The professionalisation of Australian women’s cricket

New times and new opportunities

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Front cover
A member of the NSW Breakers takes the field for a WNCL match at Manuka Oval (Canberra, 2015).
(Photo by Mark Nolan / CA / Cricket Australia / Getty Images)

Authorship
Chris Hickey, Lyn Harrison, Debbie Ollis and Amanda Mooney assert their moral rights to be identified as the authors of this work.

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NEW TIMES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

When the Australian Women’s Cricket Team defeated the West Indies in 2013, to win their fifth World Cup from eight attempts, they reaffirmed their status as one of Australia’s most successful international teams. Victory in the 2015 Ashes series, in England, further reinforced their pre-eminent world status. During this time, significant changes also occurred off the field. Cricket Australia introduced pay increases of up to 150% for international and state-level players. The sustained success of the national team is attributed to the rapid growth of participation in women’s cricket (up 18% 2013–14), a trend that has resulted in females making up almost 25% of all cricket participants across Australia. On face value, the burgeoning profile of women’s cricket across Australia is cause for celebration.

It is against this backdrop that Cricket Australia faces a range of enduring and emerging issues in the provision and promotion of the women’s game. With so many changes and adaptations occurring across the game, we chose to limit the focus of this research to the elite level. Among the enduring issues that are understood at this level are persistently high attrition rates among elite and aspiring players and large age differences across teams and squads. A further point of difference in the men’s and women’s games is that female teams are largely supervised by male coaches and support staff.

While cricket is understood to impose an array of lifestyle challenges for elite level performers, there are nuances to the women’s game that warrant particular attention. Prominent here is the limited capacity to sustain meaningful education, training and employment while meeting the extensive playing and training schedules, and associated travel commitments. While the remuneration associated with participating at the elite level has greatly improved in recent years it does not present as a viable career, with only a minority of female players identified as full-time athletes. Whereas the men’s game offers elite players with the opportunity to establish a financial base capable of supporting them through and beyond their playing years, the women’s remuneration falls far short of this – even though it is unanimously described as being ‘much better than it used to be!’

Despite the recent gains that have been made across most aspects of the women’s game, issues of inequality continue to be prevalent around many aspects of their participation. This is noticeable in the provision and allocation of resources and the general lack of support personnel around them. A common strategy for overcoming the lack of support staff around women’s teams is the fractional apportioning of support staff employed around the men’s game to assist female players. While this strategy is well intended, operationally it generally proves unsatisfactory. At the heart of this criticism is the difficulty this creates in practically mediating the different playing and training schedules and needs of men’s and women’s teams and male and female athletes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the Australian Women’s Cricket Team defeated the West Indies in 2013, to win their fifth World Cup from eight attempts, they reaffirmed their status as one of Australia’s most successful international teams. Victory in the 2015 Ashes series, in England, further reinforced their pre-eminent world status. During this time, significant changes also occurred off the field. Cricket Australia introduced pay increases of up to 150% for international and state-level players. The sustained success of the national team is attributed to the rapid growth of participation in women’s cricket (up 18% 2013–14), a trend that has resulted in females making up almost 25% of all cricket participants across Australia. On face value, the burgeoning profile of women’s cricket across Australia is cause for celebration.

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By breaking the playing group up into three career phases (early, mid and late) we were able to identify and locate particular issues, opportunities and challenges within particular career phases. Examples of this include:

**Early-career players** – were particularly optimistic about the career opportunities that lay in front of them should they be able to make their way to the elite level. High-profile role models, such as Ellyse Perry and Alyssa Healy, were seen to have enhanced the public perception of women cricketers by representing emphasised femininity – thus rendering it a less ‘risky’ identity space for young athletes.

**Mid-career players** – generally faced an ongoing struggle to reconcile the competing demands associated with their cricket and non-cricket commitments. For many in this cohort, the opportunities presented through the increased professionalisation of the game were intensifying these tensions, rather than reconciling them. Yes, it was good to be better paid, but it still did not replace the need for a supplementary income and/or prepare them for life after cricket. Further, many in this cohort were struggling to sustain meaningful relationships outside of cricket.

**Late-career players** – harboured somewhat bittersweet attitudes toward the opportunities that were being made available to elite performers through the increased professionalisation of the women’s game. At one level they were grateful that the women’s game was finally being better recognised and remunerated, while at another level they shared a concern around the heightened expectations being placed on players. Further to this was a concern among this cohort that the current approach to promoting and marketing the game was privileging particular player identities, with an emphasis on heterosexuals, to the exclusion of others.

Though there are strong indicators that women’s cricket has benefited from a surge in recognition, support and provision, women continue to function as second-class citizens to their male counterparts. Though the players are overtly grateful to Cricket Australia for the advancements that have been made in support of elite women cricketers, there are enduring aspects of the prevailing culture within elite cricket in Australia that continue to position women cricketers as peripheral. Within this culture there is a perceived lack of respect for the sacrifices that players make to compete at the elite level and a corresponding lack of attention to their specific challenges and needs in this pursuit. Such has been the recent level of improved support that there is a widespread view that to express anything other than gratitude can be read as ‘ungratefulness’. This creates a particular tension for mid- and late-career players who view the processes of change as far from complete!

A key challenge that emanates from this research involves the need for industry-wide education and training as a basis on which to build a more gender inclusive and respectful culture across all levels of the game. Further to this is the need for targeted support to better attend to the specific professional and personal needs of emerging and elite women cricketers.
SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The encouragement and/or participation of fathers and brothers were the most recognised driver of young players’ induction into cricket.
- Although they often experienced sexism and bullying, most cricketers reflect on their early experiences competing in male competitions as being positive for their cricket development.
- Strong family support is a central feature of young players’ induction into competitive cricket.
- Young female players identified access to elite pathways and friendships as the key drivers to sustained participation.
- The sustained need to be ‘on the road’ during cricket seasons placed considerable strain on non-cricket relationships.
- In contrast to social stereotyping, most young female cricketers did not identify ‘lesbianism’ as presenting any sort of problem for the women’s game, yet participants’ stories of club-based experiences clearly highlight systematic issues associated with sexism, harassment and homophobia.
- While the high profiling of particular ‘photo friendly’ female cricketers strategically works against the lesbian stereotype that exists around the women’s game, it simultaneously acts to marginalise other members of the wider playing group.
- The demands associated with playing, or preparing to play, at the elite level greatly restrict the development of meaningful careers away from cricket.
- The lack of a second tier of competition for elite players tends to create an increased gap between the best and the rest.
- While the recent rise in financial opportunities associated with participating at the top level was widely welcomed, it is not seen to offset the need to prepare for a career outside of cricket.
- There is a perceived lack of communication and coordination between the national and state level.
- There is a lack of industry-wide recognition of the particular personal and professional needs of women cricketers.
There is a lack of industry-wide recognition of the particular personal and professional needs of women cricketers, prompting the following recommendations:

1. **Providing opportunities and competitions** that enable young female players to hone their skills at an appropriate developmental level in safe and supportive environments should be considered.

2. A **coherent education program** that can respond to the health and wellbeing issues specific to the women’s game, and that can support them to establish and maintain respectful relationships within and beyond the game should be developed.

3. There is a need for **strategic interventions to challenge and confront the systemic culture** that positions and resources women cricketers as ‘second-class citizens’. Appropriate education and training needs to be ushered in across the industry to ensure that all stakeholders have a sound understanding of, and empathy for, the specific needs of women cricketers.

4. **Addressing the challenges** associated with participation at the elite level of women’s cricket and the capacity to develop meaningful education and employment skills for careers outside of cricket should be prioritised.

5. While change is readily identifiable at the elite level, little seems to have changed at the club level. There is a burgeoning need for research that can provide a **better understanding of the relationship between club and elite level cricket** and to **better address cultural conditions that contribute to player attrition**.

6. **Industry-wide education and training**, dedicated to the specific issues and challenges associated with supporting women’s participation in the game is needed.
INTRODUCTION

The research undertaken for this project set out to explore the professional identity of elite and emerging female cricketers. It is positioned within a conceptual framework that recognises ‘professional identity’ as something that does not happen naturally; it is not fixed or stable. Professional identity is instead developed through specific relationships with oneself and others, such as teammates, support personnel, administrators and the media. As with all other professions, the professional identity of elite female cricketers can be shaped through a range of ‘professional development’ activities. In looking to explore the construction and enactment of such relationships the research sought to identify key issues and themes that emerged from interviews with players and other key stakeholders associated with elite women’s cricket.

Against this backdrop the project team conducted research related to the construction of a professional identity by elite female cricketers, and the relationships between professional development and player practices. Guiding us here were two related questions:

How does the cricket industry define and manage a standard of professional identity for elite female participants?

How is professional identity interpreted and practiced across the different layers of engagement that comprise the industry – namely the executive, management, coaches and players – and how do female cricketers experience and respond to these?
AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The research explored the experiences of elite, and emerging, female players at the state, national and international level, with a view to identifying aspects of current thinking and provision that could benefit from further professional support and development. Specific features of this environment include extended periods of time away from home; participation in different teams that compete in different competitions; significant age differences across teams; managing life outside of cricket; and maintaining life balance as well as an overall sense of personal and professional satisfaction and wellbeing. While these industry characteristics have some comparisons with other industry and organisational sectors, there is a uniqueness about the experiences of elite female cricketers that warrants particular attention.

The research aimed to produce a significant and innovative sociological knowledge base about:

- the emergence of a professional identity for elite female cricketers
- how the professional identity of elite female cricketers is understood, managed and negotiated across all levels of the industry
- the ways in which the particular characteristics of participation at the elite level shape the professional identities of elite female cricketers
- how professional development activities currently contribute to the development of elite female cricketers, and to their day-to-day health and wellbeing
- how timely, relevant and responsive professional development practices can be delivered in a systematic and ongoing way into the future.

Beth Mooney (Queensland Fire) attempts to run out Bridget Patterson (SA Scorpions) (Adelaide, 2016) (Photo by James Elsby / CA / Cricket Australia/Getty Images)
NEW TIMES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The data presented in this report were collected through interview-based research. Across the span of the project we conducted 45 in-depth face-to-face interviews. Interviews collected demographic and personal data, and encouraged participants to discuss their introduction to cricket; the importance of their family; the place of schools and their experiences with peers; pathway and representative teams; and their transition to higher education or work. We asked questions which gauged the effects they believed their participation in cricket had on their health and wellbeing. The players interviewed were from across the elite participation spectrum from pathway squads to established Australian representatives. Interview themes that related to all of the participants’ ages and stages included the challenges of gender, the role of support staff, issues of sexuality and diversity, team dynamics and cultures and visioning the future.

The sample
We categorised players into three different career phases, while recognising permeable boundaries between them. From our discussions we determined that it was appropriate to describe these phases in the following ways:

1 Early-career players: zero to four years in pathway programs
2 Mid-career players: four to eight years at the elite level
3 Late-career players: eight-plus years at the elite level

Table 1 summarises the research participants that were drawn from the two case study states – Cricket New South Wales and Cricket Victoria. It is important to note that although participants were recruited through their state affiliations, a number of the participants were currently, or previously, representatives of the Australian women’s cricket team. Although we are aware that the presentation of key challenges for players of the women’s game can be exacerbated at particular levels of the competition, for example, travel commitments among international-level players, many issues were relevant across the various phases of participation, were experienced differentially. In acknowledgement of this distinction, we have classified participants and represented the data according to the number of years they have spent in elite teams or pathways as described above.

Table 1: Summary of research participants by general classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview participant</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early-career players</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-career players</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late-career players</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of players</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S CRICKET

New South Wales vs Western Australia
National Indigenous Cricket Championships (Alice Springs, 2016)
(Photo by Darrian Traynor / CA / Cricket Australia / Getty Images)

Kirby Short playing for the Queensland Fire (Adelaide, 2015)
(Photo by Robert Prezioso / CA / Cricket Australia / Getty Images)

Bridget Patterson playing for the SA Scorpions (Sydney, 2015)
(Photo by Tony Feder / CA / Getty Images)

New South Wales vs Western Australia
National Indigenous Cricket Championships (Alice Springs, 2016)
(Photo by Darrian Traynor / CA / Cricket Australia / Getty Images)
Overall, the data highlighted a number of recurring themes with regard to Australian women’s cricket. There are many similarities and occasionally striking differences in the issues that emerge with regard to women’s participation in the game of cricket.

The key themes presented in this report are:

1. Induction into the sport of cricket – the early years
2. Factors for sustained participation
3. Role models and pathways to the elite level
4. Making the team and changing cultural dynamics
5. Support around the women’s game
6. The opportunity cost for female players
7. The future of women’s cricket

The presentation and analysis of these themes, under the relevant headings, are substantiated by direct quotes from participants. However, it must be noted that within the same theme, variations are often highly visible and the quotes have also been used to illustrate differences within the themes. The themes aim to generate discussion about the various factors that shape initial interest and recruitment into the game, identify features that facilitate sustained participation and explore participant experiences as they contribute to understandings of their own professional identity as an emerging or elite cricketer. In recognising the significant socio-historical timing of this research – in light of the significant and recent changes to the women’s game brought about largely by successful collective bargaining endeavours – thematic discussion of the perceived support and opportunity cost for female players is explored. Consideration is also given to participants’ perceptions about the future opportunities and challenges emerging in the context of Australian women’s cricket.

At the end of each of these themes we discuss the key messages and challenges raised through the data. These messages and challenges provide the building blocks for the generation of the key recommendations.
1. Induction into the sport of cricket – the early years

In this section we describe the major recurring themes around the ways young women found their way to the game of cricket. As a historically male sport, we found that the influence of a ‘significant male’ continued to be a notable factor in introducing them to the game and nurturing their continued participation. While it also remains quite common for young female participants to undertake their early game experiences as minorities in male teams, the opportunity to participate with other female players is clearly becoming more commonly available. Another discernible shift across the dataset is the place of schools in facilitating the early participation of young female players.

a. Significant others

Players’ reflections on how they became attracted to the game of cricket revealed a number of quite common pathways, which will be explored in more detail in subsequent sections of this report. The most frequently cited stimulus to their initial participation in cricket was via the particular interest and encouragement of a ‘significant other’, or person who was very close to them.

The significant other persons that were identified as having the most influence on developing their interest in cricket came from numerous points of connection (namely parents, siblings, relatives and family friends) but were most commonly older males. Though far from exclusive, a father’s interest in the game was part of a highly recurring pattern around a young female’s pathway to participation.

Well I suppose she didn’t really have a choice because she was born on a Saturday and the following Saturday she was at cricket and she was there every Saturday since ... So she really didn’t have a choice in playing cricket because she was there all the time because her dad – well he still plays now, so yeah ...

(Mother of early-career player)

The influence of a father’s love of, or participation in, cricket was not always the direct source of motivation for young females, but its influence was often readily traceable in the reflections of many players. A number of players recounted how they would play games of cricket with siblings and friends while attending the games in which their older family members (usually fathers) were involved.

Well, dad played so mum always used to take us kids down to his games while she chatted with the other mums. We’d just run around on the sidelines. We also had a family friend that was born two days before me. Our parents and his parents were best friends. So between him, my brother and myself we were just always playing cricket together, in the back yard and stuff. (Late-career player)

Outside of parental influence, siblings and friendship groups presented as another significant source of motivation in attracting young female players to take the step to participate in junior competition cricket. The enticement to participate, based on seeing or hearing about other female participants (namely friends and acquaintances) was more pronounced among younger players interviewed.

I didn’t initially play because I really liked cricket, I played because I had friends who played and my sister played. So I think for women, having that social aspect is really important when you’re young. Yeah, absolutely, I think if my friends had dropped out in their teenage years, I might have too. (Mid-career player)
b. The only girl in an all-boys’ team

The majority of female cricketers experienced their introduction to competitive game settings in predominantly boys’ junior teams. Almost all reflected on their initial experiences in this context as being somewhat conflicted. While there was almost always a source of support around their participation (at least enough to keep them involved) they were unanimous in experiencing incidents of bullying and sexism in these contexts.

So we grew up playing against the boys in [name of place], where the boys had never seen girls play cricket. In cricket you’re an individual when you’re batting, you get a lot of attention, and we got a lot of attention from the young boys in [name of place], which was negative.

(Late-career player)

When my friends found out she was playing cricket they used to rib me about her being a lesbian. It used to really annoy me. Some of them still carry on, as if it is some sort of joke. I know cricket is trying to do something about it, but the perception out there that women’s cricket is full of dykes is still pretty strong – at least with my age group … She used to cop it a bit at school too, but I think that’s got much better.

(Father of early-career player)

Despite playing most of their junior cricket as a lone female in an otherwise all-boy team, the input and impact of other females took numerous forms. Whether this presence was fleeting or sustained, it was often instrumental in helping young female players successfully navigate their way into what could otherwise have been an uncomfortable or unwelcoming sphere of social engagement for them.

My dad was coach so he made it pretty safe for me. I was pretty well accepted among the team and they tended to look out for me. I remember one boy on another team calling me a girl and carrying on, until one of the boys on my team reminded him that I’d taken more wickets than him!

(Mid-career player)

My friend’s dad coached my first team. He was really good to me. He sort of talked mum and dad in to getting me to play so I think he was keen for me to enjoy it. He was really inclusive and wouldn’t tolerate anyone getting picked on.

(Early-career player)

The surveillance and support of a responsible adult was undoubtedly a significant source of protection for young females in these contexts. Of course the voices of the many young female players who have withdrawn from such situations because of the harassment were not represented in this dataset. However, there were frequent references to this being a major issue for some young players and it was probably a significant factor in historically high attrition rates. What is clear is that in the absence of strong adult leadership, the more likely exposure to incidences of bullying and exclusion would be pronounced.

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(Mid-career player)

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There was another girl who started the same time as me so that kinda made it easier. I don’t know if I would have played if was going to be the only girl in the team so it was good. She didn’t last more than a season but by that time I had sort of established myself and had become pretty comfortable amongst the group.

(Late-career player)

My mum used to do the scoring and kind of look after the team. All the boys loved her cause she would always bake stuff for morning tea and bring lollies. There were other mums around the team doing stuff too so it wasn’t like I was this lone female, even though the rest of the team were boys. (Early-career player)

Many of the players reflected on their time playing with and against boys as having a positive impact on their cricket development. There were no reported comments suggesting that playing against boys was not inherently good in this respect. In fact, from a skill development perspective, many of the research participants acknowledged that they actively sought out opportunities to compete with and against males.

There is no doubt playing against boys for the first four or five years certainly developed my skills. When I went down to [name of place] for my first all-girls game of cricket I was like way ahead of where some of them were up to. While it was good socially and personally to be playing cricket with other girls, I knew it wasn’t as good for my cricket. I enjoyed playing with the boys and I still do now ... I’m still playing with the men and boys now.

(Mid-career player)

Importantly, most of the research respondents revealed that they were able to earn the respect of their male counterparts on account of their cricketing prowess. This was ultimately the single most important factor in their sustained participation in boys’ competitions.

c. The place of schools

Across the dataset it was clear that schools were emerging as significant participants in the recruitment of young females to the game of cricket. While there were repeated reflections of school experiences not offering any formal or structured activities aimed at recruiting girls to cricket, there was sporadic evidence that this was changing.

Year 3 at primary school, she came home and said that she’d tried out for the school cricket team and made it. It came as a complete surprise to my wife. It came as a complete shock to me. I didn’t play cricket. I had a couple of years playing at school, but cricket wasn’t a topic of conversation for us. (Parent of early-career player)

There was one teacher who’d drive the whole girls’ cricket team. He decided that the school should put a team in and me and a few of my friends decided to have a go at it. We had a great time, and it was a bit of shock to the school, when we won the whole comp. The school’s had a girls team every year since then and I think it’s now really competitive to get into it.

(Mid-career player)

It is worth noting that, historically, being a female cricketer is not something that has been celebrated in schools. Many of the older players reflected on keeping a low profile around their participation in cricket, while at school. And across the interviews there were numerous references to keeping their participation in cricket to themselves.

I think maybe my dad didn’t get his fix out of playing cricket in the backyard with his son so I just started playing. I think growing up in the country no-one ever said that girls didn’t play so I think it probably took me a while, probably when I got to high school, that I went, oh hang on it’s not actually cool for a girl to be playing cricket. I think by that time I’d already fallen in love with the game.

(Late-career player)

... but it was never really talked about much. My close friends knew I played but it just wasn’t something that was talked about at school. Probably the first time it got recognised was when I first made the under-16 state squad. I got called up to the front of assembly. There was a bit of jeering amongst the boys but ...

(Early-career player)
2. Factors for sustained participation

A number of significant barriers to sustained participation of girls and women in elite level cricket were identified. Yet a number of protective factors appear to provide the players with a sense of achievement, belonging, support and connectedness that enables them to remain in the game in the face of inequality of opportunity, lack of financial remuneration, sexism, homophobia, harassment, a loss of social interaction and the pressures of family and travel.

a. Love of the game

The most basic of these factors is a ‘love of the game’. An overwhelming theme to emerge from the research was how much females loved playing cricket and were grateful for the opportunity to play, or to have played, at the elite level. Players were also well aware that this was an important sustaining factor in the context of the barriers that currently exist. Travel, success, cultural opportunities and being part of the team all featured as key elements among the players interviewed.

I love it. I think it’s the way it’s progressing at the moment, it’s just – even already I’ve had the opportunity to go to India and Sri Lanka and New Zealand. It’s all – just to play cricket, it’s awesome! (Early-career player)

... your love of the game has got to be very strong to commit a whole weekend every second weekend, every third weekend and most of your school holidays and a few other things ... you’re sacrificing a lot to do it. So I think that’s a massive challenge for a lot of the [older] kids. When you’re 13 it’s all right. When you’re 13 you don’t cop much, you’re going down to Melbourne, you’re training at the MCG that’s cool; when you’re 16, 17 that changes. That’s a difficult period in your life anyway. You’re sorting out a whole range of things anyway ...
(Mid-career player)

... that’s a big driving thing having something that I wanted to achieve – that competitive side, that going and competing and I think it’s been good for me as something to focus on for me. I much prefer cricket than work, so I kind of went cricket is easier than going back to work ... it’s fun. I enjoy the camaraderie of the other girls and the team working together to achieve something.
(Late-career player)

Related to this were the opportunity, desire and stimulation for early-career cricketers to play and train alongside experienced and well-known players.

Last year, being the youngest in the under 18s it was a bit challenging. Obviously they have a – they’re older, stronger, bowl faster, hit it harder, but they’re lovely girls that are involved in the cricket, and some of my closest friends, because I spend every weekend, every weeknight with them, pretty much. So yeah I’m really enjoying being with the older girls because they push me more as well, because I’ve really got to lift my game.
(Early-career player)

She flipped when she received the email for that, to know that she might be playing with people that she looks up to, like Ellyse Perry and Alyssa Healy. So – ah, and Alex Blackwell.
(Parent of early-career player)

I think it’s inspiring to play with people that are much older than you because you try and think of yourself being in the same category. They’re much older than you, have so much more experience ...
(Early-career player)

It’s just good to see what goes on and what I can expect if I do make it to that level, which is exciting ... The team dinners and stuff, it’s a great way to bond with some older players and just learn from them, I guess, off the field as well.
(Early-career player)
b. Friendships and camaraderie

The structural nature and relentless demands of elite level cricket mean there is always the potential for social isolation from family and friends. As such, it is to be expected that building relationships with teammates emerged as important. Players in all stages of their career highlighted the significance of this for sustained involvement, and for a number of cricketers this was the key to continuing in the game.

I think I enjoy the company of my teammates a lot, I think that’s what kept me going. I think some family support too was pretty influential in that, they were okay if I stepped away from the game, but they were pretty adamant that I don’t think I would enjoy that decision if I walked away without potentially achieving what I thought I could achieve in the game. (Mid-career player)

I didn’t play initially because I really loved cricket, I played because I had friends who did it and my sister did it. So I think for women, having that social aspect is really important when you’re young. Yeah, absolutely, I think if a lot of my friends had dropped out in their teenage years, I might have too. (Late-career player)

I’ve made too many friends – had too many memories. I couldn’t stop doing all this training. So it’s really good to finally see where all the hard work goes. So yeah, just to walk away, I don’t think I could do it just yet. (Early-career player)

c. Relationships, support and connectedness

i. Family

Support and connectedness to a range of people, both personal and professional, emerged as perhaps the most significant factor in sustained participation of women in cricket. The early-career cricketers in particular talked about the importance of parental support and involvement. A recurring theme from players, regardless of their career stage, was the impact of the unconditional support from parents, partners and family.

Supportive family. I think that’s the biggest thing that has enabled me to keep playing … having a supportive family and a supportive job. Without those two things, there’s no way that you could keep playing. (Late-career player)

My parents, they’ve supported me 110 per cent. Dad drives me here every single week, sometimes twice a week. It can be an hour and a half drive some days. It’s commitment. I wouldn’t have anyone else share it with me. (Early-career player)
Mum and dad were forced to drive me every Sunday morning, get up at four or five in the morning, drive here and then drive back Sunday afternoon ... four and a half, five hours. Yeah, I don’t know how they did it because I was in the backseat sleeping all the way but yeah, I think you definitely need supportive parents.  
(Mid-career player)

So I don’t get to see my parents very often, maybe like three times a year which is hard because you go home and you don’t want to leave and they feel like I’m too busy to talk to them and it’s hard to maintain that relationship, moving out of home and things like that. So I think it affects all of those aspects.  
(Mid-career player)

### ii. Partners

A number of the players interviewed talked about the importance of their partner’s support in sustaining their participation and also the significance of recognition by Cricket Australia of the need for partners to visit on tour, particularly for late-career cricketers. There was a strong sense among players who had partners involved in cricket that ‘they were lucky’ because their partners were supportive and provided financial support that enabled them to continue to play. There was also recognition of the different treatment between them and the men.

—I’m fairly unique in the fact that my boyfriend’s also an elite cricketer and plays for Australia ... we both know what we’re going through. (Mid-career player)

—My husband works in cricket and that’s where we met. That’s lucky ... I think it probably nearly tested our relationship a few times ... some of the expectations when you come into a professional sort of sport. Some of the meetings – yeah, I’ll be finished at this time and you don’t finish until two hours later and it took a while to get his head around that stuff ... There’s no way that you could keep playing, you’d have to drop out to support yourself financially or those sorts of things, if that makes sense. (Late-career player)

I know for a fact that some of the girls in the Australian team have been travelling for quite some time without their partners being able to stay with them. It puts a serious strain on their relationships, especially when they’re even just there watching and they have to get separate accommodation. It just seems ridiculous ... For me the biggest thing is the fact that because I’m juggling all of this stuff I can’t go home enough. (Mid-career player)

We had a few girls in the team who were married and others who had been in six, seven, eight-year relationships, who asked for Cricket Australia to have leniency towards having their partners come away with them. Cricket Australia quashed that and basically said that they’ll deal with it. They have a policy now where if two days or two, three days or whatever, they do allow it in, but it’s still on their terms.  
(Late-career player)

### iii. Support staff

A sense of connectedness to those who support the players in various roles also emerged as a key factor in sustaining participation. Both players and other stakeholders identified the importance of this for female players. Coaching and other support staff recognised that their roles went far beyond dealing with technique, motivation and game preparation. There were a number of illustrations of coaches being the point of support for players and their families in relation to issues such as bullying and sexual assault, with little training to do so.

We had a girl who got sexually assaulted. The family, the first people they rang was us. So in one sense that’s a tough one because you’re not really trained to know all that sort of stuff but you’re very trusted in their lives.  
(Coaching staff member)

The current under-18 coach, he’s got a fabulous manner with the families and the players, so they comfortably approach him with issues. I think it’s going to be whoever they have that emotional connection to and they feel as though they matter. If you give someone that vibe, then they’ll talk to you. If they don’t get that vibe from you, they don’t.  
(Administrator)
With the girls, because they’re all about relationships, they want to actually build a relationship with you and they want you to like them. So they’re all about trying to impress you and improve. So from that perspective, sometimes they’re a lot easier to coach because of that but you then have to understand that mindset when you want to do things.

(Coaching staff member)

Players also referred to a sense of connectedness and support from staff that enabled them to juggle the demands of careers, education, cricket and life.

This year I’ve had a lot of support with school, actually, she’s [player welfare manager] helped me a lot with different options for school. The school that I go to at the moment’s not very open subject-wise. So [name of player welfare manager] has helped me to look at some other things. (Early-career player)
3. Role models and pathways to the elite level

Becoming an elite level player in women's cricket is far more difficult than one would expect. The lack of club opportunities and limited elite level competitions mean very few young women make it into state level teams and therefore have the opportunity to be selected for the Australian women's cricket team. Hence, there are very few women role models for younger women to aspire to. In addition, media coverage is still poor even though the Australian women's team has experienced success on consecutive international tours. Compounded by sexism, sexual harassment and homophobia at the club level, it is not surprising that women leave the game.

a. Role models

The low profile of women's cricket in Australia means that very few aspiring cricketers have watched women's cricket and few women cricketers are household names. Combined with the impact of male pathways and the role of fathers and brothers in initiation to the game for women, it was common for many players to nominate famous male cricketers as their role models.

I didn't really see women's cricket as such. I think it's probably different for girls here because they grow up knowing there's a Victorian team. But I think at that time there certainly weren't Tasmanian female players to actually look up to. For me it was David Boon, Ricky Ponting and Shane Warne, sort of thing. (Late-career player)

However, this is shifting and early-career players in the research identified key players as their role models. Although visibility was a key factor, another important theme to emerge was that younger players had a sense that they could balance cricket with family if they so desired.

I'd probably say now I look up to Sarah Elliott, who's also in the VicSpirit squad. I think Sarah's got a child and she's on her way to having a second and I think just the way she balances family life and cricket, and she's just so modest. You barely know she's made hundreds for Australia. She's so modest and down to earth too. I think it's something I aspire to be. Ellyse I've always looked up to because she's been on the face of everything. Yeah, definitely Meg Lanning now – knowing her personally and knowing how she goes about balancing. She's modest once again and I think – yeah, I look up to those girls. (Early-career player)

i. Tensions around role models – 'pin up girls'

There was some tension in the way that role models in the game were currently being marketed. The female game has long been seen to provide a safe space for women who identify as lesbian. While there was a strong perception that strategic marketing of women's cricket was trying to present it as a heterosexual environment, it was clear from participants that sexual orientation is not considered a particularly important issue for those within the game.

... from our environment I'm not gay myself, but it probably is a safe environment because there are a lot of girls that are lesbians. They probably feel a lot safer in that environment than they feel with other circles of friends. (Late-career player)

The captain's gay, everybody knows that, no one cares. (Administrator)

That said, there was some evidence that early-career players were struggling with a lingering public perception of a culture of lesbianism within women's cricket. A number of support staff referred to the concern that many young players had of being labelled this way. There was a general fear that the level of homophobic harassment would only increase if there was an increase in the visibility of the level of lesbianism in the game. The following example illustrates the complexity of inclusive practice in the face of continuing homophobia more broadly.
... last week two Australian players marched in the Gay Mardi Gras, which is athletes against homophobia, which is fantastic, great. But it’s interesting how it’s seen lower [down the hierarchy] because Alex Blackwell tweeted I’ve won four world cups, I’ve played in 14 internationals, that was one of my proudest moments leading the Gay Mardi Gras. Now, I spoke to three girls on different topics who were horrified that Cricket Australia re-tweeted that because the perception of them at school is – if you play cricket you’re a lesbian. The message that they took is that everyone is going to think we’re lesbians.

(Coaching staff member)

Although the overwhelming majority of players, regardless of age, stage and sexual orientation, felt that women’s cricket was an inclusive and supportive space for women who identify as lesbian, it was not seen as something that the industry had ever owned. Accordingly, a number of players and stakeholders felt that the current marketing of particular, media friendly, heterosexual players was creating an internal tension. While it was acknowledged that this strategy was having a positive impact on the profile of the women’s game, it was also perceived to be silencing lesbian players and others who did not fit the favoured stereotype. Rather than supporting sexual diversity, there was a concern that, in the absence of alternative strategies, the current approach ran the risk of further marginalising this cohort.

Yeah, I wonder if it’ll shift the culture towards driving homosexuality in women’s cricket underground, similar to what happens in men’s sport, because the promotion of what’s happening in the game of women’s cricket is very – if you look at any of the advertising campaigns they’re very targeted and specific people that are the face of the game. Ellyse Perry is the face of the women’s game, and receives a marketing contract, and is significantly remunerated to be that person that represents women’s cricket.

(Administrator)

So yes, there is still some homophobia within cricket teams, it presents itself differently. I think it’s always been around the stereotype that in women’s cricket everyone there is gay – which is incorrect and it’s a negative stereotype, which is really not fair, because it’s saying well it’s not very good to be a gay person. The way our cricket team is projected in the media, it’s all about hetero-normativity, so very feminine, and this is not just for cricket, it’s with other sports as well.

(Late-career player)

... all the marketing sort of stuff that Cricket Australia are doing. There are the ‘pin up girls’, for want of a better word, that they’ve got leading their campaign. So the image has softened – the image of women’s cricket I think has changed massively over the last 10, 15 years. But I’m not sure whether at club land your average 30-year-old bloke playing cricket at the local club, whether his perception has changed or whether just the...
perceptions of people working in cricket have changed. It’s definitely a general society thing that people are more accepting ... (Late-career player)

But what if our best player – and I believe that one of our best players in recent years has been a ‘non-feminine looking player’, and I don’t think she’s being used as much as what she should have been ... (Late-career player)

b. Pathway experiences

i. Pathways through boys’ and men’s cricket

Although there are a number of pathways to women’s elite level cricket – schools, women’s clubs, mixed gender teams and so on – the one that appears to build the most resilience to the harsh realities of elite level cricket is coming up through the men’s game. This is particularly relevant for country girls. A common observation among players is that of developing a ‘thick skin’. While experience of sexual harassment, sexism and homophobia were omnipresent in this pathway, most players reflected favourably upon the sum of their experiences.

I enjoyed it because I was friends with most of the boys because I’ve grown up with them. The first few years I don’t think the opposition liked it. It took them a while to get used to playing a girl, but I enjoyed playing with the boys and I still do now. I’m still playing with the men and boys now. I think it’s just gotten better since I was young. I think they respect me a lot more. I’ve grown up around them and yeah, they’re really good. They’re used to it. (Early-career player)

Despite this measured positivity, there was repeated reference to notions of survival. Indeed, there were a number of comments made about the strongest players having emerged from this pathway. This notion of survival goes beyond issues of participation and talent. There were endless illustrations of sexual harassment as the following comment demonstrates.

Boys as you know are quite different to girls. I’ve had some – we had a super talented girl that plays who had an incident where she played senior men’s cricket and she got a bloke out. He came off the ground and the boys [jib] him because he went out by the girl and his response is ‘That’s alright I’ll f**k her up the bum later on’. So that sort of environment. It’s a stupid comment by a bloke, but they all laugh and think it’s funny. (Coaching staff member)

Moreover, there was a worrying level of resignation among the players that being disrespected and ridiculed was just part of the game if you want to play against men. They shared a concerning level of acceptance that to play the game they love, and have the opportunity to improve their skills, they just had to ‘cop it’.

I’d say men – playing with boys – it’s a hard thing to get respect from boys, being a girl playing boys’ representative cricket. I played boys’ representative cricket for about nine seasons. It was tough. I always got disrespected and just – not in a bad way, just as a player, just oh, ‘You’re not good enough, you’re a girl, you can’t do this’. (Early-career player)

Coaches and support staff recognised the discrimination that most girls faced when playing in boys’ competitions. In particular, they acknowledged the constant threat of sexual and homophobic harassment that accompanied girls’ participation in the boys’ competitions.

One of the girls in country Victoria was on a boys’ team and was getting bullied by the boys, even to the extent where they were all calling her a lesbian because she played cricket. But then one of the boys sent her a text message and said, ‘If you send me nude photos, I’ll tell everyone you’re not a lesbian’. Now that’s horrendous. (Coaching staff member)

Despite their shared and justifiable concerns, participation in boys’ competitions provided the girls with the greatest opportunity to play and improve their skills and visibility. However, for most participants this practice was limited to junior competitions where gender differences were less pronounced. Recognised differences in strength made playing with the boys challenging as girls moved through adolescence. While some persevered in the belief that it was good for their
cricket, most reached a stage where they were keen to move into the women’s pathway.

When I got to about 14 or 15 it got to the point where I was like I want to start playing with more girls ... because the boys were getting a lot stronger than me. At that age I was a bit frightened. I just think that I moved to Sydney because I wanted to play with the girls really; not that I was afraid of playing the boys, I just wanted to give playing with other girls a go. (Mid-career player)

ii. Girls’ and women’s pathways

The alternative for some is the female elite pathway, which seems to produce greater results for country girls. As the following coach points out, differences in the uptake and status of sport in country areas appears to provide a more successful pathway than metro areas.

The girls’ game, I think it flips the other way where the country regions are the stronger ones and tend to win most of the female state championships. I just think it’s got more to do with that sport in the country is so much a part of the community and where they’re at. The girls just – if they want to be part of the community hub, you go to the football or netball club and you do your stuff. They just seem to be more open to playing sport and getting involved. Whereas there are so many more other things for the girls in metro to do, I think sport doesn’t have the same ... sense of community and friends type stuff.

(Coaching staff member)

A key limitation in the current structure appears once girls finish their participation in the representative junior pathway. A lack of provision for the graduates of this pathway seems to be present once they reach 17. A number of stakeholders in the women’s game made mention of this being a point where a number of girls contemplate their future.

The reality is, we had about five top age girls coming out, but only one of them got a contract. (Administrator)

... a lot of the really talented players will play under 13s together, school stuff, then they’ll play 15s together, then they’ll play 18s together so it’s a social network for five, six, seven years. Then it finishes and there’s nothing between this and Spirit. So there’s a lot of angst about I’m finished, I’m done, that’s it for me. I’m not going to see these girls again. I’m not going to go straight into the Spirits. Not many of them go straight into the Spirits. (Administrator)

While all of these young players would be welcomed in most club-level teams the lack of a recognisable pathway to the elite level is seen to be accompanied by a drop in motivation. There appears to be a growing concern that, while there has been significant advance in attracting young players to women’s cricket, the end of the junior pathway is a significant phase of attrition.

The big thing with the girls is if they don’t think they’ll make the team, they don’t train. They don’t see it as an investment in their game and getting better.

(Administrator)

iii. Women’s club cricket

The obvious pathway out of juniors and into sustained participation in women’s cricket is to play in the women’s club competition. Unfortunately, there is a widespread perception among elite and pathway cricketers that club-based cricket is an end point, not a pathway point. A number of participants felt that clubs provide limited opportunities, little coaching and a somewhat inferior level of competition.

Women’s clubs are disappointing but again you don’t want to compare everything to male but the male premier cricket system is really robust and strong. It’s got 18 clubs, it’s good cricket, there are a lot of good players. The females have got – [the females stretch to] six teams. I don’t think all six clubs have got a coach. Some train one night a week, some train two. You might have 20 at training one night and three the next. It’s not a great environment to continue to build yourself as a cricketer after coming out of programs where you’re training at the MCG, you’ve got specialist batting coach, specialist bowling coach, strengthening,
conditioning coach and dietician. You’ve had that for five years, suddenly you go to a club and there’s three people training. You think, what’s going on? (Administrator)

iv. Schools and communities as pathways

Another pathway identified in the research was school cricket, although experiences here did vary enormously. For some players, schools provided no pathway at all while for others, enthusiastic and supporting school staff were key to getting involved.

So the school that we ended up going to, I was really fortunate I had a teacher who just absolutely loved his cricket, always took the women’s teams and stuff. He suggested a couple of clubs that I could go to. (Late-career player)

I think, to be honest, it depends a lot on what school you go to and if there is a cricket program at your school. So I know at my school we didn’t have one, so obviously I didn’t go to school with any girls that played cricket, but [name of school], which was our neighbour school, had a really strong cricket program. (Mid-career player)
4. Making the team and changing cultural dynamics

As signalled in the discussion above, there have been some notable cultural shifts that appear to have occurred within the context of elite women’s cricket. However, it is debatable that these changes have filtered down in ways that influence day-to-day practices in club-based cricket. In this section we explore the ways that these cultural changes, together with the realities of ‘making the team’, or becoming an elite cricketer, can shape the construction of a professional identity for female cricketers.

At the time of conducting this research, there was a palpable sense of anticipation about the possibilities available to elite female cricketers.

... things are forever changing in women’s cricket and there’s more money being put into the game. I still feel as though unless you’re a top echelon player, it’s hard to make a living out of it. I also am a big believer in making sure that you become a balanced person and not just a cricketer, because I think while your athlete life’s pretty short lived, the years after that are probably going to be the most important from a financial point of view.

(Late-career player)

Recent changes in player contracts, remuneration and conditions, combined with increasing international success, have resulted in Australian women’s cricket gaining a higher media profile. These changes have afforded some players more opportunities to train and play as professional athletes, albeit on a part-time basis. While players and support staff alike appreciate these initiatives, there is evidence to suggest that these changes have foregrounded issues of gender and age inequality. Furthermore, the growing professionalisation of the women’s game has made a differential rewards system and differential access to support and resources more visible.

One key stakeholder highlighted some of these inequalities, which are different in intensity across state boundaries.

I think it was us going around and seeing, for example in Western Australia where the females were training in an indoor facility that the male players had deemed too dangerous to use; there were cracks in the pitch ... there were pigeons living in the facility, and yet we were expecting our female players to play ... Our male players had access to gym facilities. Our female players didn’t. Our male players had access to recovery facilities in pools etc. Our female players didn’t. So essentially, going round the country some of our male players were concerned about their female colleagues, and we started to build a voice. (Administrator)

Although inroads have been made into addressing some of the resultant issues, it is clear that there is still significant work to do.

One coach referred to the [name of state] culture as a ‘bit of a boys’ club’ when she was playing. She struggled as a player and ‘didn’t feel supported’. Coming back into the game as an elite coach in [different state] was a completely different experience for her. The staffing and the environment were completely different and she sees the players as ‘more professional’. This does signal significant changes in the women’s game in terms of the provision of more coaching and ancillary support and quite a significant increase in remuneration for some players at the elite level. However, there were a number of comments that this cultural shift is uneven between states, between different levels of the game and between different players in the one team.

a. Factors that have contributed to changing cultural dynamics

Recurrent across the dataset was a sense that elite women’s cricket has experienced a ‘cultural turn’. Although not discernible in any one action, or attributable to any one event in particular, there is a sense among the research participants that the influence of the Australian Cricketers’ Association (ACA) has resulted in distinctive changes in cultural practices and dynamics. This shift is attributed to...
the role of the ACA in recent industrial negotiations and enterprise bargaining, increased on-field success and discursive rhetoric about ‘professionalism’ within the organisation. In particular, participants highlighted a commitment to behaviours that promote inclusivity both on and off the field as discussed below.

i. Cultures of inclusivity: On-field and within the sport

There is a sense that the game is more ‘inclusive’ than it used to be. A number of late-career players identified improvements in the culture and conditions of the women’s game as the reason why they continued to play. However, the large age disparity among players in the same team was noted on several occasions and seen as challenging. Players can range from 15 to mid-30s across the various teams, and this disparity in ages can affect the dynamics among the players. There was some evidence of resentment on the part of the older players at the opportunities and provisions now available to the younger players. A number of participants commented on some of the consequences of this difference, both positive and negative.

a. Positive

We had an activity [and] … Australian players [were] picking a 15 year old at our camp, to lead us through an activity. So that gives her confidence about being in the group. (Administrator)

They’ve almost empowered themselves to do it, but social media I think has probably engaged them a bit more; they know more, they’re more experienced worldly, I think. Whereas, 10–15 years ago, you could have players that lived under a rock and they didn’t really know what the hell was going on. That was probably me, but yeah – so I think nowadays there’s just more things that they’ve got access to. So it’s better. I think it’s easier to link your teams. (Coaching staff member)

Yeah, they get everyone involved in everything and let everyone know what’s going on when we stay together, so yeah, it’s good. (Early-career player)

b. Negative

Whether they’re talking about movies or things like that, you’re probably going to get differences along the path I think with that. Some of them have had jobs – some haven’t. So they’re not going to – it’s hard to probably engage if there’s something that they don’t know. (Administrator)

I think to be honest it’s tougher for the older girls, well more frustrating than anything if they want to – like you to go competitions or grade competitions and you want to play as hard as you can, but you’ve got this little 14 year old. It’s not that you can’t, but instinct tells you, you shouldn’t be playing as hard as you can, which can be frustrating. (Early-career player)

I think now I feel like it’s less of looking up to those people who are ingrained in the team and been there for a long time. It’s like now we do it this way, so there was a little bit more breaking down of the hierarchy within the team now. I don’t know what really causes that, but it’s just that generational shift … Whereas, I think younger players now seem to be a bit more on their phones, or watching series in their room. So over a period of two months, you’re going to need a little bit of your own time. But it feels like we’re just on a different page of what’s enjoyable. I’d like to go out and see the fish markets in Mumbai for example, yeah you’ve got to get up at five to do it, but it’s an experience. (Late-career player)

The younger ones I would say take it more seriously. There’s a bit of a divide there with generations … Yeah, I think that would be the biggest divide you’ll find is that generation again. There are a few characters in that main squad who are getting towards the end and have the different ideals and things like that and still approach their cricket differently as well … they are probably – some of them have played at the top level and just aren’t as professional and it’s sort of being found out that they’re not there anymore because of it. It’s up to them to respond now. (Coaching staff member)
Inherent in the comments above are a range of tensions and challenges that result from the broad age range of team members in the women’s game. Although it signals some quite disparate social dynamics on occasions, particularly when travelling and touring, participants acknowledged the efforts that had gone into understanding and addressing different social dynamics in women’s teams which is discussed below.

ii. Understanding the different social dynamics in the women’s team

Many members of the coaching and support staff expressed respect for the commitment shown by women cricketers for the way they trained and worked as a team. There was acknowledgement that their collective instinct to establish good relationships with their teammates made them easier to work with than their male counterparts. There was a broad perception among those who worked across both men’s and women’s teams that men are less likely to be motivated by the need to be liked.

What drew me into women’s cricket particularly is just the different thinking, their way of thinking, their way of going about things, their respect for a lot of different aspects of life ... cricket for me is just a word that brings us together in all that sort of stuff. However, with the women’s game, just their ability to listen, absorb, and internalise information, whether it be personal or coaching and technique work. To then go out and, in particular with technical stuff, to then be able to go out and do it ... a guy would take three months where I find the girls just so more adept at internalising things, working it out and then being able to do it ... their ability to process from oral feedback, to then just going out and doing it, is extraordinary. I find them just so much more rewarding to coach, outstanding in fact I’d say. (Coaching staff member)

I think the girls are much better at organising themselves than the men are. The men will leave it till the last minute or ask me to do it all for. Whereas the girls will probably wait until it’s almost overbearing before they put their hand up and say hey I need a hand with this, which to some respects is admirable because they want to get it done. (Administrator)

Many of our conversations with the coaching staff, welfare staff and administrators provoked them to make comparisons between working with members of the women’s team, and their previous experiences of working with male cricketers. In an on-field capacity there were many examples given where the players’ responses to particular coaching strategies differed according to gender. This is not to imply that they were simply interpreted as exclusively male or female, but rather that there were clear gender differences in how players respond to particular situations and challenges.

... the girls struggled to give feedback, but were happy to accept it. That was a massive thing by all of the group ... after we finished that couple of sessions and got them in and asked ‘How’d we go?’ They all struggled to give feedback, I found that extraordinary ... They’re more about feeling is it going to hurt somebody, as opposed to where in a male environment the ego just, yeah no worries they’ll do it, wouldn’t think twice about other people’s feelings. (Coaching staff member)

Comments like this were part of a broad acknowledgement of difference, and the need for more to be done to ensure that male coaches and support staff were equipped to effectively manage the particular needs of women cricket players and teams. Part of this was thought to involve respecting that the interpersonal dynamics of women’s teams are often qualitatively different to those in the male teams.

... male coaches will traditionally run a female program with changes obviously, but similar to a male program. So they will push for higher intensity, less excuses, more aggression, channelled aggression into the game kind of thing, rather than just rolling through the motions practising with actual purpose. I think that’s what the girls want. They want to compete and that’s why you’ll see the girls actually, a lot of our girls play against men when they can. So they play in the female competition because that’s their competition and that’s what they want to
win. But when they have the opportunity they will play in a men’s 20/20 competition ... they want that competition and that higher level. I think that’s one reason that male coaches are dominant in female coaching roles. I think the other one is that there’s a distinct lack of female coaches. (Coaching staff member)

I’d love to see more male coaches, elite male coaches coming to the game and offering a different perspective, because our game’s changed a lot from when the other, the ladies before us played. I think it’s changed dramatically. But I think they’d have to maybe learn a little bit about how to deal with women, a group of women especially. It’s okay talking to one of them, but talking to 15 of them is a bit different. (Mid-career player)

Another point that was regularly raised by participants was an acknowledgement that players today appeared to be more influenced by wider societal and generational trends than that of any other era. An extensive body of sociological research exists to support the claim that we have witnessed widespread societal change that undoubtedly influences how participants in this research view the world, themselves and their place within it (Furlong 2013). This then, has implications for the way in which the notion of ‘professional identity’ can be understood in the context of this research. For example, there was a sense among some participants that today’s elite cricketers could be characterised in some generalised ways – that is to say, not all contemporary players displayed these characteristics, but rather there were some generalisations deployed to discuss contemporary elite women’s cricketers.

To me, culturally, I think interestingly in the past they didn’t question ever – in 2001–02 they rarely questioned things. I think this group of cricketers are more inquisitive, more curious, want more answers and they just don’t necessarily accept that because the coach says, do, that they do it. (Administrator)

You can see that some of them are a bit young and oh yeah the world owes me. So that’s worrying. It’s worrying because like some of them just don’t see it. There’re a few girls that are like yeah, I’m doing my degree, I’ll be fine ... but I just think they think that they’ll get to the point where they’re earning a couple of million, in the long run ... (Administrator)

I find the girls are very much in comfort zones as well, like some they hate change and they love structure. Sorry, you’d probably realise this more than I, but just clear structure to the fact where everything’s organised a week before that. Just information, like if I’ve got a plan I send it out a month before, and if I sent it out a couple of days before they’d go nuts – whereas a bloke would just turn up! (Coaching staff member)

Although we acknowledge that these perspectives are select examples of the ways in which some people working in women’s cricket classify and categorise the playing group that they are working with, it does suggest an increased need to understand the social dynamics that characterise and shape these groups. As highlighted above, with elite players ranging in age from the teenage years to mid-30s, the strategies employed to support these players in their on-field performances and off-field challenges need to be accommodating of this variability. Importantly, education that builds capacity among coaching and support staff to manage relationships in women’s cricket in ways that are sensitive to the variability in playing group dynamics should be prioritised.
5. Support around the women’s game

An increasingly ‘professional’ approach to the game has also resulted in the requirement for greater attention to the support structures that surround women’s cricket. Discernible across the dataset were particular ways in which this ‘support’ was referred.

a. Understanding ‘support’ for the women’s game

Support for the women’s game was generally understood in terms of support services available, and often in ways that compared what players were or were not able to access in relation to their male counterparts. This appeared to be broadly categorised in terms of performance-based support and professional-based support. Participants’ perceptions about the various levels of support available to improve their performance centred largely on training facilities, access to and relationships with coaching staff, and the availability of ancillary allied health staff such as physiotherapists, massage therapists, nutritionists and sport psychologists. Professional-based support was often referenced in terms of those advocating for the advancement of the women’s game, such as the ACA, and the avenues of support that focused on players’ lives outside of the game such as welfare staff.

b. State-based ‘structural’ support – support staff

The data available from the interviews with stakeholders in different organisational positions reveals that support systems and training facilities provided to female players is distinctly sub-standard when compared to facilities provided to male players. There are changes taking place, but perhaps not with the commitment and speed that is required. It was recognised, however, that some states were doing things much better than other states.

In all honesty, we’re still working it out. It’s continually changing. When I started, there were no full-time PDMs [Player Development Managers], education was just varied across state to state, there was nothing done at under age level outside of like an online 20-minute thing. So there was no face to face with those girls. What shocked me the most was the lack of interest and care given to the girls. It was like all about the boys’ team and then – oh yeah, we’ve got girls that play cricket too. No one had ever done anything with them, which was fascinating for me from an education perspective. From a wellbeing perspective I asked why do the guys get this and the girls don’t? Prior to me arriving, they did education with the male players, [but] didn’t touch on the girls. (Welfare staff member)

At the moment a male player will have access to support services in spaces where a female rarely would. The men’s teams have a sport psych, females’ teams at the moment may have access occasionally to one … a female player doesn’t have a team doctor – no medical support service at the ground, yet a state men’s team has a team doctor at every venue. (Administrator)

It was generally acknowledged that the structure and support around the New South Wales team appears to be more advanced than the other states. However, they still recognise that there is a long way to go to receive parity with the male players.

Probably the biggest one recently is around the demands on them, so from my perspective it’s the expectations of a full-time athlete with part-time staff. So for the guys they’ve got the full-time physio and the full-time S and C [strength and conditioning] and all the rest of it. The girls have a physio that works four hours a week, so there are expectations on them to be on top of their physio, on top of their S and C, but they’ve got to fit into this small pocket of time that those service providers have. So the expectations are the same as for the men in terms of injury, rehab and all the rest of it, but there’s not the resourcing for them to get on top of their servicing like they...
should. So I’m the only full-time service staff member I guess for them whereas combined between the dietician, the sports psychologist, the S and C and the physio you’d have a total of eight hours a week for them to go across all the players – so the demands exceed the resources that are available for them.

(Welfare staff member)

We miss out on some top-level support staff, just simply because they rubbish it [the women’s game] a little bit and they want to get in to the men’s game. Obviously it probably pays a bit more, and they’re working with different players.

(Mid-career player)

There are signs that a more comprehensive approach to the provision of player support is being adopted. While the provision of resources continues to be relatively sparse, there is evidence of the adoption of better practices around them.

They’re starting to get into that area of really having a holistic approach to the training, rather than just pure skills all the time. So we’ve got a nutritionist on board, a dietician and we work together preseason, sort of double-heading it. So one group would go with her for a little lecture while the other was with me doing a circuit and so on, which worked really well. That’s the main thing with the young ones. So we’re really happy with how that’s developing.

(Coaching staff member)

Players generally reflected positively on the support that they did receive as discussed below.

You’re not just here all by yourself. I think the player welfare manager’s really good as well … she helps a lot … we’ve got a sports psych and he’s really good as well. So probably more performance related, like if you’re struggling with confidence and all that sort of thing, you can go to him, which is really good. He’s awesome.

(Early-career player)

c. Support for the profession: The Australian Cricketers’ Association

The participants involved in this research unanimously endorsed the role of the Australian Cricketers’ Association (ACA) in supporting the professionalisation of the women’s game. Their advocacy, with respect to collective bargaining and in the provision of educational grants to support players in their endeavours beyond the game, were regularly cited as reasons for players’ sustained participation in the game.

In the face of very little financial support, many of the players referred to the in-kind support that was provided by the ACA to encourage a career path. Those that had been supported to complete some type of formal qualification in particular, reflected on the positive impact this had on their ability to continue to play because they felt they had something to fall back on in the future. Pursuing education also provided flexibility to play and tour – a prospect that was far more difficult for those that had full-time employment.
I have been through university, had the assistance from the ACA which was amazing because after relocating, I’m obviously paying rent, so uni fees on top of that, it’s an expensive but yeah, now I’m doing my Masters and still getting that assistance. (Mid-career player)

I’ve been through the younger ages straight off school and now I’m being really assisted by the ACA to continue with my career professionally as opposed to just cricket so I have something to fall back on. (Mid-career player)

... supportive, yep. That’s why I’m still playing without a doubt. Without a doubt that’s why I’m still playing ... I’ve been looked after really well, I’ve got a career behind me and stuff ... (Late-career player)

We’ve got the Australian Cricketer’s Association, they’re amazing. They have education grants that you can apply for each year and it pretty much pays half of my HECS debt every year. So I’ll come out of uni having a debt that’s half of other people going through my degree. (Early-career player)

Given their long history of very low remuneration through their involvement in cricket, the recent progress in this area was widely welcomed across the playing group. However, while demonstrable improvements had been made there was clear recognition of the work/education still required to be done with players in terms of understanding the collective bargaining process and the opportunities that lay ahead for them in the emerging era of professional women’s cricket.

I do think there’s still a feeling within women’s cricket about being extremely grateful for what opportunities come your way, as opposed to not necessarily wanting to challenge the establishment for fear of losing what they’ve got. (Support staff member)

I think industrially they’re still very much in their infancy in terms of understanding collective bargaining. (Administrator)
6. The opportunity cost for female players

In this section we describe the major recurring themes around the opportunity costs that are regularly weighed up and/or mediated by elite women’s cricketers. In making decisions about their continued involvement in the game, many participants spoke of the educational, economic and personal costs. These are elaborated on below in the discussion of issues that arise within the context of being an emerging or elite women’s cricketer, and their lives outside of cricket.

a. Barriers to sustaining a cricketing career

In discussing some of the factors that impact on a player’s ability to continue their involvement in cricket, stories largely centred on perceived sacrifices and lost opportunities as they relate to life outside of cricket. There was an overwhelming concern that the sacrifices made to ‘chase the dream’ required some consideration of contingencies in terms of education and employment in the event that their on-field development and performance did not facilitate continued involvement in the game. There was a widespread perception that this was a largely individualistic concern and responsibility, rather than an industry one.

I just think sometimes the girls don’t talk about their issues as much because I don’t think they see the value in their individual stories. (Administrator)

One is in terms of cricket taking up too much time and it stops more professional development ... one of the girls is taking six years to do a three-year uni course. (Welfare staff member)

Lately I’ve found that – because I’ve had a load of time off school this year for cricket, a lot of the schoolteachers have
gone, oh, okay, how come you don’t have this amount of work done then. (Early-career player)

For mid- and late-career players, the concern about ‘life after cricket’ appeared amplified across the dataset.

Because I’m not contracted I’ve maintained full-time employment, I’m taking a pay cut to get that employment from Cricket Australia. I’m renting. I need that financial security in a way ... it may be different for someone in the Australian squad who’s living at home still ... also, if you get one of those contracts and you injure yourself say at the start of the season and you make it through your contract, they pay you. But if you get dropped the next season, where to from there? It’s a huge risk ... so there’s pros and cons obviously, but yeah, I don’t think I could take the risk to quit my job to train to try and achieve one of those contracts. I’m going to have to keep working to train to achieve one of those contracts. (Mid-career player)

You end your [cricket] career at 30–32. You’ve got to have a different career. You’re starting new in a new career at 32. That’s a worry for me anyway and I know it is for a lot of other girls. You’re up against people who are finishing university and you’re starting at their level but you’re a lot older! (Late-career player)

Even players who do have qualifications and skills outside of cricket often find it hard to take up employment in those fields on account of their cricket commitments. For example, one player discussed having a teaching qualification but could not take on a teaching position if she wants to continue to play cricket at the elite level. Even part-time work became difficult to commit to due to demanding cricket schedules and tours. In the case of players having a sustained involvement in elite women’s cricket it was recognised that skills and qualifications gained but not deployed can rapidly lose currency.

... I’ve been relief teaching ever since [completing her degree] which is a bit sporadic. I moved out of home so I’m paying rent and all that sort of stuff ...
needed a job that was more reliable …

I just resigned from my job … you’re just always on the run, so I was getting very burnt out I realised, and very irritable the last little while, and I think getting anxious about the season coming up … I made the decision to resign from work just before that. I just never had any space to just switch off, or even just sit down and watch something. I don’t know what’s on TV on a Monday night, or any other night …

(Late-career player)

As highlighted in the extracts above there is an underlying tension for many players about prioritising their cricket development through training and practice opportunities – in ways that allow them to address other priorities that compete for their time.

I’d like to get to more sessions. I know I need to spend more time hitting balls if I’m going to go to the next level, but I have to weigh that up against what I’m prepared to let go. At the end of the day my career as a [name of profession] is going to pay me a lot more than a few years playing top-level cricket. You’ve got to be real about these things.

(Mid-career player)

It was interesting to note that this also appeared to be an issue for early-career players. It was not simply the time demands associated with school and cricket that emerging players battled with, but also the distraction associated with feeling like they have a chance to make it to the top. A number of early-career players talked about underachieving at school on account of channelling their attention away from study and into cricket. This was associated more with young players for whom the allure of a professional cricket contract had become an ambition, a dream.
Yeah, I'd take sick days from school and in the afternoon I'd be out there bowling in the backyard ... (Early-career player)

Yeah, and just training of an afternoon. I train four to five nights a week, so it’s hard for homework and all that stuff that you need to stay on track with, especially at this end of the schooling. Mum and dad push me to keep up my studies but it’s really hard. It’s pretty exhausting. (Early-career player)

There was also evidence to suggest that the competing demands on elite cricketers’ time away from cricket limits their capacity to more fully develop aspects of their game. In turn, this was a key point of tension for coaching staff given their focus on improving performance amidst demanding schedules.

... there are a fair few demands on them, especially with trying to balance full-time work or university courses. Now the Aussie girls do it easily, they’re in having hits all the time because they’re able to do it ... but our girls have got university – apart from university they can come in and have a hit and do that sort of stuff. But then that’s the expectation, they need to be hitting balls to fulfil the demands of the program as well. But they’re only playing spasmodically. So yeah, it’s that whole thing about can you still get the improvements in skill level and maintaining your form with less sessions? Or is it a case of the very good just getting better and the gap between the two levels just getting wider? (Coaching staff member)

The ongoing stress and emotional and physical demands of playing at the elite level are often a very private struggle for many players. That said, there was recognition of the types of initiatives that the organisation has drawn upon in an attempt to understand, make transparent, and potentially mitigate, some of these issues.

I think it’s the busyness in their lives, and not having time for their families, or they feel, I’m working and I’ve got to rush to training. We had a player that retired last year and she’d always arrive at training and be like, oh sorry, she had to beat the traffic, she’d had a long day – sometimes she’d even ring and say, I’m going to be half an hour late because of work. She’d just be like a stress ball when she’d get there and you’d think, oh god I just don’t know how she’s going to keep going with that ... We do a system where they say how they’re feeling in their wellness, so I used to always look across and if I saw one or two I’d actually say, ‘Is everything going alright?’ Quite often it would be like, oh I’ve got to sell my house, or I’ve got to move. So the AMS system [Athlete Management System] with their wellness, even though the players think it’s a bit of a drag, it’s actually quite useful if coaches get the time to look at it ... You can pick players when they’re a bit flustered – when they’re a bit anxious ... There’s one girl saying, I’m tired, I’m tired, I’m tired, all the time. I’m like, I’d rather you go home and sleep and actually not be here. So I’d say to her,
‘Look if you’re tired maybe we’ve got to talk about what’s happening – just go and have a chat to [name of player welfare officer] about your work and how you’re balancing it, and do we cut back with what we’re doing with you?’
(Coaching staff member)

ii. Pay disparity – between and within genders

Further to the discussion above, a recurrent theme was noted in reference to the need to supplement financial remuneration from playing cricket with other income sources. It appears, for many players, there is a degree of agonising over the sustainability of maintaining contracts.

I think it’s great what we earn out of the game but I certainly don’t count that as my income as such. You don’t live off that sort of money because it can go as quick as it comes. I don’t think I’ve ever had that as a driver but I think that will change for the next generation coming through ... (Mid-career player)

For others that have been in the game for a longer period of time, the notable gender gap between the Australian male players and female players was regularly cited as a significant barrier to a sustained career at the elite level. As illustrated in the quotes below, the systematic inequality between men’s and women’s elite level cricket, particularly in terms of financial remuneration is seen as a serious contributor to the high level of attrition from the women’s game. Although there have been some significant inroads made across the industry to address this, attention is still warranted if high-quality players are to be retained.

What you get paid to play doesn’t really cover the cost of playing ... it doesn’t cover childcare, it doesn’t cover travel, flights for my mum and dad [carers] or me ... it’s totally different on the men’s side where they’re earning big money. So it’s okay, the wife often isn’t at work or they can easily pay for flights in and out, all those sorts of things would come into it. But unfortunately, we lose so many girls at about 27, 28 when they want to start buying a house or they want to settle down and they need to focus on a career.
(Late-career player)

Our program is adequately resourced to support some of the challenges that present for female players, but we saw in the women’s game a lot of inequity. We saw a lot of challenges around just basic minimum terms and conditions for female players where they were playing, largely paying for the privilege of representing their state ... We had ridiculous situations where a female player would play in India and receive a $20 meal allowance, and a male player was receiving $75, and yet I’m not sure that the cost of dahl in India was any different for a male or a female. So that was essentially what the driving mechanism was to provide basic terms and conditions for women players.
(Administrator)

Remuneration is one thing, but other aspects of the industry need to be confronted before widespread change can be seriously implemented. It was widely noted that there are a range of systemic practices and assumptions about in relation to women’s cricket that continue to constrain its pursuit of respectful coexistence.

... obviously there’s no significant income generation from the girls. They’re not bringing in any kind of financial resources to the business. So that’s always going to have an effect on how much money gets spent on them. They just don’t have the same profile or interest levels out there, so the resources aren’t going to flow to them. (Coaching staff member)

Particular concern was raised about the quality of life and opportunities afforded to those considered in the ‘top echelons’ of the women’s game when compared with those lower down in the player hierarchy. Further, with some players contracted full time, and others in a part-time capacity, there was some concern about the ways in which part-time professionals will be able to continue to improve their game. There was a clear acknowledgement that personal growth in their game could in no way compare with the opportunity for growth afforded those who attracted greater financial remuneration.

I see my teammates that are earning that money, but I’m not earning that money and I’m trying to compete with those people. It’s going to be really hard for the next level to catch up. It’ll probably start coming through in the next generation.

(Late-career player)
Now, but for people that are at the same age as these top players, but are still part time, it’s really hard for us to catch them now. (Late-career player)

I think the most important thing, is firstly that the girls are remunerated to an extent where they’re able to concentrate on cricket when they want to. I think the Australian girls are well looked after [at the minute] … I think it’s the next two groups; first are the ones that are playing cricket because they’re good at it, but don’t see it as a career and have their own career outside, very successful some of them doing various things … The other group you have are those just outside the international squad and want to break into it and I think they’re the ones that have to be looked after. It has to be ensured that they have the financial support to be able to give that their best crack I guess. (Coaching staff member)

In recognition of the sorts of issues that confront players across various contractual arrangements, there has been some progress made in terms of available support services for women cricketers at the elite level. This has been acknowledged and appreciated with an overwhelmingly positive response by the players.

… our female state players and Australian women players now receive exactly the same entitlements as a male player from a professional development perspective. So up to $4000 worth of educational support for a 15-year-old girl that’s attending school is a significant opportunity that on a world stage would stack up as the benchmark. So I think it’s pleasing to see that exists … (Administrator)

I have been through university, had the assistance from the ACA which was amazing because after relocating, I’m obviously paying rent, so uni fees on top of that, it’s an expensive adventure especially when cricket wasn’t really paying any money … I’m being really well assisted by the ACA to continue with my career professionally and not just focus everything on cricket, so I have something to fall back on. Their support has made a huge difference … (Mid-career player)

Among late- and mid-career players there was a sense that the move toward a more professional era for women’s cricket was in a transitional phase. For those already well into their professional cricket career there were existing commitments and sensibilities that constrained their sense of this as an opportunity to simply dedicate time to improving their own game. While for the emerging generation of players the prospect of increased monetary gains associated with ‘turning pro’ appeared a panacea for alleviating the demands on their time so that they could concentrate on cricket, established players were more likely to be deeply committed to the clubs and pathway programs that facilitated their progression in the game. There was a sense among this group that giving back to the game was as important as their own individual success within it. There was a sense that the emerging generation of players may not embrace this same level of commitment.

So I think as a female player, it’s very different to being a male player in that particular scenario, because Michael Clarke is the Australian captain, he’s not captain of his club team. He hasn’t got that responsibility of all those layers of, like the whole pathway I’m a captain of. Whereas he’s got his job, and he doesn’t really need to worry about anything else. He just turns up and he’s a figurehead at his club. Whereas I’m player, coach, a selector, a committee member at my club. So I think that’s a major difference. (Late-career player)

They’re working full time, they’re training at 6:00 am, go to work, they come and they train until 9:00 pm, then they’re back in the gym at 6:00 in the morning. Something like that. In the meantime they’re expected to run their own clubs. They’ve got to do something that grows the base and takes the pressure off the players and the expectations of their clubs. That would lighten a bit of a load in terms of freeing up some time during the week. (Late-career player)

In addition to the dominant themes discussed above that act as significant barriers to sustaining a cricketing career at the elite level, there were some interesting observations pertaining to those involved with pathway programs. From a financial perspective, for younger players who are still living
at home and still attending school there was a recurring perception that the costs were manageable and that players and their families were well supported to facilitate continued involvement in the sport.

That’s one thing I’ll say for cricket, is that [player’s name] had a lot of financial support because – especially with the travel and stuff like that. Even when she was younger, playing younger than 18, when they’d have to go away to nationals for things like that. Everything was paid for. If we didn’t go it wasn’t going to cost us anything really. I don’t know what it’s like in other sports at that level, but I’ve always found that’s been really good, and I appreciate it.

(Parent of early-career player)

Notwithstanding the off-field barriers that will be discussed below, a key concern among early-career players, as well as their parents, was access to high-quality coaching that would continue to support their development, particularly for those from regional and rural areas.

b. Off-field challenges

In considering the barriers to sustained participation at the elite level, the dataset overwhelmingly pointed to the continued tensions that confront players off the field. Although there was significant variation in individual stories told, there were points of commonality in that they often always anchored back to issues relating to career prospects beyond cricket, balancing family life and sustaining relationships, and addressing historical, but persistent, stereotypes of women’s cricket.

i. Balancing a career pathway

For many players, the opportunity cost associated with balancing a career away from cricket presents as a real barrier to sustained participation in the game. It appeared that for those who had ‘made it’, and for many late-career players, there was a general level of acceptance that their career away from cricket has been compromised.

My [name of profession] career is not where it would be if I had not played cricket. It’s been secondary for a long time and it just fits in and I just do it when I can, I haven’t professionally developed myself as much as I should have. I’ve got a lot of catch up to do in that space.

(Late-career player)

I didn’t finish my first degree but I’ve now done more study ... with a Bachelor of Science ... I was 19 when I made the Australian team ... that was in my second year as a full-time medical student. So second year of med, full-time med, I’m now an international cricketer, that’s when things just really started to heat up in terms of my workload, and feeling of how am I going to manage this long term? But I tried, I kept going for another two years full time, and then I started to go part time with my study after that ... Not being able to give 100 per cent to it was a

Lisa Sthalekar playing for the Sydney Sixers (Melbourne, 2016)
(©Photo by Robert Cianflone / Getty Images)
real issue for me, because I thought if I’m in a position where I’m caring for someone, and I haven’t really put 100 per cent into that, and something goes wrong. You can’t do that halfhearted ... I’ve done post grad study as a genetic counsellor by distance, while I was lecturing and tutoring. Now I’ve worked for three years permanent part time as a genetic counsellor. So there are days each week, and I’m training before work, after work, and then I’ve got two days where I’m doing all sorts of other things.

(Mid-career player)

Many mid-career players, however, are caught in the cycle described earlier where their desire to maintain a career and/or employment and further their involvement in cricket comes at extensive emotional and social cost. For players contracted part time, the demands of their workplaces and flexibility around obtaining leave to facilitate their participation in cricket tours was considered a significant barrier. The challenge to become a professional, in two professions, was quite confronting to many players and can be considered a key factor in player attrition at the elite level.

The biggest difficulty I’ve experienced is I think for the whole time I’ve been here I’ve been working at least two jobs, playing cricket and studying. So it’s juggling all that and two years ago my first job out of university which was crucial for me to get, my boss told me that if I put my hand up for selection for a tour in Sri Lanka that I would lose my job. So he just outwardly said, don’t even say that you can go or I’m going to fire you.

(Mid-career player)

Probably the biggest thing I find where girls will walk away. We had one of the girls walk away this year because she’s now a schoolteacher. So her time was just way blown out of proportion for what she needed to do as a first-year schoolteacher and not being able to get leave to play cricket. So that was one reason why she had to step away ... The pressures of training and having to take annual leave from work to play games is probably the number two because I know some of the girls struggle big time when they’re at work – employers are just like well no you can’t have any time. They’re taking annual leave in credit and so then when they do get time off to go on a holiday, they’ve got no annual leave anyway because they’ve used it all up.

(Welfare staff member)
The professionalisation of Australian women's cricket has attracted individuals with a range of career aspirations and the capacity and drive to achieve them in the face of extreme burdens on their time. Players spoke of their involvement in, or desire to become involved in, diverse careers such as the police force, defence force, journalism, science (genetics and marine biology), teaching, physiotherapy, sports science and sports management among others.

ii. Sustaining relationships

Another significant off-field barrier to sustained participation that was regularly discussed by participants was their concerns around being able to sustain meaningful social relationships as a result of the increased demands on their time. Heavy time commitments with playing, touring and training schedules combined with busy work and/or study demands left limited time to devote to family, friends or partners. The opportunity cost associated with this is arguably one of the most significant barriers to sustained participation in the women’s game and certainly a potential cause of health and wellbeing issues that can result from social disconnection. With increased numbers of younger players attracted to the game it will be important to consider the ways in which they are supported to maintain relationships beyond the cricket fraternity.

I was playing cricket while I was at school, so all my girlfriends at school were always going out on a Saturday night and doing things with their life, and I was stuck at home because I had a cricket game at nine o'clock the next morning. So that was probably the hardest part for me I think, once I decided that I did want to play cricket, and I did want to play at the top level it wasn’t so hard. But going through that transition, that's where we lose a lot of players in their teenage years, just simply because you can't potentially have a life like most people.

(Late-career player)

I think socially, for me at school, not many of my friends understand the level that I play at, because it is a pretty high level. Not many of them realise that I am an elite athlete now ... I've had guys before that I've had a relationship with – it's hard because you don't get to see them – obviously, training four to five times a week. I don't get to see them much, I don't get to talk to them much. It just gets a bit too hard, and that's normally why things don't work out in the end. I think that's sometimes what happens to the older girls as well. It just gets a bit too hard with the schedules and whatnot. For me, I'm young. I don't really need to worry about that.

(Early-career player)

Not surprisingly, for players relocating from rural and regional contexts to metropolitan areas to pursue cricket at the elite level, there were stories of social isolation. Feelings of loneliness are not an uncommon occurrence for young people who relocate for work or education, and such emotions were amplified in the stories of the young athletes we spoke to. A number of them identified the difficulties of the transition from the known and familiar as a key barrier to sustained participation.

I think I was very lucky in the fact that my parents were extremely supportive, but I remember driving back from the game when they left me and I started crying and I was like, oh my God this is happening. I was really lonely and sad initially, because I lived in a granny flat at my brother's house. I still had some family support, but I would go to training and half the girls go home to see their families and have dinner cooked on the table. It was a real independent shock. I've got to do everything for myself and I didn't live with anyone that did any of my duties ... So it was mostly putting myself out there to obtain a job and be comfortable going to a university full of people I knew nothing about. I didn't know one person, but in a sense I was lucky that I had my teammates around. But, yeah, there were definitely periods where I felt very lonely.

(Mid-career player)

... most of the team are the metro girls because the country girls don't tend to come to Melbourne, I don't think. They won't move just for sport. If they move down for work or university or study or something they will but there's not many of them that will move down for sport. So the Spirit squad, it's made up of mostly metro girls, which goes against the skill set we're seeing at the state level – at the regional championships.

(Coaching staff member)
We've had a fair few country girls down to train with us. Heaps of talent, but they aren’t going to stay just for cricket. You wish you could offer them more to keep them in the program but they miss family and home and there’s the expense of living in Sydney. So they just go home. 
(Coaching staff member)

That transition was hard – I was quite homesick for probably many years. I probably on reflection didn’t quite realise how homesick I was. I don’t know how many times I nearly packed it in and went home. But the girls at the club that I played at were amazing. We had a lot of Victorian players at our club at that time, so they were very well established professionally and personally. They helped with my transition a lot. Until I got my friendship group up and going and I had those older girls looking out for me – every now and then I’d go to their house for dinner or whatever, so they became this little family to me. 
(Late-career player)

Discernible across the dataset was a concern that the nature of many of the girls’ relationships was very cricket-centric. That is, their friendship groups and support networks were largely established around cricket. This appeared particularly prevalent among contracted players and those who had experienced significant relocation. While there are certainly positive elements associated with developing strong and cohesive bonds with ‘teammates’, it can be problematic when ‘cricket-based’ issues, such as non-selection, arise. There was a sense that having good support networks away from cricket was important in establishing a healthy sense of balance and perspective about the place of cricket in one’s life.

I left all my friends behind in [rural New South Wales]. In Sydney really all I’ve got are cricket friends. I spend like all my time here so that’s not really surprising. Often I’m in here five days a week so it is a full-time job between state stuff and the expectations from Cricket Australia. I think that’s in itself created a few issues for me. 
(Late-career player)

... but what was most concerning for us was the reduction in friends and family outside of the game. So the whole network that they are connected to is almost cricket-centric, and almost similar to what you’d see in the special services or police-type environment where the narrower it gets the transition from the game is impactful on a number of levels; one of which is that there’s not a network there to support them in their transition into other pathways. 
(Administrator)

iii. Addressing prevailing stereotypes

Among the array of challenges that continue to confront those that seek to grow the women’s game is the lingering social perception that it is a game proliferated by lesbians.

... there’s been different parents that I’ve spoken to and they’ve said their daughter is not playing anymore because the perception at school is that she’s a lesbian. So she’d rather not play cricket and lost the tag than keep playing the game and have that moniker. So they’re the things that we need to look at in educating the public about the game. 
(Administrator)

I think it’s just a public perception from a bygone era. Cricket Australia has done a great job getting rid of it. But I still cop it from my mates at the pub and that. They’ll sort of rib me about [name of daughter] being a dyke or leso and that stuff whenever cricket comes up. It actually shits me and I used to bloody argue with them about it. But now, I just let it go. I know they’re just doing it to stir me up. But it’s certainly still out there. 
(Parent of early-career player)

Despite the presumption and perceived stigmas about sexuality that often surround many female athletes who participate in what are seen as male sports, players at the elite level did not readily identify issues of homophobia as key barriers to their sustained participation. Many commented that this was a significant issue through club-based and transition pathways, and that, alarmingly, they just had to have a ‘thick skin’ to pursue their cricket amidst cultures of sexism, harassment and homophobia. In contrast, their experiences of elite pathways have been refreshingly accepting and inclusive of difference.
I had some personal stuff going on, so I was dealing with my sexuality and that was really, really tough. So in the end I was like the thing that’s wrong in my life is cricket because it’s stopping me from doing X, Y, Z. I had a year off, kind of dealt with my sexuality in terms of in my family and that kind of stuff and then realised that cricket actually offered me a lot more than just cricket. I missed it a lot. I missed my friends, I missed that environment that cricket provided me, so I’ve come back and I’ve played, and I think I’m a better cricketer now and probably a better person as well for having that year off to be able to not hide behind cricket. (Late-career player)

While there were certainly examples raised by mid- and late-career players of talented players leaving the game because they wanted to avoid being labelled as ‘lesbian’ or ‘butch’, this was seen as less of a concern than in the past. Indeed, there is a growing sense that a culture of ageism is becoming more of an issue to sustaining a professional career.

It’s difficult at the Australian level. All they’re worried about is the next series and they’re not really worried about the people in the team. I think they’ve been really focused over the last 10 years in creating a different image for women’s cricket. They’re pretty fixated on moving people out and bringing new ones in. If you look at the age of the team at the moment, that reflects that. I think nationally, it’s almost an underage competition where older players just keep getting moved on. I think that’s a real shame because, I mean, I’m 30 and I’m not retiring for form reasons. (Late-career player)
7. The future of women’s cricket

At the time of completing this research it appears the women’s game has witnessed widespread cultural change driven largely by the shift towards an emerging era of increased ‘professionalisation’. Among our participants there was some conjecture about what professionalisation means to them and the game. Interestingly, their descriptions of this were predominantly to do with money.

I feel like I was at a lucky time when the sport wasn’t that professional in some ways, although the more senior players – the older players would argue that it’s always been professional, if you take the money side out. They’ve always trained the same amount and always been really dedicated. But we weren’t touring as much back then and all those sorts of things, which enabled me to study full time and get my degree done in four years and get a full-time job. Yeah, I’d say we were the lucky ones. (Late-career player)

As with many other sports that have moved from being predominantly amateur to the world of professional sport, players are now able to envision opportunities to continue in the game amidst an entirely different landscape than that which some of the late-career players experienced through the initial stages of their career. This is certainly an exciting prospect, but it does present specific challenges for the industry.

a. Professionalisation and professional identities

The era of professional sport has evolved into an entertainment industry that competes in a global marketplace, made accessible to the public through various media platforms. Media rights and broadcast deals, sponsorship and other commercial ventures have often contributed to increases in salaries and improved playing conditions; they have also contributed to the production of ‘sports celebrities’ – subject to intense public scrutiny on and off the field in terms of their performance, conduct and sportsmanship, with relatively few places to hide (Kelly & Hickey 2008). As others have argued, this shift creates a struggle for elite performers that is shaped by two specific processes. In terms of on-field performances, and in drawing on a range of knowledge (psychology, sport science, medicine, dietetics, education and management), players at the elite level are often subjected to ‘regimes of measurement, testing, medical intervention, surveillance, regulation, education and management, in the pursuit of performance and success’ (Kelly & Hickey 2008, 7). Concurrently, this occurs at a time when the commercialisation of sport fuels interests to develop and grow as a business; pursue and maintain media presence and profiles that form the basis of brand/marketing relationships; and ‘transform elite performers into highly paid sports celebrities whose image, persona and brand are positioned in a crowded, highly competitive marketplace to be scrutinised, judged and consumed’ (Kelly & Hickey 2008, 7–8). This was certainly an emergent theme in interviews.

There’ve been massive amounts of change to the sport. I could go on all day about the changes but there’s been a lot around professionalism particularly ... I think if I was coming into the system now, I’m not sure that I would have made it through to this level ... Yeah, there’s more money in it now, but the demands are huge. (Late-career player)

Yeah and that’s hard, because then you feel like you’re judging them all the time. I’m judging them on their performances and their behaviour, yet they could have something that’s really quite big happening in their life. (Coaching staff member)

There is a need to support organisations that cultivate elite sporting identities in the way players understand and enact their professional sporting and public identities. This cannot be left to chance, but rather requires targeted, strategic and relevant professional development programs and broader educational interventions for players to negotiate a successful sporting identity. Importantly, it takes ‘work’ on behalf of the individual to engage in these processes given their professional self might differ from their personal self.
It becomes a bit of a hothouse when there’re issues … if the environment’s right then it’s a happy place to be in and you’re more inclined to want to be involved. And if you’re empowered in the process of what you’re in then you feel like you can control it, whereas I feel like the girls are starting to become, well a number of them, like the boys are where they are dictated to in a sense and this is where you should be at, what you should be doing, this is how many things you’ve got to do and they don’t have a voice in that process … There needs to be more integration between Cricket Australia and the states, for example … I think more integration on a regular basis can be where you check in on the priorities – like, I wouldn’t know who’s identified as the next possible captain. Is there something I could be doing at the state level to develop their public speaking skills or develop their communication skills with teammates or is it their strategy stuff that they need to work on that we can get a cricket mentor for? They’re things I could be doing to help at the state level to get players ready for the national team but there’s probably not a whole lot of opportunity for that two-way conversation … (Welfare staff member)

The data suggests that there is a willingness among participants to engage in processes that support the development of professional sporting identities, but variation in the capacity of individuals to enact this systematically. Perhaps the greatest tension in this space lies in a perceived lack of coherence between the priorities and strategic directions of Cricket Australia, and the ways in which members of the state-based organisations engage with, are informed about, and are provided with opportunity to shape these priorities.

The program has in the past been so focused on developing cricketers, and I think the program in this era needs to be more focused on developing better people, not just better cricketers. So all that off-field stuff, and not just the sexuality stuff, but communication skills and general life skills are more important than in the past. It’s more than just hitting and catching now. (Administrator)

i. Wellbeing and health in an era of professionalisation

Many participants reflected on the increased incidence of issues relating to player health and wellbeing and raised concerns about the resources allocated to support players in a time of increased professionalisation. Although many of the issues raised here would be common to elite sports-persons per se, and therefore likely issues for both male and female players, there were a number of issues more readily identifiable in the women’s game that were highlighted in our conversations. The following examples are included to illustrate the breadth of these issues in terms of the variability in health and wellbeing concerns across the various career stages.

There was one of the young girls in the under-15s program who menstruated for the first time on a trip away … that’s a big issue. That threw up some things in the background where you had some girls that obviously, at 14 and 15, emotionally pretty immature. The coaches cannot really be expected to be attuned to everything. What if they’ve got a male coach? So we had to address some Facebook traffic around that. (Administrator)

I think there’d definitely be depression, not probably as much as what I think there would be in the boys’ game, but certainly more eating disorders … that sort of mental health issue around their sexuality would be there for a lot of the younger girls, absolutely. (Administrator)

I really feel like we’ve got some underlying mental health issues in our women’s team. I mean, there’s two that have got eating disorders … it might not be so much about bulimia or anything like that but it’s obsessive-compulsive calorie counting. That’s coming from somewhere, there’s something underlying that … I think it’s going to take some time before … Maybe I might start to have conversations around that space and spend a bit more time with the sports psych, but there’s limited hours … After the first lot of meetings with the sport psych, out of five girls, three were crying … there are some issues that the girls need help with … (Welfare staff member)
A bit of bullying, a bit of sexuality, they’re things we have been talking to HR about — where we’ve had, where we tend to get more correspondence from the parents. We reply to that, but we’ve also been talking to HR to say, look, these are some of the issues that are now coming up. We can’t just be reactive. (Administrator)

Yeah country girls travelling. Accommodation, where do we put them? How do we billet them ... ? I mean there’s that, and safety is a massive issue ... for [player name] there was an intrusion into her room at 5.30 am in the morning ... there’s a guy sitting at the end of the bed, and she’s freaked out. It’s like a violation of trust, but also innocence. (Coaching staff member)

Highlighted in the above examples are health and wellbeing concerns that are certainly amplified in the context of elite women’s cricket. As suggested through the above accounts, there are also concerns raised about the increasing prevalence of instances that require capacity and skills to respond to specific health and wellbeing issues. There appears to be a lack of formalised policy or guidelines (or if these do exist there is relatively little understanding of where to access them) that incorporate evidence-based, best-practice approaches to supporting players dealing with specific health and wellbeing issues.

... but there’s also no funds available at the moment for any really comprehensive education with our female players ... We need to determine where the need is such that we can inform conversations at an industrial level to resource it ... Yeah, it’s two tiers to it – both physical and mental health ... We need to be putting much more time and effort into getting this part of the game right. (Administrator)

The evidence from this research suggests that for players across various career stages there are a number of health-related, wellbeing issues that require urgent consideration. With a number of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders reported in this dataset alone, potentially impacted on by sexism and homophobia, there is a growing need to understand how mental health issues, among others, manifest among elite women cricketers, across various career stages.

Probably education around identifying the signs would be one thing and not just being up to one person, because I see them for a couple of hours a week and I think they’re alright ... If their close teammates were better educated around mental health as well and they could come to me and go ‘She seriously doesn’t sleep, or she’s been snapchatting’, or whatever they notice, I don’t care what it is ... I think education across the board with coaches, with support staff, and with players to keep an eye out for signs of not coping, then they can go this is not normal ... you should be talking to someone about this. So I think general education needs to be better, at the state and at the CA [Cricket Australia] level as well ... (Welfare staff member)
On the basis of evidence presented here, it appears that for some players the stresses associated with becoming a professional sporting identity in a context that is reinventing what it means to be an elite female cricket player could exacerbate mental health problems. Further, it is possible that some of the instances of sexism, bullying, harassment and homophobia as experienced by female players through pathway programs may also contribute to less desirable health and wellbeing outcomes for players. There is a need for respectful relationships education that can help to identify and destabilise unhealthy power relations that contribute to inequalities, and can empower participants to adopt inclusive and supportive behaviours that are respectful of difference and diversity.

b. Institutional directions – whole-of-sport approach

In discussions about the exciting opportunities that exist for Australian women’s cricket, participants reflected on some of the institutional directions required to support continued growth and development of the women’s game. The following discussion explores these suggestions in the context of a ‘whole-of-sport’ approach and identifies issues for consideration at the elite level, the pathway level and at the broader ‘grassroots’ club-based level.

i. Governance

Discussions highlighted some of the ongoing challenges that present when players have competing, and sometimes divided, loyalties to different teams and levels of the game. As one welfare staff member commented, ‘I think that’s probably the frustrating part for the girls, answering to two different bodies, who are ostensibly trying to achieve the same thing.’ It appears that players are better connected with, and feel better supported by, their state-based affiliations. Importantly, there appears to be a strong desire, at the state level, to engage with Cricket Australia in a more coherent and consistent way.

I feel more comfortable with Cricket New South Wales than Cricket Australia. I think the support network here is a lot friendlier and also because I have more contact with them. But the funny thing is that even though I’m more comfortable here, Cricket Australia is still running all my programs. (Mid-career player)

I really enjoy being part of this organisation and that’s probably what kept me involved after I retired from the national level. That’s probably what kept me playing another two years, because I really believe in Cricket New South Wales, and it’s done a lot for me...

(Late-career player)

I’ve got [player’s name] who plays for Australia, today was saying she would rather play for Victoria than Australia. I find that sad in some ways...

(Coaching staff member)

Cricket has pulled money out of community cricket. They’ve chopped the staff back, over the years there’s been a lot of shifts and changes at the grassroots level. Yet we’re having a women’s BBL [Big Bash League], where there’s two teams in New South Wales, two in Victoria and it’s going to really impact Victorian cricket massively I think...

(Coaching staff member)

I get a bit frustrated when we go to Cricket Australia meetings and we’ve got all the head coaches there and we’re talking about things that are affecting the Australian team. But the guts of it is in what’s happening in the state programs, and we’re not even saying, hey what’s your preparation been like – how have you set the season up? What issues are you having? What are your biggest challenges? We talk about being one, and all sitting on the same bus, but we just get in our little silo and … we’re all trying our best, but it just feels like there’s not a link...

(Coaching staff member)

Governance-related issues also appear to impact staff in the various roles they undertake around the women’s game.

Through these discussions it became apparent that staff from the various state-based organisations felt there were opportunities to harness the potential learning that can occur through informal, but regular, communications with their counterparts in other states. An opportunity also exists to formalise this with the support of Cricket Australia.
... because we chatted about it and I thought, that’s something really good that I think we’ll adopt ... we learned it off another state. I heard about it in a lunch hour and we squeezed the discussion in then. They’re the things that I think should be in our agendas because they’re the things that we can take away and put into practice ... (Coaching staff member)

I’ve met a lot of different people playing cricket ... I’ve met the New Zealand girls who come over, the Papua New Guinea girls, they come on camps with us and just join in. I think it’s good to get that cultural experience and understand their game, especially at a young age because you get to form better ideas and understandings about those cultures. (Early-career player)

ii. Importance of an inclusive culture

There is a need for Cricket Australia to consider strategies that promote and support respect for, and value of, diversity in the sport. As a number of participants highlight, there is a perception that this has been a largely underexplored space in the context of women’s cricket.

So in my time in working in cricket, I can recall one transgender player that was involved in the pathways program, and there was sort of some questions about whether that person could or couldn’t become a female contracted player ... (Administrator)

Like, I guess religion’s not something we really get into. I don’t know of anyone’s beliefs ... But we’ve got players of Asian background and we’ve had a player of an Indian background ... I guess cricket’s a game that’s played by a lot of pretty diverse nations, so you get to meet some cool people from the West Indies or India or Sri Lanka ... if you’re not accepting of it then you’re probably in the wrong game I guess, because a lot of the best players come from non-Western backgrounds. (Mid-career player)

I think across cricket in general we haven’t really embraced diversity that well at all ... We’re a multicultural society and I don’t think our cricket teams, I don’t know what the numbers are, but I don’t think our cricket teams reflect the multiculturalism in society in the same way that footy teams do. (Administrator)

They had some issues with a girl called [name] who is, I’m not sure whether she’s Afro American or something ... they had some racial issues in a recent carnival in January this year ... that certainly could be an area that could do with some development – it’s a game that’s again seen as a white Anglo game ... (Coaching staff member)

Because of the largely Anglo-centric member base, it is perhaps not surprising that diversity in relation to culture, ethnicity and religion were not a focus in interviews. Yet, as the following participants point out, there is certainly more work that could be done to promote the game across diverse groups and to establish practices and protocols that are inclusive and respectful of difference.

c. Institutional directions – elite level

As identified in earlier sections of this report, there are enormous differences that exist in relation to resourcing and remuneration for various playing groups. The largest differential is noted between the national men’s and women’s teams, but as discussed earlier, there are also concerns about the differences afforded to contracted and non-contracted players at various tiers of the elite game. The presence of systemic inequalities in the provision of support and resources continues to be a source of frustration around the women’s game.

They’re not allowed to share their hotel room with their partner, even though when they tour for six weeks to represent their country overseas, they’re essentially taking all of their annual leave to have that experience. They were unable, not allowed to have a partner – male or female – in camp, or stay with them, and yet we have actually in the men’s team, paid for two visitation periods for them to have their family around them. (Administrator)
i. Narrowing the gap – addressing inequality between playing groups

The resultant tension that exists within the women’s elite game as a result of the variation in contract conditions requires consideration. Obviously a prevailing logic underpins the current structure, of which we have not engaged in a critique. However, through the voices of our participants, particular issues relating to this differential were visible, which we believe have implications for the ways in which professional identities can be understood and enacted.

I suppose from my perspective, looking at our team we’ve got Australian players and then you’ve got a group that’s in the middle that’s probably not as skilled. They’re working jobs, so they’re probably not as fit as these Australian players. Then, you’ve got this young group that are still going to school, still studying; cricket probably isn’t number one for them. So it’s kind of like three different groups, and even from a training sense, this is just even in a year – not sort of over 10 years, this group here is in a game phase, this group here is in a starting phase, and this group here probably needs a lot more basics than say that group. So, you’re kind of training three different groups in one … (Coaching staff member)

In reference to the attrition rates from the women’s game, there were numerous references made to the absence of a second-tier competition.

That’s part of the problem as well in that there’s no second tier of competition. We’ve got 18 contracted players every year, but for any given year, like this year for example, I think we only used maybe 14 players … there’s no second-tier competition. Unlike the guys where they have their Futures Competition and then they all split up for a Big Bash and there’s more opportunities there … the girls don’t get the same opportunities – rightly because you pick the strongest team to win the game. It’s not about giving different players a go. (Coaching staff member)

So my thoughts on the matter are, women’s cricket is not marketable enough to tier payment. So, I’m not even contracted but I see the girls get so stressed about what tier they are and how much income they’re going to get. One of the girls who is the vice captain, if she gets dropped from the vice captaincy she could potentially lose twenty thousand dollars and she’s just quit her job thinking she’s secure for this year. What happens then? So until the women’s game is marketable, I don’t think it’s fair to tier everyone, and they should at least be on a minimum wage that’s liveable because they all train just as much. (Mid-career player)

ii. New policy directions to support the women’s game

Conversations with participants revealed some considerable gaps in policy and procedures relating to the women’s game. For example, guidelines around pregnancy and playing, along with practices that support mothers to return to the game, appear to be either lacking or poorly understood.

I’ve got to say there’s a long way to go with that, with women’s sport generally. I don’t think personally the strategies and some of the implementation of that with Cricket Australia is good enough. They don’t have a pregnancy policy for women. How archaic is that? (Coaching staff member)

I went and did a stint with the Papua New Guinea women’s team in Japan. They played in a series there, and four of their players weren’t available because they were pregnant – four of their best players! I was like, oh wow this is a bit different … I kind of thought, gee we don’t really have those issues as such. I think from a female perspective, I think they’d be planning it if they were going to – it would be very well planned … I haven’t really had that problem yet, but you know what, I think it will be something that will occur … (Coaching staff member)

I’ve seen one player have to not so much retire but step away because she’s pregnant … We didn’t really have a lot of
protocols around when one of our female players is pregnant how long she can train for and the risk of damage if she gets hit by a ball. We didn’t really have a set of processes in place as to how many weeks she’s allowed to train for and what’s dangerous and what’s not … (Welfare staff member)

While it is feasible that these kinds of experiences have since prompted the development of related policies, the broader concern about the proactive development of policies specific to the women’s game should be given consideration to avoid having to develop these in a retrospective and reactive manner.

d. Institutional directions – pathways and other opportunities

As discussed in earlier sections of the report, the pathways that exist to support player development to the elite level are somewhat variable in terms of experiences and this variation appears to be amplified for those in certain geographic locations. Conversations with research participants highlighted the value of pathways programs.

That’s something that has helped me grow as a person, just in general life. Cricket’s definitely taught me a lot of life lessons, not just on the field, but off the field most of the time. Just teaching me how to be a good role model to younger kids on and off the field, a good role model to other people; just life lessons that I wouldn’t get taught at school. (Early-career player)

Recommendations around institutional directions at the pathway level ranged from an establishment of clear protocols, strategies to promote and increase exposure to the women’s game, diversification in the structure of the women’s game through the introduction of the Big Bash League and targeted approaches to broaden the base of players through the diversification of ‘grassroots’ participants.

Cricket Australia wants to drive increased participation in the game and the growth corridor was going to come from females, rather than males, so it became a very strong area for them to market … In fairness to Cricket Australia, I think they have made a considerable effort to provide platforms for young females to play at club cricket level, which historically if you look to potentially talk to some of our older past female players, it was a much harder path to find into the women’s game, and invariably it was through young men’s adolescent teams … So I think the short-term future of the women’s game is to align it with the Big Bash League, and for our female players to play under a team-based system as opposed to a state-based representative system … (Administrator)

i. Establishment of clear pathway protocols

The appointment of a Pathways Development Manager in New South Wales provides significant opportunity to establish pathway protocols that support entry into and sustained participation in the women’s game. Around this broad agenda, particular ideas around potential game modifications to make the game more attractive to underage female participants were raised.

… so that when we had new players and families coming into the sport, we can say, if you are 12 years of age, this is exactly where you’ll play, what your options are and what the rules are. The other element was, there was only hard-ball cricket for junior girls. I wanted to incorporate a division two, which was always an option for girls to play with an Incrediball, so basically, a soft ball, so that they weren’t in danger or they weren’t frightened. So I wanted to create that pathway and I needed to create clear guidelines for new people coming in, hence the establishment of this girl’s cricket league, which is not completely reinventing the wheel in the first year but is sort of making it nice and clear and also utilising Cricket New South Wales’ resources. (Administrator)

I think from a girl’s point of view, just the lack of knowledge out there in the general public. As [player’s name] got older, she’s helped out with cricket clinics with Cricket New South Wales and things, and the amount of times they go ‘Wow, so you can play for NSW as a girl’ … Most parents,
when their kids are seven, eight and into cricket or whatever programs are running at the time, sort of think oh, this is just a bit of fad sport, a pastime for my daughter. Not many of them know that you can actually go on with it.

(Parent of mid-career player)

In an example of the impact potential pathway protocols can have in addressing attrition, Cricket New South Wales provides an interesting case study. Strategic appointments in pathways, at the underage pathway level and in game development, provide the opportunity to develop and communicate initiatives that aim to increase retention.

We had a city trial a few weeks ago where you could not get 24 girls under the age of 18 good enough to trial at a city trial for New South Wales. That was really concerning, and had to look at why we think it is ... As a result we are now looking at restructuring the program next year to have an under-18 metro development squad which encapsulates all of those girls to keep them in the game. Otherwise they just fall off the radar and are no longer part of our network ... I think we need to spread the net as far and wide as possible and then the top ones will come to the top. In the past the net’s probably not been thrown wide enough ... There is definitely strengthening ties within the organization, between all the different departments, and that helps. (Administrator)

I’m actually redefining at the moment, with the high performance team, what the pathway actually is. So the largest part of that is that nobody knew what the pathway was and that’s a serious response, we actually didn’t know! There was no plan as to where you go to the next step and there was no clear communication across the different levels. (Administrator)

### ii. Broaden the base – diversification of ‘grassroots’ participants

One possible growth opportunity that was regularly discussed was around strategies for increasing diversification among grassroots participants.

*I think cricket is quite a – well has been for a long time – quite a narrow demographic. We have a couple of girls in our squad that are not your white standard Caucasian, but they’re few and far between. I don’t think cricket actively discourages anyone outside of that mould, but I don’t think it’s doing huge amounts to encourage it either.*

(Administrator)

What was interesting in the dataset were the ways in which diversification was considered. For example, for some it related to sexuality, for others it related to race or ethnicity and for another group it appeared oriented around rurality or geographic location. Despite differing conceptions of the ways in which diversification was thought about, participants were united in their belief that potential opportunity exists to explore broadening the base of participants from various cultural, geographic and class-based demographics.

*I haven’t experienced any negativity in regard to racism, but I can understand perhaps that people may come across it. They’re trying to make big inroads there. There’s a lot of competition out in the west, a lot of Muslim communities are playing their own competitions and it may be just integrating them into a competition that other people are involved in ...

Women’s cricket can definitely be very multicultural.*

(Mid-career player)

In the girls’ game the country regions are the stronger ones and tend to win most of the female state championships. I just think it’s got more to do with, that sport in the country is so much a part of the community and where they’re at and the girls just – if they want to be part of the community hub, you go to the football or netball club and you do your stuff. They just seem to be more open to playing sport and getting involved in it. Whereas there are so many more other things for the girls in metro Melbourne to do, so sport doesn’t have the same pull or perspective.

(Coaching staff member)
I don’t think there’re enough quality people at club level, to help the girls. They’re very resource lacking, as far as a people resource. I think it’s a massive issue around the country and the drop off rate is high for that reason, it’s just the way it is … The question is, how do we help club cricket, promote it, and engender that to be the bigger picture of cricket in Victoria? Because you’ve got high performance … Absolutely, I’m just purely talking women. We have high performance, we have game development, we have premier cricket, which is playing overseas club cricket. There’s marketing, there’s also T20, but we need to bring it all together. What’s the five-year strategy, and how do we help the clubs? At the end of the day if we help them, they’re going to help the end result. To me, in women’s cricket the pyramid, I’ll bluntly say it, is upside down. The base is horrendous.
(Coaching staff member)
CONCLUDING REMARKS

A wide range of issues, challenges and opportunities emerge from across this dataset. Many of these are already well known to those in the industry, while others may be finding their way into the open for the first time. This, of course, will vary from reader to reader.

Whatever the level of familiarity that one has with the issues that are identified in this report, their qualitative representation here offers deep insights into how they are understood within the lives of women cricketers and associated stakeholders.

Further to this, it is our goal that the data presented here provides the foundation for the development of a ‘shared language across the industry’ within which key issues, challenges and opportunities can be purposefully engaged with.
REFERENCES


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