



Supporting Girls and Women in Sport:

Decision-Maker Insights on Breast-Related Issues, Education and Sports Bras in School and Sports Kits



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Why the Need?

Breast discomfort or embarrassment caused by excessive breast movement during sport can cause **girls and women to avoid or drop out of sport** or **limit their athletic performance**ⁱ.



Although a well-fitted, supportive sports bra can reduce breast movement and improve comfort and performance, **sports bras are rarely recognised as a standard item in school or sports kits** (outside elite-level competition), and **education on breast support remains limited**^{i,iii}.

Girls



ⁱ Brown N, Smith J, Brasher A, Risius D, Marczyk A, Wakefield-Scurr J. Breast education for schoolgirls; why, what, when, and how? *Breast J.* 2018 May;24(3):377-382. doi: 10.1111/tbj.12945.
ⁱⁱ Brisbane BR, Steele JR, Phillips EJ, McGhee DE. Breast pain affects the performance of elite female athletes. *J Sports Sci.* 2020 Mar;38(5):528-533. doi: 10.1080/02640414.2020.1712016.
ⁱⁱⁱ Brisbane BR, Steele JR, Phillips EJ, McGhee DE. Use and perception of breast protective equipment by female contact football players. *J Sci Med Sport.* 2020 Sep;23(9):820-825. doi: 10.1016/j.jsams.2020.02.004.
^{iv} McGhee DE, Steele JR, Munro BJ. Education improves bra knowledge and fit, and level of breast support in adolescent female athletes: a cluster-randomised trial. *J Physiother.* 2010;56(1):19-24. doi: 10.1016/s1836-9553(10)70050-3.
^v Women in Sport. (2023). *Only a third of secondary school girls wear a sports bra for PE.* <https://womeninsport.org/news/only-a-third-of-secondary-school-girls-wear-a-sports-bra-for-pe/>.

What Did We Do?

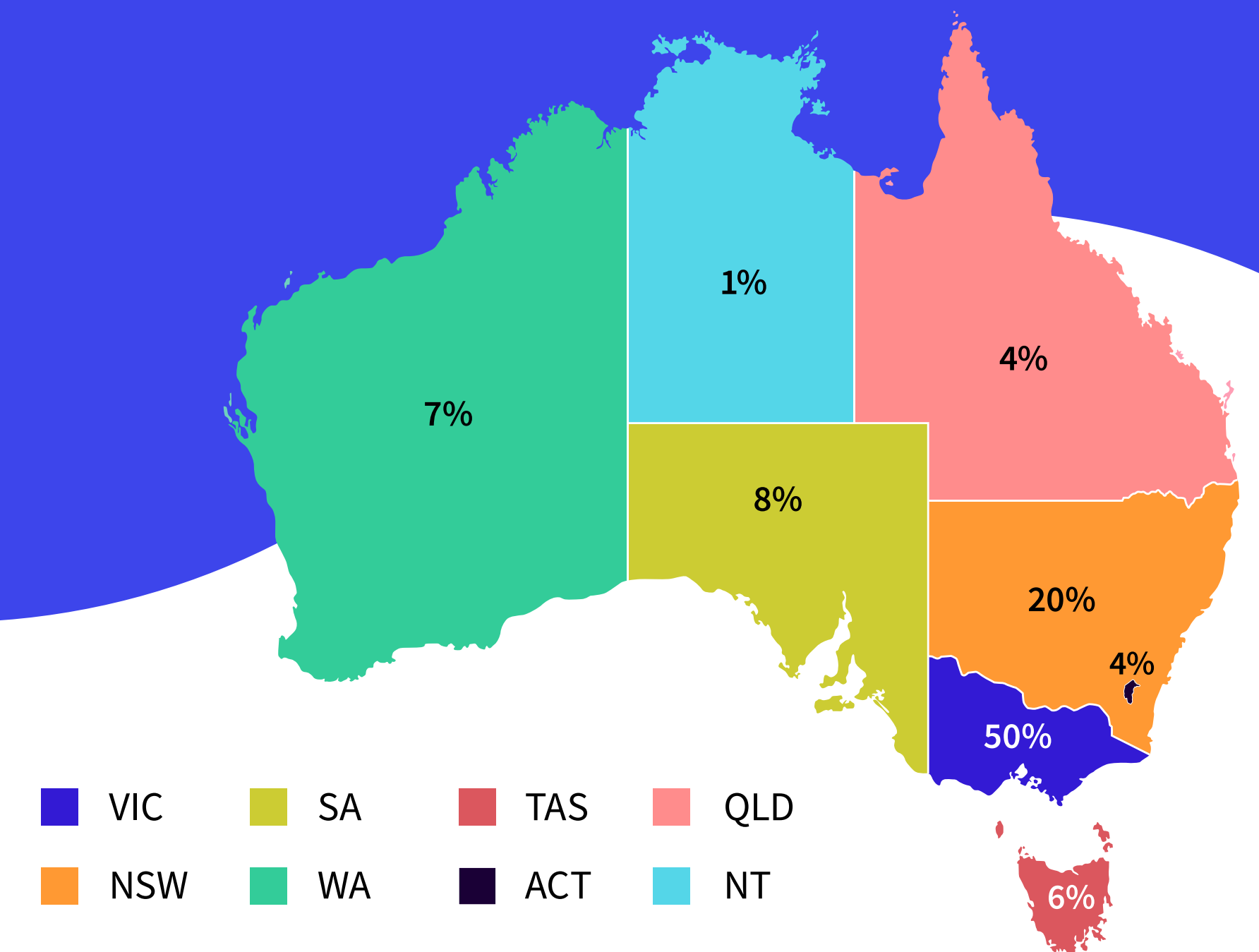
We conducted an online survey with 225 decision-makers responsible for selecting sports kit items, representing

153 sport organisations and **72** schools

To gain their understanding on:

- ▶ Breast-related issues and associated effects on participation and performance.
- ▶ Recognising the importance of sports bras and what organisational action has been taken.

Participants



Ages ranged from 18 to 72 years, with a mean age of 37 years.

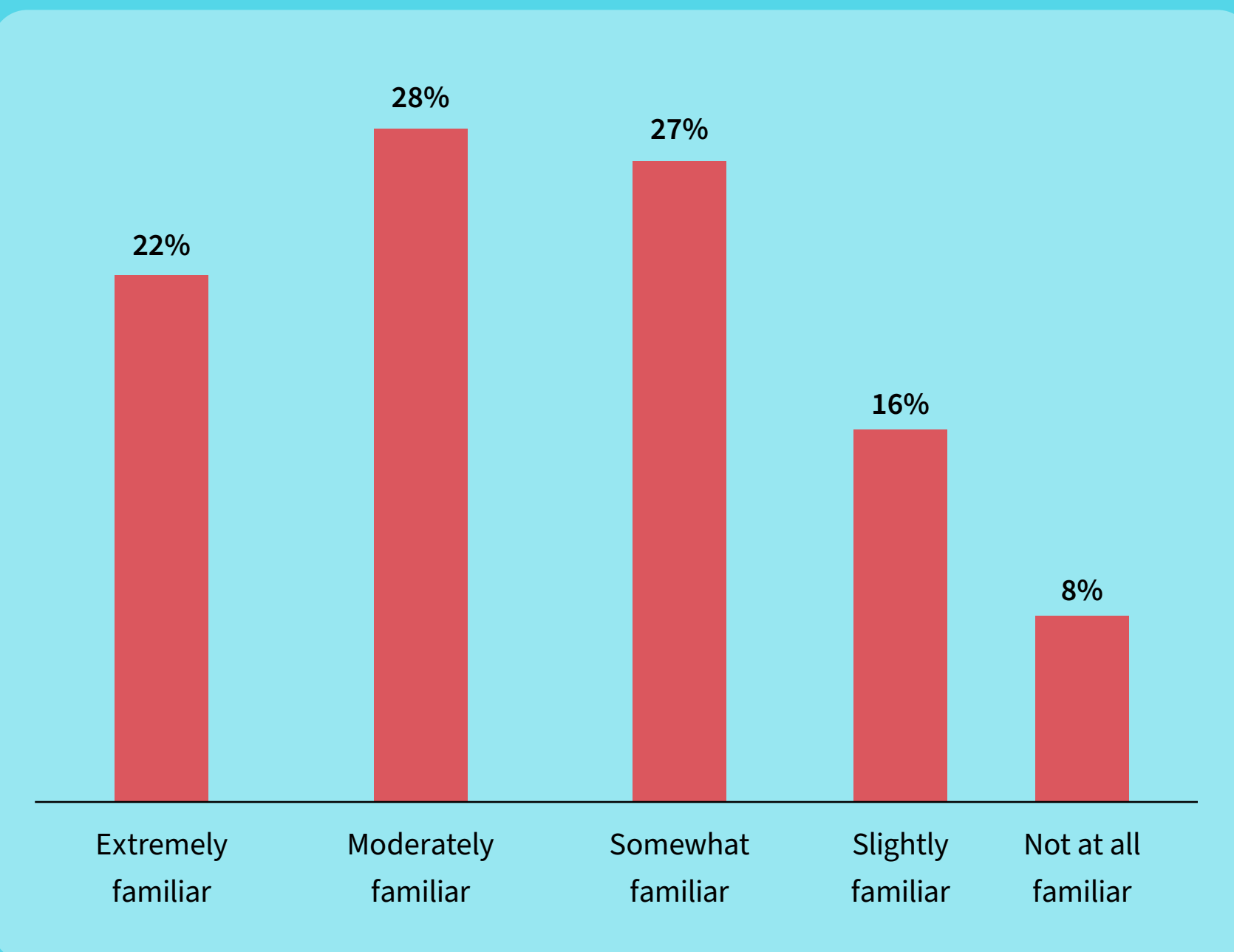
Most decision-makers identified as women (91%), and were in various organisational roles including coaches, teachers, administrators, committee members, and program coordinators.

A range of sports were represented e.g., AFL, soccer, rugby, netball, tennis, athletics.

The Findings (A Snapshot)

Perceptions of Breast-Related Issues

- ▶ 24% had nil-to-low familiarity that breast-related issues were experienced during sport.
- ▶ No differences were observed between participants who were women, men or who preferred not to disclose their gender.



Participation, Performance and Drop-Out

A majority perceived that over 40% of girls and women in their organisation experience breast-related issues that:

1. Limit **sporting performance** (reported by 66%).
2. Limit **participation** in sport (reported by 63%).
3. Contribute to their decision to **drop out of sport** (reported by 57%).



Perceived Benefits of Well-Fitted, Supportive Sports Bras

The majority reported that a well-fitted, supportive sports bra was perceived to:

- ▶ Prevent breast pain during exercise (reported by 95%).
- ▶ Reduce embarrassment caused by excessive breast movement (reported by 92%).
- ▶ Prevent bra-related chafing (reported by 85%).
- ▶ Prevent contact breast injuries i.e., impacts to the breast that result in breast pain, bruising and swelling (reported by 64%).

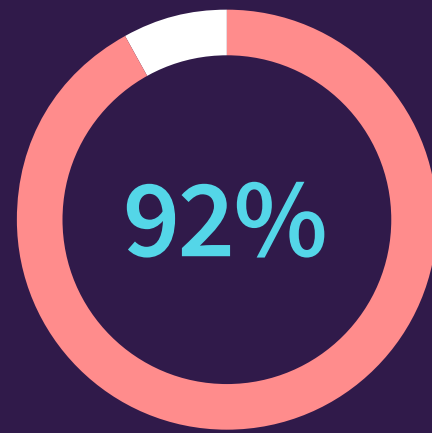


“In the same way that a mouth guard protects teeth, breasts are high contact areas in our sport that require protection and support.”

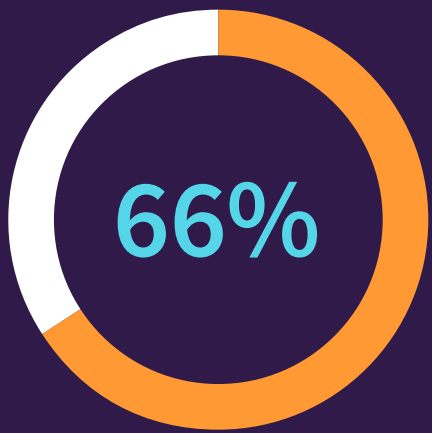
“Sports bras are essential, they reduce breast movement and strain on the muscles and ligaments that support the breasts. As someone with a larger cup size... I know how painful high-impact sports like rugby can be without the right support.”

A Disconnect

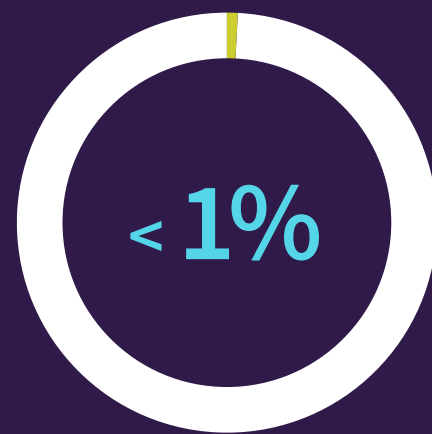
While decision-makers recognised the importance of sports bras, the findings suggest a gap between this importance and doing something about it.



believe that girls and women would **benefit** from education on sports bra design, fit, and support.



believe it is their organisation's **responsibility** to provide this education¹.



of the represented organisations provide this **education**.

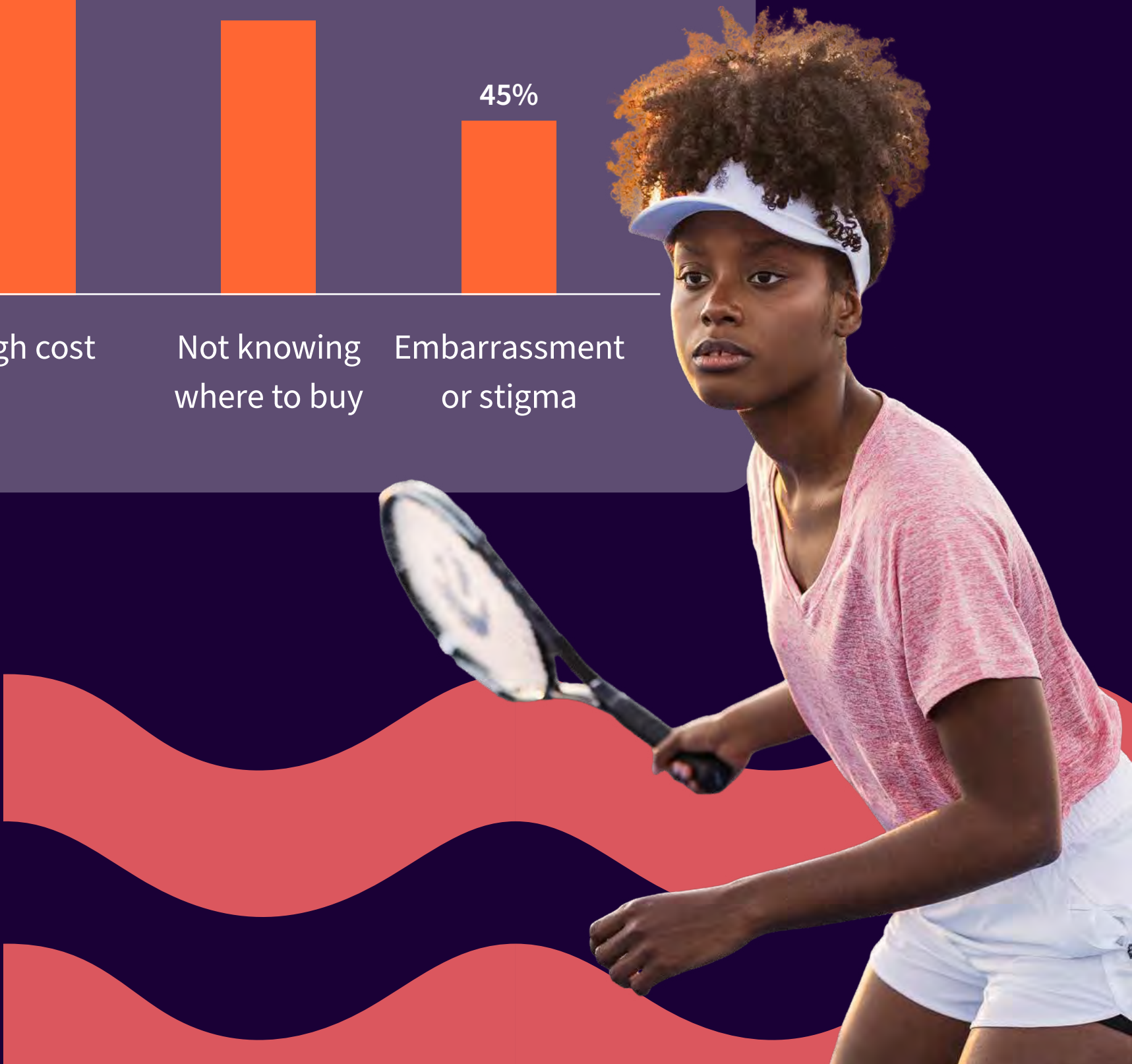
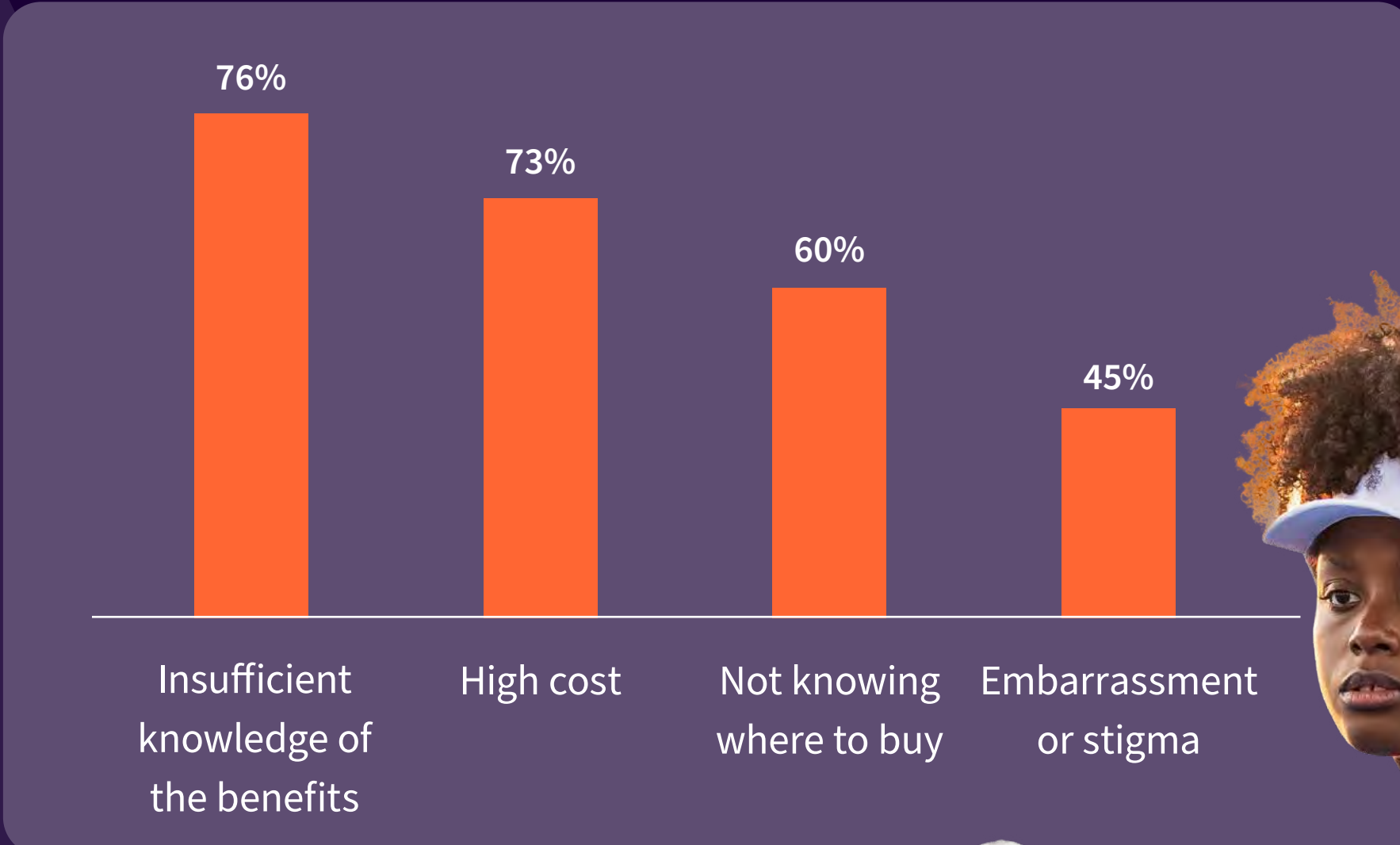


of the represented organisations recognise **sports bras in school or sports kits**.

¹ While decision-makers from schools and sporting organisations held similar views overall, those with greater familiarity with breast-related issues were more likely to see player education as an organisational responsibility.
² These barriers were similar across schools and sporting organisations, and did not differ between metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Barriers to Access Sports Bras

The most commonly reported barriers² to sports bra access for students and players were:



Reasons why organisations did not provide education or include sports bras as part of school or sports kits include:

- ▶ Bras are considered personal underwear.
- ▶ Breast shape, size, and personal comfort preferences vary, and sports bra recommendations are perceived to be difficult to provide.
- ▶ Senior leaders in their organisations are predominantly men, who lack knowledge of the issue.
- ▶ Community sports and women's programs are often under-resourced, and adding a high-cost, specialised item to the kit is viewed as financially unviable.

“At a public school not every student has the money to be properly fitted or purchase appropriate sports bras.”



“We probably make an assumption that due to the variability of athletes, they purchase the bra that is most comfortable to them, however education to make better choices, and possibly a grant/ subsidy for the purchase could be something we consider.”

Opportunities for Schools and Sports to Support Girls and Women with Sports Bras

The findings highlight two practical opportunities for schools and sporting organisations to support girls and women to access and use well-fitted supportive sports bras.

1 Provide Education

- ▶ Embed in school and sport websites **evidence-based resources on sports bra design and fit** e.g., *Sports Bra Tool*³; *Breast Health Module*⁴; *UEFA Sports Bra Guide*⁵.
- ▶ **Integrate sports bra education into existing school structures** e.g., physical education classes, health units, or pastoral care programs.
- ▶ **Bring in specialists to provide expert, judgement-free advice** e.g., school nurses, welfare officers, health professionals, researchers, or representatives from sports bra retailers.

³ *Sports Bra Tool*, <https://bra.edu.au/>

⁴ *Breast Health Module*, AIS Female Performance and Health Initiative, <https://www.ausport.gov.au/ais/fphi>

⁵ *UEFA Sports Bra Guide*, https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/02a3-2014c126244e-5f37bdc7d455-1000/uefa-sports_bra_guide-v3.pdf



“I would love to see a way where girls could test/try a well-fitting bra before running/training, so they actually feel the difference and can give feedback before they spend the money.”



“When addressing puberty and the changes the body goes through, we could address the role sports bras play. Along with barriers to physical activity and refer to it there.”



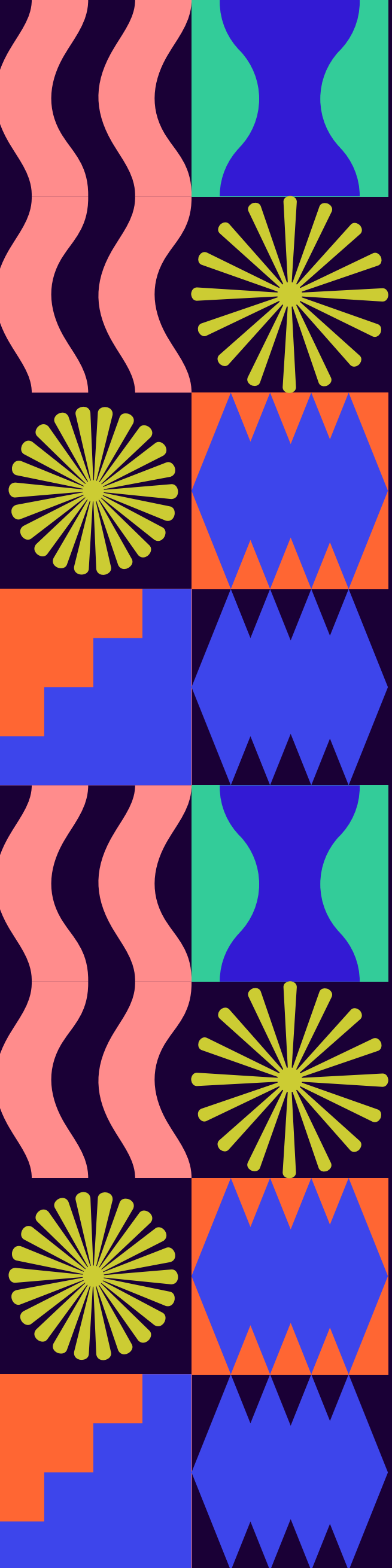
2 Recognise Sports Bras

- ▶ **Acknowledge** sports bras as an item in school sports and sports kits.
- ▶ Support this acknowledgment by **hosting practical girls/women-only sports bra sessions** that educate attendees on
 - ▶ high support sports bra design features.
 - ▶ criteria to independently determine correct bra fit and adequate breast support.
- ▶ Where possible, **allow girls and women to experience** what good fit and support feels like by trying on bras.

These actions can help girls and women make informed choices when purchasing sports bras.



Education and recognition can help girls, parents, physical education teachers, women, coaches, administrators, and the broader community better understand the importance of appropriate breast support for safe, comfortable, and confident participation and performance in sport.



The Path from Insight to Action

The following two case studies demonstrate positive outcomes that can be achieved when organisations take action.

CASE ONE

Gilgandra High School

CASE TWO

Queensland Academy of Sport



CASE ONE

Gilgandra High School (GHS) Sports Bra Education and Fitting Program Initiative

The problem

Teachers identified:

- ▶ Low female participation in sport.
- ▶ Students avoided sport because they felt uncomfortable due to inadequate breast support.
- ▶ Limited access to sports bras due to financial and geographic factors.

“Thanks Miss, my back no longer hurts in this bra. I can’t believe that something as simple as a bra was all it took to fix my back pain” (Student).

Action taken

- ▶ For the past three years, GHS has used **NSW Department of Education equity funding** to provide female students with two sports bras at no cost as part of their sports uniform.
- ▶ **Students are fitted** into an appropriate sports bra style by a professional bra fitter during a single session that is also attended by a female teacher (Ilana Austen, who initiated the program) and a GHS female wellbeing officer. The professional bra fitter is also a retailer and organises the delivery of bras to the school.
- ▶ Students are **introduced to online evidence-based education** (Sports Bra Tool) to guide future bra purchases and fittings.
- ▶ Students interested in the program receive information outlining the purpose, details of the fitting session, who will be present, and how the process will be conducted. **Participation is voluntary, written parental consent is required**, female parents or carers are welcome to attend and can also be fitted.
- ▶ **Respect for cultural, religious, and personal sensitivities** is central to the program.
- ▶ School counsellors and wellbeing staff are available to **provide support** if required.



The outcomes



1 Increased participation

In the first year, **35% increase in female participation** at the school athletics carnival

2 Increased confidence, comfort and wellbeing

Teachers observed positive impacts on the physical and mental wellbeing of female students including increased:

- ▶ **Confidence** participating in sporting environments.
- ▶ **Comfort** in participating in physical activity and sport.
- ▶ **Open conversations** about breast health.
- ▶ **Success and engagement** in sporting events.

Many students commented they no longer needed to adjust their bras during activity and were able to focus on their performance.

3 Growing acceptance of the program

Participation increased from **65% to 96% of female students from year 1 to year 3.**

- ▶ Building trust with families was key to implementation. While some families were initially hesitant due to uncertainty about the fitting process, inviting mothers and female carers to attend sessions increased understanding and transparency
- ▶ This school mentors other schools and sports to implement this program.

*“We’re finding that more parents are now supportive of the initiative. We have students who had never participated before approaching us and saying, ‘Miss, I didn’t do it the last two years because I didn’t feel comfortable, but I’d like to try this year.’ That shows we’re **normalising these conversations and creating a positive cultural shift for our students**” (Teacher).*



Queensland Academy of Sport (QAS) Resources, Education, and Support

The problem

Coaches and physiotherapists identified:

- ▶ Breast issues affecting performance and quality of training.
- ▶ Breast injuries occurring, risking breast health because of potential long-term consequences.
- ▶ Female athletes felt uncomfortable discussing breast pain and breast injuries.
- ▶ Female athletes and support staff had limited knowledge of sports bras, bra fitting, breast health and injuries.



Action taken

Stage 1: Promote Evidence-Based Online Education Resources on QAS website and social media channels for athletes to access independently

- ▶ The Sports Bra Tool.
- ▶ The Australian Institute of Sport, Female Performance and Health Initiative, Breast Health Module.

Stage 2: Deliver Practical Education and Support

In response to observed limited engagement with the online resources:

- ▶ Developed a **Female Performance Health Series** to deliver practical breast health education to athletes, explaining how this could improve their performance.
- ▶ **QAS physiotherapists were upskilled** (by a sports physiotherapist with expertise in sports bras and fit) to provide **individual sports bra design and fitting sessions for athletes** and guide athletes on the use and benefits of the evidence-based breast health resources.

The outcomes

1 Positive interest and participation:

50 female athletes attended the first event, with strong interest in the physiotherapist-led sports bra design and fitting sessions (i.e., 3 physiotherapists were fully booked throughout the day).

2 Positive feedback:

- ▶ Athletes reported the sessions **increased confidence** to identify key features when purchasing new sports bras.
- ▶ **Increased use of online education resources** when athletes received personalised guidance from physiotherapists and could see the relevance to sport and performance.
- ▶ Increased requests by female athlete squads for **additional breast health education sessions** delivered by QAS physiotherapists.
- ▶ **Reduced barriers** for athletes to discuss and manage breast health concerns.

*“The physiotherapist-led sessions highlighted just how little our female athletes knew about sports bra design and bra fit”
(Manager, Health).*

*“Once our female athletes became aware that their sports bra could affect performance, they were much more interested in learning about sports bra design and bra fit”
(Physiotherapist).*