



# COACHING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN RUGBY

A research report led by La Trobe University, with contributions from researchers at the University of Newcastle and Leeds Beckett University (UK).



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PROJECT AIM

To explore how to strengthen the coaching of women and girls in rugby, improving their experience and increasing retention in the sport.

## THE PROBLEM

Women and girls' participation in contact sports is rapidly increasing in Australia, the USA, and Canada. However, coaching strategies often remain unchanged from men's sports, failing to address the distinct needs and motivations of female athletes. Coaches play a crucial role in shaping player experiences and retention, yet there is a lack of understanding of the gendered nature of sports. This oversight creates barriers to recruitment, participation, and long-term engagement for women and girls in rugby and other contact sports.

## METHODOLOGY

- The research was conducted in two parts:
- Part One: Existing Knowledge – A systematic review of peer-reviewed literature was conducted to assess the gendered nature of coaching in contact sports, identifying key insights and gaps in current coaching approaches.
  - Part Two: Coach's Experience – A concept mapping exercise was carried out with rugby coaches to identify challenges they face when coaching women and girls. Coaches rated the importance and feasibility of addressing these challenges, helping to shape practical recommendations for improvement.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The research identified three broad categories of challenges faced by rugby coaches when coaching women and girls:
1. Organisational Challenges
    - Lack of access to quality coaching for women and girls.
    - Inequality in resources and support compared to men's teams.
    - Gender imbalance in coaching and leadership positions.
    - Limited pathways and opportunities for women in rugby.
  2. Coaching Challenges
    - Teaching contact skills effectively and safely.
    - Adapting coaching techniques to suit women's learning styles and physical needs.
    - Engaging and motivating female players.
  3. Cultural Challenges
    - Persistent misconceptions and stereotypes about women in rugby.
    - Negative perceptions from administrators, parents, and the broader sports community.

## A MODEL FOR CHANGE



- The study recommends applying the Implementation Drivers Framework to bring about change in coaching women and girls in rugby. This involves:
- Competency Drivers: Recruiting, training, and mentoring the right coaches with a strong understanding of gender-responsive coaching.
  - Organisational Drivers: Developing policies and processes to create a more equitable and supportive environment for female players and coaches.
  - Leadership Drivers: Ensuring Rugby Australia takes a proactive role in advocating for and implementing change, setting an example at all levels of the sport.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL BARRIERS



1

Improve access to quality coaching and resources for women and girls



Rugby Xplorer Learning Centre with specific focus on Women and Girls resources

2

Ensure equal allocation of training facilities, equipment, and uniforms



Working with Club Development Managers to ensure equality and minimum standards across clubs

3

Strengthen pathways for female players to transition into coaching and leadership roles



Targeted and bespoke programs including the Rugby Australia Female Leadership Program

## OVERCOMING CULTURAL BARRIERS



4

Lead advocacy efforts to challenge misconceptions about women in rugby



Advocates across all of rugby, showcasing the dedication and determination of women and girls in rugby

5

Promote visible female role models in coaching and leadership



Highlight coaches in marketing and media campaigns and feature women's rugby success stories

6

Foster an inclusive club culture where women and girls feel valued and supported



Minimum club standards and resources available to clubs to create inclusive environments

## ENHANCING COACHING PRACTICES



7

Provide tailored training for coaches to better understand the unique needs of female athletes



Gender inclusive coaching techniques, providing guidance on effective communication and transformational coaching

8

Implement education programs that address injury prevention, body image concerns, and gender-responsive coaching techniques



Education on the impact of the menstrual cycle on performance and tailored health modules on the Learning Centre

9

Encourage mentorship programs linking experienced female coaches with new coaches and players



Female Coaching Network and encouraging female coaches to undertake the Mentor Program available through the Learning Centre

## CONCLUSION

The research highlights the need for Rugby Australia to adopt a multi-faceted approach to coaching women and girls. By improving resource allocation, challenging cultural barriers, and enhancing coaching education, the sport can provide a more inclusive and positive experience for female participants, ultimately increasing retention and long-term engagement in rugby.