

Unite to end violence against women in sport

Keynote address to 5th IWG World Conference on Women and Sport

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We are gathered here today on the land of Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and I want to begin by acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of the land and pay particular respect to their elders, past and present.

I have had the opportunity to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait elders from across Australia and I know the enormous contribution they make to their communities and the Australian community more broadly.

Some of our greatest sportspeople in Australia are young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This includes one of our most iconic sports stars – Cathy Freeman, who is the ambassador of this Conference. Cathy is also a source of inspiration and courage for all Australians.

Thank you to the International Working Group on Women and Sport for inviting me here today to speak on such an important issue for women. It is a pleasure to be among such esteemed company, particularly the United Nation's Special Adviser to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Rachel Mayanja and Dr Kari Fasting from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences who have both travelled such a distance to be here and of course to be here with our expert Chair and friend Jane Caro.

It is a pleasure also to be here among such an esteemed and expert crowd. Given the breadth of topics and the calibre of all the presenters and participants, I am confident the Sydney Platform for Action will mark a vital addition to those which came from Brighton, Windhoek, Montreal and Kumamoto.

I want to begin by talking about the power of sport and its place in our culture. There has already been much said on this topic so I will keep my remarks brief.

Everyone deserves to participate in sport. Everyone deserves to feel the rush, and the exhilaration - to share in the sense of belonging, of contributing, of standing out, of camaraderie, of working together; the sense of achieving, the joy of winning and the sore disappointment of losing. Everyone deserves the benefit of physical strength, the burst of endorphins, the focus, the meditation, and the relief.

Men and women, boy and girls alike get these feelings from **all** forms of participation at **all** levels of sport – from running onto the field with your team on a Saturday morning, from tying up your running shoes, unfurling a yoga mat, joining your colleagues in a lunch time netball competition or smacking the cricket ball round the backyard. Just as you feel enormous achievement from winning a gold medal, taking out a championship, breaking a world record or setting a personal best.

And as supporters and fans, these are the same feelings we experience as we come together to watch the showdown between Australia and New Zealand in the Rugby World Cup or the epic battle at the SCG as Australia takes on England or the West Indies or the under 12s soccer grand final. Decked out in our team colours, we cram on to buses and trains and eye-off opposition supporters or we sit on the couch with our family competing for whose favourite is the most valuable team member.

Here in Australia, these experiences are extremely meaningful.

Australian identity and citizenship is heavily intertwined with sport. We are 'sports-mad,' 'a sporting nation,' 'a nation of sportsmen.' As the UK *Observer's* chief sport writer, Kevin Mitchell, recently remarked, "In a country generally blessed with sunshine, sport dominates nearly everything: news bulletins, pub discussions, the timing of weddings and holidays, the standing of politicians."¹

But, as with most things, there can be and often is a dark side.

¹ K Mitchell, 'Australia's passion tilts the balance,' *The Observer*, Sunday 7 January 2007.

I don't think it is unfair to say that, in recent times, professional sport in Australia has been plagued by disturbing allegations of sexual violence and harassment of women by high profile sportsmen.

Nor is it unfair to say that this has particularly been the case with the various codes of professional football.

You could be forgiven for holding the impression that, in sporting circles, respect for women is low.

Sport is definitely an area of unfinished business for gender equality. The accomplishments of female athletes are extraordinary - for example, at the Beijing Olympics, women made up 45% of Australia's team and won 57% of the gold medals.²

But the participation of women in sport at all levels is also marked by division and discrimination reinforced by negative gender stereotypes.

This brings me to my main point today. Exposing and addressing these negative stereotypes is critical. These stereotypes foster a belief that women's role in sport is an inferior and subordinate one – that women are merely fans, spectators, the support team or perhaps worst of all, only good for looking “sexy” and “alluring” at the awards dinner.

Addressing gender stereotyping is not only crucial to ending violence against women by sportsmen, it is crucial to ending violence against women by all men. It is also crucial to addressing the wider issue of gender equality in both sport and life - and to achieving gender equality in our homes, our schools, our workplaces and our communities.

This is not just a contention of mine. It has support from the United Nations, which has observed that, “the relationship between gender equality and sport is not solely about achieving equality in women's participation and treatment within sports.” It is

² Australian Government Independent Sport Panel, *The Future of Sport in Australia Report* (2009), p 38.

also about “promoting “sport for gender equality”, or harnessing the potential of sport for social empowerment of women and girls.”³

So today, I will be examining this issue from three angles:

- Firstly, by looking at some of the recent incidents in our sporting world that have alerted the community to the debate about violence and discrimination against women in sport;
- Secondly, by looking at the incidence and impact of gender stereotyping in sport; and
- Finally, by delving into the relationship between sport and gender equality and the potential for change.

Let’s begin by looking at violence against women.

While the issue of sportsmen and violence against women is regularly in the public eye in Australia, it would be wrong to think that it is, in itself, an aberrant thing restricted to the world of sport.

Violence against women is a national problem.

Australian women continue to experience harassment and violence as an everyday reality. One in three Australian women will experience physical violence in her adult life.⁴ Nearly one in five Australian women will experience sexual assault.⁵ Yet, reporting and conviction rates for violence against women remain low.

So, while it is clearly not isolated within, or exclusive to, the sporting arena, violence perpetrated against women by sportsmen - particularly sexual violence - has been casting an ever increasing shadow over professional sport in Australia. And perhaps the highest profile example is the various codes of football.

In May 2009, the ABC’s Four Corners program reported an incident in which a 19 year old girl called Clare accompanied two members of one of Australia’s most

³ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Women 2000 and Beyond: Women, gender equality and sport* (2007). Available at

www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/Women%20and%20Sport.pdf (viewed 28 April 2010), p 8.

⁴ ABS, *Personal Safety, Australia, 2005* (Reissue), Catalogue No. 4906.0 (2006),

⁵ ABS, above.

prominent NRL teams back to a hotel room at the pub where she was working. As Four Corners reported, one of them started kissing her and, “over the next two hours, at least 12 players and staff came into the room, six of them had sex with Clare, the others watched.”⁶

Clare made a complaint to police.⁷ She told Four Corners the events of that night have destroyed her life. Psychiatrists reported that, following the incident, she became suicidal. The program stated that the New Zealand Accident and Compensation Commission found that Clare was suffering from post traumatic stress disorder, funded treatment for her and gave her a weekly payment in compensation.

While the details were alarming, one of the main points made in the program was that the men’s behaviour was part of a sustained and pervasive pattern in professional football codes.

In 2004, Four Corners had also reported on several cases of rape by elite AFL players. Around the same time, the rape of a young woman by a group of elite rugby league players also received a lot of coverage, though no charges were laid.

I do not have time to catalogue the number of allegations of violence and harassment made against football players that have been reported since then. Suffice to say they have included sexually harassing phone messages, rape, allegations of sexual assault in clubs and at sporting events, glassing and simple assault.

Recent research suggests that, of the reported cases of alleged sexual assault by elite level footballers in Australia since 1998, none have resulted in a conviction.⁸

It is difficult not to gain the impression that the consequences for these men are at best, short-lived.

Following the Four Corners report last year, one of the primary sportsmen involved in the incident was stood down from both his commitments with a television Network

⁶ ABC Four Corners, Transcript, ‘Code of Silence,’ 11 May 2009. Available at www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2009/s2567972.htm (viewed 28 April 2010)

⁷ ABC Four Corners, above

⁸ K Toffoletti, ‘Footballers Behaving Badly: Changing Attitudes Toward Women,’ 2010 Pamela Denoon Lecture 2010. Available at www.pameladenoonlecture.net/the_pamela_denoon_lecture/2010/03/2010-pdl-kim-toffoletti.html (viewed 28 April 2010)

and his coaching role with a National Rugby League club. The team lost the support of five sponsors, including the support of its main sponsor who had provided \$700,000-a-year and enjoyed a nine-year association with the club. The Senate even passed a motion urging the Federal Government to do more to change the culture in sporting organisations.

And yet, less than a year later, that same sportsman launched his own, self titled show on the rival television network – a family friendly entertainment show about rugby league - the code he had supposedly disgraced.

So, while outrage may be immediate, it appears to be transitory – the value of these players quickly seems to outweigh their ‘transgressions,’ or ‘misconduct.’

In relation to similar incidents in the United States, one US commentator, Frank Deford, made the observation that, “while there is a lot of bemoaning about the athletes’ violence towards women, has it affected the popularity of any sport? Until we see evidence to the contrary, we can continue to assume that how pro-athletes treat women is simply not germane **so long as they treat the game we love with respect and devotion**”.⁹

The incidents which receive the most attention tend to be those at the grievous end of the spectrum of sexual and physical violence. However, there are also reports of young sportsmen purposely demeaning women as part of initiation or group bonding rituals. I have read about one team’s initiation ritual, which apparently involves young players urinating on women in public places.¹⁰ And let’s not forget the role that the excess consumption of alcohol plays. Some coaches believe it is an essential component of male bonding despite alcohol being a strong contributory factor in many act of violence against women.

A Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Gender Studies at Deakin University who has a keen interest in sport is Dr Kim Toffoletti. She suggests that this litany of events over

⁹ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, note 3

¹⁰ N Philadelphoff-Puren, ‘Dereliction: Women, Rape and Football,’ *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, (2004) (21) December, p 45.

the last 10 years, some of which I have touched on today, have, “revealed a fundamental disrespect and disregard for women across the footballing codes.”¹¹

So, now as Dr Toffoletti suggests, I would like to take these stories and place them in the broader context of gender stereotyping in sport.

These gender stereotypes are created and reinforced through the different ways that men and women are able – or even permitted - to participate in sport in our culture. And this difference creates a profound power imbalance which lies at the heart of all forms of discrimination against women, including violence.

Let’s look at participation.

Australia is indeed a nation of sportspeople. A recent ABS publication shows that, over the 12 months they collected data, roughly 66% of the adult Australian population – men and women – participated in physical activities for recreation, exercise or sport.¹² And 64% of kids aged between five and 14 participated in organised sport outside of school hours.¹³ While we are pretty good do-ers, we are also great spectators, with 44% of the adult population attending at least one sporting event in that 12 months.¹⁴

But of course, strict gender segregation marks all levels of sport.

Sport is the subject of a permanent exemption under the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act. This exemption means it is not unlawful to exclude a person of one sex from any competitive sporting activity in which the strength, stamina or physique of competitors is considered relevant.

In particular, elite, professional sport, therefore remains the unquestioned domain of men.

This domain is created and reinforced through the media coverage of sport. In 1996, a study conducted by the Australian Sports Commission found coverage of women’s

¹¹ K Toffoletti, note 8

¹² ABS, *Sports and Physical Recreation: A Statistical Overview*, Australia, Cat. 4156.0 (2009)

¹³ ABS, above

¹⁴ ABS, above

sport accounted for just 1.4% in radio, 6.8% in sport magazines and 10.7% of newspaper sports reporting.¹⁵ And women's sport accounted for only 2% of total sport broadcasting in television.¹⁶

Around the same time, a report on the coverage of women's sport noted that the level of coverage of women's sport was certainly not a reflection of the limited time available on networks. In fact, "one program detailed the minutiae of *guinea pig racing* for more than six minutes, whereas the only woman's sports story on the same show was given 15 seconds."¹⁷

And alarmingly we learn from the report released by the Australian Sports Commission today, almost 15 years later, the TV coverage of women's sport has increased from a tiny 2% in 1996 to 7-9% in 2010 – hardly a meteoric rise in 15 years.¹⁸

The recent Senate Inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia rightly pointed out that the limited media exposure of women's sport creates a vicious circle: It "means littler commercial opportunities and this severely curtails revenue raising capacity and limits the interests from broadcasters. Lack of revenue prevents expensive competitions, which then puts mainstream advertising out of reach which then limits fans willingness to attend and thus lack of media engagement."¹⁹

Of course, as we all know, this doesn't mean that women are not participating in sport, as both players and spectators. A quick survey of the crowd at the Homebush Stadium, or the MCG or any suburban sporting field will show you that.

However, as Dr Toffoletti points out, women's participation in sport in many ways "mirrors the gender division of paid labour in the Australian workforce, where women predominate in caring professions that service the needs of others - this itself being

¹⁵ M Phillips, *An illusory image: A report on the media coverage and portrayal of women's sport* (1996) cited in United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, note 3, p 25.

¹⁶ M Phillips, above

¹⁷ M Phillips, *An illusory image: A report on the media coverage and portrayal of women's sport* (1996), cited in Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, *About Time! Women in sport and recreation in Australia* (2006), p 99. Available at www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/ecita_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/womeninsport/report/index.htm (viewed 26 April 2010).

¹⁸ M Phillips, note 15; Australian Sports Commission, *Towards a Level Playing Field: Sport and gender in Australian Media* (2010), p v

¹⁹ The Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, note 17, p103.

an extension of the type of unpaid work that women carry the burden of in families and households.”²⁰

Women are on the red carpet at the Brownlow medal, cheering from the sidelines, providing the entertainment, driving kids to practice, washing uniforms and cutting up oranges.

This is exactly why achieving gender equality in sport is a key plank in the campaign for gender equality in our homes, our schools, our workplaces and our communities more broadly.

For, often when we talk about women in sport, we raise the same issues as when we talk about women in the workplace – pay equity, women in leadership positions, discrimination on the grounds of sex, the valorisation of a male ideal and the marginalisation of women as the physically weaker and the caring sex.

This brings me, finally, to the role of sport in achieving gender equality.

That we have a long way to go was illustrated with complete clarity to me last year, when the Associated Press named its top 10 female athletes. While Serena Williams placed a well deserved first, two of the top 10 female athletes were actually race horses.²¹

Let me be clear, engaging women of all ages in sport is an end in and of itself. The UN has said that, combined with the emotional, psychological and medical benefits that are associated with participation in sport, participation also enables girls and women to increase their self-confidence and self esteem, enjoy freedom of expression and acquire valuable skills in negotiation, management and decision-making.²²

²⁰ K Toffoletti, note 8

²¹ C Pierson Dulay, ‘Zenyatta runner-up for AP Female Athlete of the Year.’ About.com: Horseracing, 22 December 2009. At <http://horseracing.about.com/od/latestnews/a/aa122209a.htm>

²² United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, note 3. p 9.

But, as sportswomen and men and human rights advocates, we should not lose sight of the **power** of sport to act as a catalyst for challenging gender stereotypes and violence against women, and as an important vehicle to achieve gender equality.

Nowhere is this more true than in a country such as ours. The wide Australian sports arena provides a significant opportunity to reach out to young boys and men on attitudes about women.²³

The participation of boys and men in sport - from their role as athletes to fans to organisational leaders and the positioning of sport within the national imagination - means sport has the potential to be a powerful forum for dialogue.

There are increasing examples of sporting clubs instituting a range of programs to do just that – from the under 5s to the top teams, and I am hopeful these will contribute to the more positive and balanced participation of young women and men at all levels in the future.

One relevant resource in this regard is the Play by the Rules website²⁴, which is a partnership between the Australian Human Rights Commission, the Australian Sports Commission and the State and Territory Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissions. This website provides information and online resources for community sporting clubs, coaches, parents and players about how to prevent and deal with discrimination and harassment, and how to develop more inclusive and welcoming environments for all participants. There has been a great response to the site and I think resources such as these could be expanded to address issues of gender stereotyping.

Many people, including the Federal Minister for Sport, have also drawn the link between violence against women by sportsmen and the lack of women in visible positions of sports leadership and governance.²⁵

Indeed, as Sex Discrimination Commissioner, it is my view that increasing the representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions is crucial to

²³ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs, above, p 12

²⁴ See www.playbytherules.net.au/

²⁵ See The Hon Kate Ellis MP, Transcript of Interview, 2UE (FED), 15 May 2009.; K Toffoletti, note 8

raising the status of women and gender equality. Recently I have been looking at these structures in corporate Australia, but it is just as clear that we seem to have the same problem when it comes to women's leadership in sport.

Research by the Chair of the International Working Group on Women in Sport, Johanna Adriaanse, has shown that, at present, only 21% of board directors of national sport organisations in Australia are women.²⁶ Just over 20% of national sport organisations have no women directors at all.²⁷ I am sure Johanna wasn't surprised to discover that this list included Australian Rugby League, Australian Rugby Union and Cricket Australia – these are, after all, our most iconic sports.²⁸

Raising the number of women in these positions is critical to changing attitudes – to reducing violence against women by sportsmen and to progressing gender equality in a sports-mad country such as our own. As Dr Toffoletti suggests,

If women and girls, and men and boys for that matter, don't see women in decision making and leadership positions, as full members of their sporting communities, then how can we hope to foster cultures that truly respect women?²⁹

To do this – to see women differently, both on and off the sporting field, we must consider the role of gender at every level of our sporting cultures and our sporting industry.³⁰

The International Working Group on Women in Sport has suggested that funding grants to national sporting bodies in Australia should be linked to the sports increasing the representation of women on their boards. They have my support – it is well and truly time that we took decisive and effective action such as this.

Minister Ellis announced yesterday that all sports organisations receiving government funding will need to report on the composition of their boards and these figures will be made public.³¹ This is a great development but should we not consider adopting

²⁶ J Adriaanse, *Gender Distribution on boards of National Sport Organisations in Australia funded by the Australian Sports Commission*, University of Technology Sydney, Doctoral Study (April 2010)

²⁷ J Adriaanse, above

²⁸ J Adriaanse, above

²⁹ K Toffoletti, note 8

³⁰ J Adriaanse, *No seat at the table? Women's under-representation in sport governance* (2009), Paper submitted to the European Sport Management Quarterly at 13.

³¹ The Hon Kate Ellis MP, 'Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the 5th International Working Group, World Conference on Women and Sport,' 20 May 2010. At www.kateellis.com.au/speeches/162/

some of the strategies that appear to be gaining traction in the business community? I am referring to the reforms requiring companies not just to disclose the number of women on their board and at senior level but to set a target and report transparently to the market against this target.

What we need is sporting bodies setting progressive targets so that over time we will have a minimum of 40% of each gender on national sporting boards. The Australian Sporting Commission, Australia's primary national sports agency appears to be leading the way. It's time other sporting bodies picked up the pace!

Everyone deserves the opportunity to participate and be visible in sport. Involvement in sport is as empowering for women as it is for men.

Exposing and addressing gender stereotypes is critical - critical to ending violence against women by sportsmen, to ending violence against women by all men. It is critical to achieving gender equality in our homes, our schools, our workplaces and our communities.

Looking around this room today, I sense a community that is keenly engaged in the matter of gender equality in sport and most certainly in building a culture of respect for all women and men in sporting arenas. Together we can build that momentum.

When I turn on the TV, open the paper, catch a sporting update on the radio, or drop my adolescent daughter and son to their respective sporting events, it is clear to me that sport is a powerful vehicle through which to drive change.

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