guy coaching me for boundary umpiring and he showed me a video of myself umpiring and told me to not touch my hair so much while I was umpiring. And I was literally tightening my pony tail, and I think that’s just something he didn’t understand. I had to do it otherwise my hair would be in my face and stuff, and I’m like – And then I told every other coach, and they were like, ‘That’s not right.’”

Shania, VIC focus group



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Accounts like this were present with some other umpires, who reported that coaches had given unclear and vague remarks about styles of flag waving, walking or crouching that did not 'look right', and that they felt that this may have been related to their women's bodies. Data like this indicates that coaches sometimes rely on images of an ideal umpire to provide feedback. These images may have been formed by previous encounters of seeing 'good' umpires, and asking those in their care to try and replicate these performances. Problematically, however, it is likely that these images have been contributed to and formed by only male bodies and mannerisms, and therefore feedback may have a gendered lens. To effectively coach any umpire that departs from this norm, it is crucial for coaches to focus on how to derive the best performance in umpiring, rather than reproducing previous performances or bodies.

It is also crucial for coaches to find balance in their feedback. Some umpires reported that they only experienced negative feedback following games, with a lack of discussion about their strengths.

## Communicating appointments and selection criteria

Stemming from the requirement for balanced feedback, umpires in this study articulated that a crucial component of good coaching and list management was around transparent and consistent communication regarding appointments and the selection criteria that was used to determine these appointments. Some umpires in this study expressed frustration when coaches were unclear about why particular umpires were selected over others, or when coaches did not explain or justify broad appointment strategies. This aspect of the theme, like many others in coaching, may also be experienced by umpires that are not girls and women.

For Emily, she felt that her coach had a double standard in scoring and feedback that impacted on selections:

"I got told one of my strengths as an umpire is, I'm really quick off the mark to cover behind areas. [The coach] told me, 'I can't give you bonus points.' Whereas, he might give another umpire a bonus point for the same

"the main coach did not have a bar of us, did not like the way we were, what we did, we were never good enough no matter what we did. I could have a perfect game but he would find something to fault."

Holly, state league umpire

"I get the AFL standard is [that] perfection is your baseline, anything beyond that is not up to scratch. It's like I know, I've gotten so used to it now, where you don't expect to get positive feedback. Not getting positive feedback is kind of a normal, and to not get negative feedback is a really good game."

Emily, state league umpire

While Emily suggests that she had 'gotten so used to' not receiving any positive feedback, she went on to say that over time this made her feel exceptionally pessimistic about her coaching experiences and constrained her development.

thing. 'Just because you're too quick, and you're too good at it.' He openly told that to my face."

Emily, state league umpire

This lack of consistency across different umpires frustrated her, as she felt that she was unable to get the same positive feedback and selection advantages as her peers, and was therefore disadvantaged. This indicates that having transparent and consistent selection criteria and scoring strategies for senior umpires is an important part of quality coaching and list management. In addition, it is also important for coaches to articulate how and why they reach decisions about appointments, especially when they are directly asked:

Charlotte: I asked [a more junior coach], and I was like 'How come I haven't been put in Reserves yet?' and he was like 'I have no idea why.' And that kind of like – I think – I feel like it's definitely a problem when you have



other coaches saying 'I don't know why you're not progressing.' And it sucks because they're not the main coach so they can't really do a lot about it really.

Vic: And have you had that conversation with your main coach?

Charlotte: I have, and he seems to be pulling out very little excuses like 'Oh, your flag waving is a bit like this', or 'Oh, no, you had that one decision that wasn't right,' things like that and it's just frustrating really.  
(Charlotte, state league umpire)

For those that were receiving additional support and were targeted for opportunity games (through Diversity or Female programs), it also became clear that it was important for coaches to support them through their selections. This was particularly the case when considering the broader cultural environment around girls and women when they were selected for games. As detailed in earlier sections, Maha's case was particularly illustrative of this. She had felt guilty and out of line for her selection in a practice match at a higher level than she previously umpired, to the point where she apologised to her umpiring colleagues. When talking about how her coaches could have helped through this process, she contributed that:

"What does work is knowing that your coaches have your back, having your coach explicitly tell you that they support you, believe in your abilities, and that they will promote and create an environment where other umpires don't feel emboldened to question your pathway and what's happened... And just that thing of just hearing again, 'We wouldn't put you in these positions if it wasn't for your ability. We believe in your ability.'"

Maha, state league umpire

These individual interactions with coaches, especially the investment of coaches in positive assurance and confidence building activities are critical in the contexts of minority umpires. When they may be experiencing gendered harassment from spectators or other umpires, and crises of confidence related to misogyny around appointments, the inputs of coaches that believe in umpires are invaluable. Maha reflected, however, that this also needed to go beyond the support of the individual, and that coaches must also attempt to influence the cultures and interactions of the broader group.

"What doesn't help is the opposite of having supportive coaches, which is what I had, really. My coaches who are not so happy about [my appointments] because they feel like the AFL's interfering and promoting, when they've got perfectly good umpires who have a better skill set who should be getting those opportunities... So that doesn't help because the culture comes from the top. If the top is accepting and just normalises it, of women being on the list and all the efforts being made, then they will. But if it's coming from the top that there's a bit of disquiet about people taking people's spots, then it just starts rumours and it just makes it really uncomfortable for me to try and function."

Maha, state league umpire





Umpires' coaches do have the ability to influence the types of talk around selections, especially talk around girls, women and other minority groups being selected for various games. While conversations around

selection strategies may be difficult and unfamiliar to some coaches, there is always the potential to at the very least, disrupt group discussions about 'taking people's spots'.

## Building relationships through care

This final element represented the most complex but most important part of umpire coaching. Care through coaching represents a conduit for enriching the learning and participation of umpires. While umpires in this study rarely mentioned the word 'care', we used this as a central theme of their broader reflections. As part of good coaching, the building of relationships was a key experience for umpires in this study. They felt that the best coaches understood them beyond their performance at training or on the field, including their life pressures, umpiring motivations and goals, and the complexity of their experience in the group and beyond. For Paige, care and relationship building looked like 'personal connections', which created opportunities for talking:

"I think my umpiring coach has a very good personal connection with everyone so we can trust him on other levels. If something's going on at home or in general, we can talk to him. He always asks us - make sure we've got enough food in our house and make sure that everyone in our family is doing okay. I know when COVID was pretty big, he called us every three to four weeks to make sure everyone was okay and if we needed anything as well, so I think that was pretty important and that's a big deal too."

Paige, NSW/ACT Focus Group

This was also the case for Amelia. Her most valued coach checked in on her when she was encountering challenges that were away from umpiring, but in turn impacted her attendance at training and subsequently, her ability to umpire games:

"my husband's mum passed away very early on that season. [The coach] was really good, really supportive, really checked in quite a bit with both of us just to see how we were going being like, 'Hey guys, how's things going?

How's life?' Obviously it kind of sucks, mum's passed away... I [also] had quite a few injury issues ... So he was always really good checking in to see how's it going, where are you at, where's your rehab at, where's fitness at and that type."

Amelia, state league umpire

For Charlotte, the coach that regularly checked in on, and listened to her responses about life pressures made a positive difference to her umpiring:

"This one coach, he will send me messages just to see how I'm going with my fitness and just life in general, and I feel like he really cares, whereas this other coach just, I don't know, he's - I just felt like he's had that same attitude. Even with school and things like that, I'm not trying to sound pretentious but I study [university degree] so it does take up a lot of time and I feel like he's not understanding of that, and I feel like because I missed trainings I don't get to be in the higher leagues. He's always done that. Even in Year 12 when I was really busy and had to study, I felt like he held that against me a little bit."

Charlotte, state league umpire

It is clear from these accounts that umpires do not, and can not be expected to, leave life at the door. Their experiences are not easily separated as 'personal' or 'unrelated' to umpiring, and can influence their performance. Participants in this study reported that the best coaches were those that listened to, understood, and responded to the complexity of their lives, and how umpiring articulated against other pressures and commitments. Coaches that did not undertake this relational work were seen to be 'out of touch':

“When I had [name] as a coach, she was incredible because she was very connected, lots of feedback, sort of checking whether you could do this day or not and she’d come up to [city] as well and want to meet up with me to have a chat to see how things were going and what I thought about the season and stuff like that. So having that compared to what I’ve had previously where they were so out of touch.”

Claire, state league umpire

When relational connections were fractured or not present, Charlotte explained that this seemed like a lack of interest or engagement from the coach, and that there was a sense of being shut out or excluded:

“I just feel like every time [the coach] talks to me, so he’ll talk to some of the other umpires and just seem to be more engaged I think with their conversations, and then I feel like with me it’s always like- I don’t know, he always seems disappointed to talk to me or not – yeah, just doesn’t want to be there. And I remember bringing this up with one of the other girls... and she was like ‘Yeah, I’ve had the same experience.’... I feel like all the girls have had – just the way he talks to them is just not – he just doesn’t really seem engaged in the conversation or anything.”

Charlotte, state league umpire

This shows that the work of coaches goes beyond knowledge transmission, and while it is not necessarily about being a friend, it is about expressing appropriate and consistent care and interest in the lives of umpires in order to get the best performance from them. Ella’s quote helpfully summarises this, as she points out that the best coaches ‘know’ their umpires, rather than just ‘watching’ them.

“Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses, and someone who knows everyone on that deeper level and isn’t someone who stands back and just watches. I know [another coach], he didn’t really know anyone or get to know anyone, he just watched everyone. So it was almost like this cloud of just watching over your back, and it was almost like this fear of, ‘What is he thinking?’”

Ella, state league umpire

By taking an interest and ‘knowing’ umpires, coaches can create an environment where umpires feel safer, more included and more valued as members of a team. This, as Jennifer shows, can encourage umpires to continue umpiring because they feel “involved and included and wanted”.

“... the coach, he was very inclusive. He tried to include me in everything and I’m a naturally very shy person so when he kept trying to bring me into stuff, helping me out, it made me want to continue on umpiring and that’s probably what made me continue. Because I felt so involved and included and wanted.”

Jennifer, QLD Focus Group

## 5. Influence of culture on girls and women in umpiring: Enjoyment, mental health and retention

While the previous findings sections of this report have taken a more segmented, thematic approach to reviewing participants’ contributions, this section reflects on these as a comprehensive, cumulative system, with a particular focus on its effects.

This references the broader theoretical model that was produced in reflection of the data in this study; the culture that umpires exist within is formed by selections, infrastructure, harassment and coaching. This complex culture- encountered differently by all umpires- then influences enjoyment and social connectedness. In this section, we illustrate some of these impacts further, with a focus especially on how cultures denied and despoiled the mental health and wellbeing of the umpires in this study.

### Social connectedness

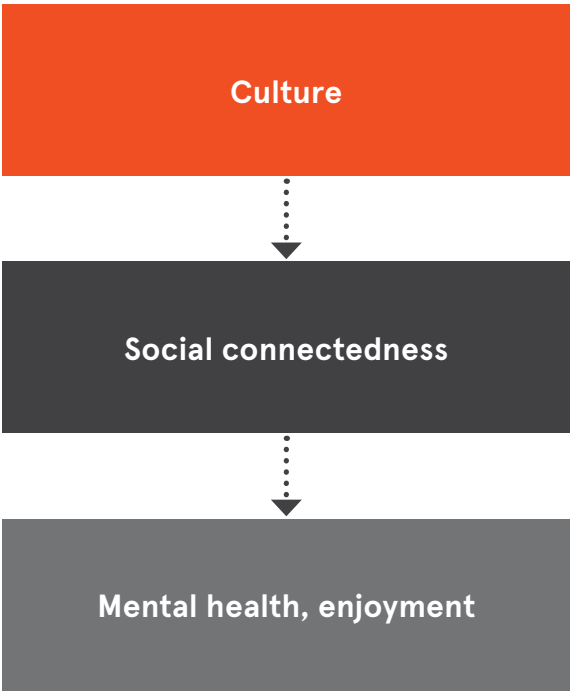
Participants in this study were asked about how connected they felt to umpiring in general, and specifically about social connections to their immediate training groups. While this report has detailed many incidents and factors that impact upon umpires trust in those around them, and their confidence overall, many umpires explained that relationships with other umpires was one of the best parts of umpiring. This was the case for both Mikayla and Shania, community umpires from different parts of Victoria:

“what kept me coming back was the whole family kind of aspect of it. I don’t know how it works for other leagues, but for [my umpiring club] it’s very – everyone knows everyone kind of thing, and yeah, it’s just very communal and family, almost... we’ve got heaps of events going outside of the field and you always get to know who you’re working with and things like that.”

Mikayla, VIC Focus Group

“I really value the social and the family aspects. I definitely feel safe in the league and that’s a big thing for me. It’s another thing that they want you there. If you are struggling to find a way there, there’s always somebody that will pick you up on their way, or even go out of their way to make sure that you are able to find there – to get there. Whether that’s calling you an Uber, or picking you up directly, and it’s, for me, very supportive. And a lot of the clubs are local, so there’s always one or two people you know in the game as a player. And yeah, it’s, I think, an experience that I wish everybody got to experience, but unfortunately that’s really not the case.”

Shania, VIC focus group



Other umpires talked about the benefits of these friendships, that they created a feeling of supportiveness, community and a genuine sense that they were valued as umpires and people. When connectedness was strong, it was capable of offsetting other difficult parts of umpiring:

“... like 90% [of umpires in the group are supportive and inclusive]— they were so happy with the way that we were with our progression and the fact that we had each other like [my friend] and I were a bundle, we would always support each other because we knew alone, we would be ripped to shreds like it would be awful.”

**Holly, state league umpire**

These exchanges proved to be a strong factor in reasons for umpires returning each season, and continuing to enjoy umpiring— a factor that represents previous research around the importance of social connectedness in retaining umpires. However, this connectedness was tenuous for most umpires, and for some, completely absent. Some struggled to find partners for drills at training, or were immediately excluded from meaningful roles in games:

“All I want is that when we have to partner up, or get into groups for something, I don’t want to have to wait until everyone else is partnered up and I have to go with the last person. I want someone to come up to me and be like, ‘Hey, I’ll be your partner.’ Or, when I rock up to training, I want a couple of people to come over to me and say, ‘Hey, how are you?’ Have a conversation.”

**Morgan, community umpire, QLD**

“Well, since most of the time I’m the only female, sometimes there’s one other girl that comes but none of the boys would want to pair up with me or they go, ‘She can’t run.’ There was some point where they say, ‘You don’t have to run the full thing because you’re a girl,’ and I was like, ‘What do you mean?’ and he was like, ‘You don’t have to do the full lap of the oval, you can just do half a lap because you’re a girl,’ and I was like, ‘Well, I can run the full lap. That’s fine,’ or they don’t want to pair up with me.”

**Taylah, NSW/ACT Focus Group**

For Morgan and Taylah, they felt immediately excluded due to their gender both during training and in social interactions surrounding them. This was a common experience for many of the umpires in this study, especially those that were the only girls or women in their training group. Some of the participants explained that it felt like the other (non-female) umpires were already a whole ‘gang’, and that it was exceptionally difficult for them to try to break into that and make social connections.

Some umpires spoke about the benefits there were when women were already part of the group, or even when they were at camps, academies or carnivals with other female umpires. This allowed them an opportunity to talk about their experiences umpiring while female:

“just being able to talk about those sort of things where you don’t even realise it’s a thing till you start talking to other people and going, ‘Oh, I’ve also experienced that’ or ‘I do this.’ You can’t really talk about that with the men because I know they mean well, so I don’t really want to say it, but they also just can’t relate. They wouldn’t have ever thought about something like that before.”

**Claire, state league umpire**



Certain interactions from umpires eroded social connectedness through making the participants in this study feel that they were 'different' or outsiders to the other umpires. This included arguably minor incidents like male umpires apologising (often performatively) to girls or women for swearing in conversation, therefore pointing out that these umpires were different to them (and to the others in the group).

Regardless of the methods, exclusion from the group placed strain on umpires, and impacted on their ability to confidently perform in training and games. Ella spoke about this when she shifted to a state league group, and the difficulty of trying to find an 'in' with the existing umpires.

"But you're not fully in the group... you're trying to impress, you're trying to – I guess, try and fit in, in some way with the group. And then, some people already have their friendships. But if you didn't have anyone, it would definitely impact your performance because you feel really isolated."

*Ella, state league umpire*

Claire, another state league umpire, made direct links between this isolation and the retention of girls and women in umpiring:

- Vic: Why do you think that is? Why do you think people drop out? Well, women especially, girls and women especially drop out quickly?
- Claire: Mainly – I feel like potentially just not being really part of the group that much, because I do think it plays a big part of it and knowing – and getting all that feedback and getting that extra help, because you don't really stay somewhere unless you're getting better or acknowledged or – like you don't – kind of actually wanting to turn up to training twice a week and [build gain] if no one's really talking to you and you're not getting any better when you're there. And I do find that the girls are quite often on the side. (Claire, state league umpire)

Trying to fit in to the group to gain the benefits of connection sometimes meant sacrifices from the girls and women in this study. As detailed in the earlier section on selections and merit, this could mean that they give up their competitiveness or ambitions for selections, and begin to think of available spots in games as not for them. It may also mean that girls and women need to adopt a 'carefree' attitude around harassment, exclusion or other moments of 'boys being boys'. This was the case for Emily, who felt that she had to go into 'survival' mode if she wanted to sustain her involvement in umpiring:

"I think for me, why I maybe fit in really quickly was I just accepted the boys' club mentality, and I put my head down and went okay, this is how it's going to be; survival. You're going to maybe feel a whole lot of pain, or maybe not be as happy, it's just deal with it."

*Emily, state league umpire*

Emily's contribution shows the dominance of prevailing masculine cultures, and the requirement for girls and women to 'fit in' to this culture if they want to continue umpiring. These sacrifices or self-regulations were around ignoring or not reporting things like discomfort or personal harm that came from exclusion or gendered harassment. For Electra, it meant that she felt unable to report the sexual harassment that she was experiencing from another umpire – both physical touching that happened at games, and unsolicited nudes being sent to her. We asked her what might have helped her to report this behaviour to coaches or staff, and her response showed the deep impact that the broader culture in her group had on her ability, willingness and confidence to seek support:

"I would have felt safer and more comfortable in reporting the behaviour if the coaches didn't engage in the 'boys club' behaviour you see at trainings, and made me feel welcome. A lot of the time I felt like I wasn't part of the group and they didn't know how to deal with me, which meant I had no rapport with any coaches and if I did, there's a chance I would have been comfortable enough to report what was happening. I further think that the coaches could have called out some of the inappropriate comments at training if they

heard them - this would indicate to female umpires that the environment wasn't the boys club we were used to and that those sort of inappropriate remarks weren't tolerated (and I know they would have heard the comments being made). Lastly, I think that because I had to work so hard to prove my performance was up to standard, I felt that any complaint made to the coaching team would just show them I wasn't as good as the boys and wasn't up to the challenge of umpiring [state league]."

Electra's story shows the important impact that culture had on her connectedness with coaches and others in the group. When she saw interactions that made her feel like an outsider, while other male umpires were recognised as true team members, she interpreted that her complaints might not be viewed as legitimate, and that she might be labelled as an inadequate umpire for not being able to handle the situation. For Electra, the only recourse in this situation was to leave umpiring all together - which she did.

## Impacts on mental health

Some umpires in this study continued umpiring despite serious social, cultural and physical hurdles that came from incidents and interactions with a culture that was hostile to them. For many umpires, their passion for umpiring and love of football was a factor that sustained their commitment in the face of these challenges. For some participants, their participation in umpiring in these contexts came at the cost of their mental health.

To illustrate this, we share Holly's story. While Holly was a state league umpire for a number of years, she has now stepped back from umpiring. Her story indicates how non-reflexive coaching strategies, a lack of care and relationships with coaches, and problematic messaging around female bodies and fitness requirements produced a toxic environment for her. Subsequently, her mental health significantly declined to the point where her eating became disordered. This decline in mental health began for her with coaches who did not take the time to understand her goals, resources or to have a discussion about training strategies that might work to suit these.

"when I first started, my first year a coach came up to me and said to me - I was only 15 at the time - no, 16. He goes to me, he goes 'you need to join a gym' ... in order to stay with [state league]. I had no money like I was 16, what money did I have? My mum was not going to bring me to a gym, I didn't have my licence and I thought to myself wow like am I really that bad like am I that unfit? Which I wasn't, to the average person I was fit like I was really good, I could run, I could

do everything like I was running my 3 Ks in 17 minutes like it wasn't bad, it's a good time for someone that didn't really enjoy running. I trained all the time but it wasn't enough for them, I wasn't the 14 minute girls, I wasn't getting the 800s in this much time or I wasn't moving as quick as what they wanted so it's a lot of pressure that they put on and because say a boy could do it in this time, why can't Holly?"

This first excerpt shows that Holly felt that coaches did not take the time to talk with her about the resources that she had available to her, for example the financial position to pay for gym membership, or even a means of getting to a gym. She also felt that the broad brush understanding of training and outcomes was applied to the times that she was running. In other words, her experience was that there was a set time that she was expected to achieve in certain fitness requirements (3km and 800m efforts), and that if she was unable to achieve these, she was less valued by the coaches. This feeling impacted her level of connection, a theme she picked up in this next segment of data:

"I just hated the way that I felt walking into there every day, walking onto the oval and they did not accept me for who I was. Then for about six months over 2019 to 2020, that summer from about September when the season ends, I got really, really sick and I just hated the way that I looked so I did everything they wanted like I stopped eating, I stopped doing this, overexercising and completely lost myself. When I came back

it was everything they wanted, it was like ‘wow, you look good, this is what you should look like’ but on the inside I was so sick, I was absolutely at my wit’s end to the point where I’d lost my period, I’d lost everything, I just completely derailed.”

In this next part of Holly’s data, we can see her feeling of connection to coaches wane as she says that “they did not accept me for who I was”. As an umpire seeking to get the approval of coaches to get more senior games and improve in the group, this was an important part of her story. She explained that her next step was to change who she was, with the hope of getting approval of her coaches, “I did everything they wanted... and completely lost myself”. Her disordered eating was part of this, and led to significant weight loss, but in her words, the coaches saw this not as problematic, but as “everything they wanted”.

In this situation a holistic and relational approach to coaching may have offered opportunities for coaches to check in with Holly, and ask questions about her mental and physical health in formal or informal ways. We asked her if the coaches ever knew or found out about these experiences and outcomes:

“They never knew that because they never asked, they never asked like ‘what’s going on within your life?’, they never got to know me on a personal level. They only knew me on a professional level which is great but I think when you know someone for five years you should start to learn a bit more about them and what their interests are but they didn’t care, it was umpiring or that was it.”

However, the lack of this connection meant that these conversations did not happen, and Holly continued to attempt to please the coaches.

“In the back of my mind it was the coaches are happy so I have to stay this way, I have to stay lean, I have to do all this and it was the constant praise of ‘wow, you look really, really good, you look this, you look that’... they were awful and it hurt my soul to think that I had to feel sick all the time to make them happy. But

I was rewarded, I was put up to reserves, I was put up to league, I was given everything that they wanted but to look a certain way in that sort of light was really, really hard.”

Eventually, Holly had critical conversations with another female umpire, who asked her if she was okay, and direct questions about her eating and mental health. The support that this friend offered helped Holly to seek help, and deeply question the environment that she was umpiring with. Taking some time away from umpiring helped Holly heal, and led her to conclude that she could no longer return to that context and sustain her mental health.

“When my depression and anxiety’s already really, really bad, I’m not going to go to somewhere like that where I already know that it’s going to make me feel even worse about myself and then have to try and tell myself every day that it’s okay, you’re worth it, you’re going to be okay. I don’t want to put myself in that sort of environment again.”



Holly's story shows a significant context where coaches failed in their duty of care and their more general mission to get the best from their charges. While her coaches were never aware of her mental health and eating disorder, the lack of relationship building, communication and connections between Holly and the coaches meant that she could not reach out for help or articulate the problematic incidents that contributed to her mental health decline. This led Holly to conclude that she would never recommend umpiring to other girls and women, and instead would encourage them to avoid it:

"I can take the crap, I took it for five years, I buckled the last year that I was there. I was able to do it but could you imagine putting a 14-year-old girl in that sort of environment? I just couldn't do it."

While it may be tempting to categorise Holly's story as a 'one off' or isolated incident, it represents a strong example of how particular cultural contributions can affect connection and mental health. We do not contend that these issues are widespread, nor that there are multiple sites where this does happen, but we do suggest that this example may help any umpire, coach, manager or administrator to understand how certain actions- however well intended- may profoundly impact individual umpires, and even extend to potential umpires. Holly's example shows the ways that actions of coaches can impact both retention and recruitment of girls and women to umpiring.





# Findings: State Umpiring Managers

## Research Question 2:

### How do State Umpiring Managers understand their role in relation to registering and retaining female umpires?

State Umpiring Managers were the other group of participants in this project. Three of the four managers that were invited to participate chose to take part in an interview where they were asked broad questions about their understanding of the place of girls and women in umpiring, the challenges of recruitment and retention, and the various strategies that they had used or encountered to address these realities. In their responses, the managers referenced what they thought were the overall problems or issues that girls and women faced in umpiring, and what they thought might be done about this.

All three managers interviewed recognised that umpiring was historically male-dominated, and that culturally this dominance continued into contemporary experiences of umpires. In all cases, they noted that this manifested in unequal numbers of umpires- that overwhelmingly umpires across their state league and community leagues were boys and men. While the other state managers spoke less about the cultural conditions around this dominance, Paul noted that that women in umpiring experienced the brunt gender stereotypes and subsequent harassment simply by being present in this environment:

“There is still a perception, again whether it’s intentional or unintentional, that having a female official is different when in reality it shouldn’t be, especially in a team environment like Australian football is it’s not one official out there on their own, it’s at least two generally. I’m talking senior footy up that there will always be a problem until we can stop saying, ‘Oh, that girl’s really good,’ like it’s a surprise.”

Paul expanded on this, noting that football benefitted those that were white men, and those that did not fit this mould were historically ‘maligned’:

“I’m quite open and upfront about it, the white male privilege kind of thing. I know that’s not a politically good term that anyone likes using but the reality is that we’ve got a group of people that are very much maligned and have been maligned for so long. You look at any umpiring Club over the last 20 years have been white male, that’s the common thread between them, and similar kind of mind sets.”

While this was the most explicit commentary about broader cultures from the umpiring managers, it was also the commentary that spoke most faithfully to the findings of research question 1.

The recognition of a masculine culture was present to lesser degrees in the other two manager participants, and this translated to varying extents into their approaches to coaching umpires or putting strategies into place. In other words, while all managers agreed that the ideal outcome was to get more girls and women into umpiring, they had different understandings of how to achieve this goal.

## Gender, appointments, and 'merit'

Two of the three managers (Paul and Chris) recognised the tensions around selections and affirmative actions that were also spoken about by umpires in findings relating to research question 1. For Paul, he spoke at length about the tensions when appointing girls and women to games, particularly when they were promoted to higher grades. He recognised that there were social and cultural practices of 'resentment' that operated around these selections at times, and that these were a feature of norms of masculinity and a sense that these norms were being artificially challenged:

"It's a really hard thing to balance because you're dealing with young people and you're dealing with a perception that for many who won't go ahead in their careers of women who are just getting a leg up, blah blah blah, all that kind of stuff which builds resentment. However, that can also be countered with the appropriate education which we just don't have at the moment."

Paul articulated that this resentment was misplaced, and problematic, and he suggested that cultural change needed to happen through education and a philosophical and practical commitment to affirmative action:

"Honestly, if anyone can't accept that 'hey, we're going to be fast tracking some women in order to get more female umpires' then there's no place for you in the Club. It's that simple. If you've got an issue with diversifying your workforce then that Club needs to ask itself what does it stand for and if that's not part of it then you might need to get rid of some people."

Paul went on to explain that his philosophy was about competency, and that if a female umpire was on an 'equal level' or 'in the ball park', then it was a good opportunity to elevate them.

"What I mean by a strong candidate is a competent candidate. Like, not putting up someone that isn't there where they need to be. But they need to be on an equal level in the ballpark."

Overall, this approach complemented Maha's experience, and that of other umpires, who explained that if a coach affirmed their competence and readiness for elevated appointments, their confidence improved. It also avoided what Paul labelled as 'box-ticking', or the elevation of umpires for a promotional or visibility rationale before they may be ready or capable.

Chris took a different perspective, and was uncertain about whether appointments or other strategies such as academies or targeted programs to elevate girls and women were helpful. His understanding of this was around possible feedback from the umpires about 'blending in', and being treated like any others:

"I'm not sure moving forward if the girls feel like we just want to be normal and blend in to other programs rather than having specific - I'm not sure. That's just a thought is whether we've got to a stage now where do we need female academies and that, or are the girls saying, 'No, we just want to be like any other umpire and blend in to any program for umpiring.'"

This contribution mirrored much of what we heard from umpires in this study- that they at times felt uncomfortable about the 'female' label that was applied to them and programs that were designed to improve their umpiring. However, our analysis suggests that part of the reason umpires may take that position is due to the culture and resentment around these programs, rather than the programs themselves. The results of this study indicate that what is needed is not an elimination of programs that upskill a marginalised, minority group in umpiring, but a reframing of these programs to already privileged umpires that are not part of that targeted group.

When discussing the lack of women at state league level and progressing to the AFL, Chris did recognise that a big feature of building the readiness of girls and women for this level was shifting them into state league programs sooner, possibly via rookie or academy programs, to ensure that they had more resources to grow their skills for longer.

“I think states have, again, they’ve just got to get [women] into their system even if they’re not quite at a certain level- they’re better off in your state league program than spending another year or two at community. So I think

states have just got to look at it and go, ‘Well, okay. Some of them might not be quite ready, but we get them into our system with more resources, and that’s going to help them develop and then increase their numbers at state league level.’”

These contributions show that state league managers are cognisant of the needs for women to be elevated to higher leagues, and that strategies in community and state league levels need to be employed in order to do this. These strategies extend beyond selections to other aspects of umpiring.

## Other strategies and solutions

State Umpiring Managers raised a number of strategies that they had encountered, used or thought about in their roles. These included strategies around visibility and promotion, social support, change rooms and coaching strategies.

### Visibility and promotion

In order to address the recruitment of girls and women to umpiring, Chris suggested that the most helpful strategies were around visibility of girls and women umpires, and the promotion of this. He mentioned that he had formerly had some success around this in his state approximately ten years earlier.

“we really had a strong push to start getting more females involved. We did things like we had a Queen’s birthday, division one reserves panel, all-female panel... we had umpires that were up to that level and were doing it anyway, so we thought in terms of promoting females and umpiring back then, we put them in the one game. And that got a heap news and promotion. So that was really good.”

Chris repeated this strategy on other occasions, and felt that this produced benefits of visibility. However, this represented the majority of his articulations in the interview about what might encourage girls and women to become umpires.

### Increased female staff numbers

For both Steven and Chris, social support was noted as a key response for female umpires in light of the cultural or contextual challenges that they faced.

“I guess back 12, 13 years ago I realised that we’re male dominated, we need to do something about it to make them feel I guess included in the best way we could... [I thought] if we’re going to have young female umpires coming through, then we needed to have female coaches, female support staff, all that sort of stuff involved as well.”

Steven utilised this philosophy to ensure that there was a female welfare officer and psychologist at the State level. He also engaged a female leadership group at that level, who were asked to report back with any issues that might require action. While Paul agreed that additional support and communication might be helpful, he differed in his response about the requirement for women to fill additional staffing roles, and suggested that the gender of the person that is working with the umpires was less relevant. This aligns with our findings that demonstrate that gender is not necessarily relevant when it comes to positive relationships that sustain communication and care. Our data indicates that participants in this study did not necessarily mind what gender their coaches or support staff were. What was more important to them was the expression of care through listening and openness, and respect and support in their umpiring.

### Change room policies

While change rooms were not mentioned as a pertinent issue by Chris or Paul, Steven had undertaken significant work to reform the change room policy in his state league. These changes in many ways ascribed to the ideals that were articulated by participant umpires in this project. In brief, they relied on a 'three area' model- one for men to get changed, one for women to get changed, and a common area for coming together when not getting changed or using toilet or shower facilities. This model sustained a connected team element, especially at the training ground, but also allowed separation. This strategy was supported by a dress code:

"there is a common area where they might want to go and see the trainer but we have policies in place that, if you're in that area, then you need to have a shirt on, you need to have your shorts on, all that sort of stuff."

If using an ice bath in this area, all umpires, regardless of gender, were required to keep a shirt and shorts on. This policy resulted in some push back when first being implemented, but Steven insisted on it to ensure equality in its application.

"The females were really pretty good. But the males, it took us at least a couple of seasons to get it right... It might have been that, if you were umpiring league footy, [the consequences of not having a shirt on in that area were that] the following week, you're in reserves... And that also sent a strong message of one, support to both the male and the female umpires. Hang on a sec, we need to provide these facilities as equals."

This model represents clarity for all umpires and was sustained by clear guidance and consequences from the top. While there are clear constraints for less used or resourced grounds, the policy could be applied to any area where there is at least one cubicle for changing, and another area for umpires to congregate.

### Coaching strategies

Although coaching strategies was the element least spoken about by managers, it did present one key story about differentiation and responsiveness. Steven raised the importance of recognising individual umpires' strengths and weaknesses, and responding to those through coaching. To do this, he spoke about the example of teaching a female field umpire to bounce. Following some years of coaching and refining her methods, the umpire went on to a different league, and Steven went to watch her debut:

"she walked out and her first bounce had changed completely... and it was based on - this will summarise why I think we struggle for the next step. Her technique was based on a male. I'll give you an example. Bouncing a footy, a male has the ability to bounce it with his hands straight up and straight through because they have the brute force within the shoulders and their torso. When I looked at [her action], we tried that and I said to her, I said, 'That's not going to work for you. It's not going to work. I think you need now, we need to develop you a sling action similar to when you hit a golf ball, it's all wrist'. But then when I got to the first game and saw her trying to bounce just all brute force, I rang [the coach] on the Monday and said, 'What the hell mate? What have you done?' So anyway, I sent over videos of her that we had done while she was developing and we got her back to where she is today. [As coaches we need] to adapt to the female to give them the techniques to go to the highest level."

This experience speaks to some of the data we encountered from umpires in relation to research question 1. In it, we see that the coaches who can make the most influence are able to recognise and respond to the particular capabilities and areas of improvement of umpires. In this scenario, Steven had supported the umpire to bounce in a way that worked for her, but from his perspective, other coaches were attempting to replicate bouncing that had been done by (only) men before her.



### Cultural change

Paul was the only manager to substantively engage in discussions around culture change, especially in relation to gendered harassment and abuse. For Paul, he saw that culture change needed to come from resourcing Leagues to confront these aspects of umpiring both within umpiring Clubs, and within the broader League including playing Clubs.

“It’s just more having I think that education component around it which footy can also provide because it’s a really important social issue too, especially in the context of broader issues like domestic violence and all of that kind of stuff. It really does have a connection and I guess what do we want our group to be and my view was always it should be reflecting society. So if that behaviour’s not good in a workplace or a general group then it’s not acceptable within an umpiring club either.”

In this excerpt we can see that Paul locates gendered harassment as a societal issue, for which umpiring clubs can be an important educational institution. This quote followed his points about the young men in clubs and the ways that through umpiring, they can learn ‘how to interact with people in general’. Beyond this, Paul recognised that abuse and harassment also came from spectators, players, and player coaches:

“... there is still a bias against women umpiring. The Clubs need to do a little bit of work around that because there are still elements within Community football in [city] that, whether it’s intentional or not intentional, holds sexist views when it comes to umpires. When girls are still coping abuse because of their gender or comments like ‘back to the kitchen’ or whatever like that or ‘what would you know’, ‘take charge’, that type of inflammatory language just hasn’t been eradicated completely from [city]. Until it has been eradicated completely then it’s not a job done yet. Whilst it’s definitely getting better and it’s changing our player base need to understand, across both men and women’s football, that I feel anyway, is that there’s this unconfirmed bias towards male officials.”

Paul further related this to the AFLW, where he felt that national dialogue about the quality and presence of umpires had sexist overtones:

“... the AFLW players have actively engaged or actively advocated the male AFL umpires [to take over the AFLW umpiring]. Now you can just say AFL umpires and the ladies are included in that conversation. I don’t buy that. Eleni is not the diversity point here. The fact is you’re saying our female umpires aren’t up to scratch. You’re saying that our women’s competition needs male AFL umpires to officiate. You might not use those terms but if you’re saying AFL umpires and there’s only one female you do the math. That sets a negative precedent because all of a sudden you are saying to that girl that you’re not good enough to officiate in this competition.”

This statement shows one of the possible interpretations of national level umpiring appointments that are made at different levels. For Paul, he argues that from requesting or encouraging AFL umpires in the AFLW, women were automatically shut out from this competition and pathway, and this sent messages to those that observe the game that no women are good enough to umpire at that level. Paul argued that these policies entrenched already problematic social and cultural expectations of women as poorer quality umpires, even alongside the growing popularity, publicity and respect for women playing football. These contributions raise questions about national appointment and academy selections, and about resourcing for umpiring and playing clubs.

# Conclusions

This project investigated the social, cultural and material conditions of umpires around Australia. Through participating in expansive, in depth interviews and focus groups, 27 umpires across New South Wales, the ACT, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria shared their experiences of umpiring while female.

This phrasing is deliberate, as this report shows that gender plays a key role in experiences umpiring. The historical and contemporary context of umpiring continues to be male-dominated, not only in numbers, but also culturally. The data analysis detailed in this report showed the complex realities that girls and women faced in multiple umpiring environments, including cultural and social discrimination, harassment and abuse around their gender.

Overwhelmingly, this study has demonstrated that girls and women in umpiring navigate experiences where they are indirectly or directly told that they do not belong or deserve to be in umpiring. While at its best, umpiring provides participants with greater social, physical and mental health, this report demonstrates that gender plays a significant role in constraining those benefits.

Although State Umpiring Managers demonstrated varying levels of engagement with the recognition of the inequality and inequity in umpiring for girls and women, they had differences in their perspectives and motivations about how this might be meaningfully addressed. These differences illuminated the lack of consistency in these approaches across the regions, and potentially within them at community umpiring Club level as well.

This report demonstrates that the cultural and institutional mechanisms of community umpiring Clubs and state leagues around the country still require significant change and improvement if they are to make girls and women feel safe, welcome and valued as umpires. While the AFL has stated that Australian Football “is a game for everyone, no matter who you are or where you’re from” (AFL, 2019c, p.117), it is clear that for many umpires, this is not the case.

With the growth of AFLW and the explosion of girls and women participating in Australian Football, umpiring represents a place of substantial potential growth—both in numbers of participants and environmental quality. To sustain the growth of Australian Football, growth of umpiring is also needed. Considering how to grow umpiring in both quantity and quality is a crucial undertaking for those involved in football operations, coaching and game strategy over the short, medium and long term. We believe that the findings and recommendations in this report will assist in guiding this development of umpiring across local, state and national levels.

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# Appendix: Interview and focus group schedules

## 1. Community Umpires focus group schedule

**What are some of the things you like most about umpiring?**

- Positive aspects of training, games, coaching, the umpiring group?

**What are some of the things that you would like to change about umpiring?**

- Negative aspects of training, games, coaching, the umpiring group?

**Do you feel that you experience things differently to umpires who are male?**

- Does it feel like male umpires are treated differently by those in your umpiring group? Umpire coaches? Football players? Team coaches?
- Tell me about a time in an umpiring environment that you were aware of being a girl/ woman because of the environment or interactions you were facing.
- What are some of the positives about being a female umpire?
- What are some of the negatives about being a female umpire?

**If you had to name one reason that keeps you continuing with umpiring, what would it be?**

**If you had to name one reason that might cause you to leave umpiring, what would it be?**

**How connected do you feel to your umpiring group?**

- What makes you feel connected? What might make you feel more connected? Is there anything that ever makes you feel like you don't belong?

**Do you think there is a different type of connectedness depending on the gender of the umpire?**

- How connected do you think the male umpires feel to the group in comparison with the female umpires? Are there different types of friendships/ relationships that happen in the group related to gender? Are there any moments of inclusion/ exclusion that happen that relate to gender? Have you ever witnessed or experienced harassment or negative attitudes because that relates to gender?

**Do you feel that there is a strong pathway for you to get to the AFL?**

- Do you feel other girls/ women can access this pathway? Have they already been successful from your group or other groups in the state?

**How supported do you feel by your community group/ state league?**

- What are some events, policies or behaviours that make you feel supported? What are some events, policies or behaviours that make you feel unsupported?

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**



## 2. State League Umpires interview schedule

**How long have you been umpiring?**

**How did you get into umpiring?**

- Prompts: What made you start umpiring?  
What was the appeal?

**Tell me about your first time coming to an umpiring group.**

- What's something positive you remember from your first umpiring training session? What was something negative you remember? What was an abiding memory from that time?

**What are some of the things you like most about umpiring?**

- Positive aspects of training, games, coaching, the umpiring group?

**What are some of the things that you would like to change about umpiring?**

- Negative aspects of training, games, coaching, the umpiring group?

**Do you feel that you experience things differently to umpires who are male?**

- Does it feel like male umpires are treated differently by those in your umpiring group? Umpire coaches? Football players? Team coaches?
- Tell me about a time in an umpiring environment that you were aware of being a girl/ woman because of the environment or interactions you were facing.
- What are some of the positives about being a female umpire?
- What are some of the negatives about being a female umpire?

**If you had to name one reason that keeps you continuing with umpiring, what would it be?**

**If you had to name one reason that might cause you to leave umpiring, what would it be?**

**How connected do you feel to your umpiring group?**

- What makes you feel connected? What might make you feel more connected? Is there anything that ever makes you feel like you don't belong?

**Do you think there is a different type of connectedness depending on the gender of the umpire?**

- How connected do you think the male umpires feel to the group in comparison with the female umpires? Are there different types of friendships/ relationships that happen in the group related to gender? Are there any moments of inclusion/ exclusion that happen that relate to gender? Have you ever witnessed or experienced harassment or negative attitudes because that relates to gender?

**Do you feel that there is a strong pathway for you to get to the AFL?**

- Do you feel other girls/ women can access this pathway? Have they already been successful from your group or other groups in the state?

**How supported do you feel by your community and state league?**

- What are some events, policies or behaviours that make you feel supported? What are some events, policies or behaviours that make you feel unsupported?

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

### 3. State Umpiring Manager interview schedule

**What do you think is the overall landscape for female umpiring in your state?**

**What are some specific challenges that there are for recruiting and retaining female umpires in your state?**

- What is the biggest challenge to getting females to become umpires? How are these challenges different to recruiting males to become umpires?

**Data shows that female umpires tend to leave umpiring at higher rates than boys/ men. Why do you think this might be happening?**

**What are some specific things that you think might assist in recruiting females to become umpires?**

**What do you think are some strategies that might work to retain females in umpiring?**

**What are some initiatives around the state that are happening to address female registration, participation and retention in umpiring?**

- How successful do you think these initiatives are? What could be done to improve/ strengthen them?

**What are some barriers or challenges to implementing these initiatives or strategies?**

**How well are pathways to the AFL for female umpires in your state operating?**

- What do you think the difference is in pathways to the AFL for females and males in your state? What do you think the difference is for female pathways in your state in comparison with other states?

**Is there anything else you'd like to say about female participation in umpiring?**







### **For more information**

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