

VicHealth chief executive Jerril Rechter: Promoting sport for all

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In her school days, VicHealth chief executive Jerril Rechter says she was as obsessed with being a ballet dancer as she was an AFL star. In spite of her enthusiasm for sport, however, there were roadblocks. In high school, she discovered she was unable to play in the school's AFL team because she was "a girl".

"That was probably my first experience of being told you can't do something in physical activity because you're a girl," she says.

Now, however, Rechter is in a position to influence attitudes about gendered participation in sport.

More broadly, however, the aim of her job is to lead VicHealth to promote health and well-being across the community.

Her team's efforts have just been validated by VicHealth winning the Melbourne Achiever Award from the Committee for Melbourne, in recognition of the organisation's positive impact on Melbourne and Victoria and the consolidation of Melbourne as a leader in global health promotion.

"That was an amazing thing, to be honoured for VicHealth work over the last 30 years – its legacy and its lasting contribution and its future potential," says Rechter.

VicHealth's Changing the Game: Increasing Female Participation in Sport program is a key plank in the organisation's endeavours.

VicHealth funds six sporting codes to work with women and girls who typically don't participate in traditional sports programs provided through clubs and competitions.

Within the program, Rechter says one of her current goals is to make more female sports role models more visible to the public.

"I didn't have the Daisy Pearces (Melbourne captain in the AFLW) or the Katie Brennans (Western Bulldogs captain) on my wall.

"I think it's really important that we have those sports stars as role models for young women to look up to."

There's a dearth of female CEOs in Australia too, but Rechter, who has degrees in education and dance and theatre, along with a masters in business leadership, is accustomed to CEO roles, having also led Leadership Victoria and Footscray Community Arts Centre.

She's also worked in various other leadership roles and attained numerous accolades including a Tasmania Day Award, Harvard Club of Australia fellow and Telstra Victoria Business Woman of the Year.

She says the inroads she has seen in areas such as the prevention of violence against women, gender equality and alcohol culture all influence the optimism at the heart of her vision for VicHealth's continuing role in health promotion.

"I think the response from our partners and the community more broadly around the message we have been able to communicate has been fantastic," she says.