

This month, the biopic of jockey Michelle Payne's life, [Ride Like A Girl](#), will be released.

In 2015, Payne made Australian sport history by riding Prince Of Penzance to victory in the Melbourne Cup at 100-1 odds. She was the first female jockey in the Cup's 155-year history to win the prestigious race.

Payne's success is part of a surge in the numbers of female jockeys in Australia. But while women are more visible in the silks, there is nonetheless a persistent sexist culture that is proving hard to stamp out. Australia lags behind other racing nations in making meaningful changes for women.

A sport steeped in masculine history

In its long history, horse racing has been dominated by men – they have been the jockeys, the strappers, the trainers and the administrators. It wasn't [until 1979 that female jockeys](#) were finally granted licences to compete against men in professional races.

In recent years, the gender imbalance has started to turn around. There is little doubt that Payne's historic win spurred the continued rise in female jockey numbers – and, in turn, the rising number of women winning races.

These days, [about 30% of Australian jockeys](#) are women. Women [now dominate](#) regional meets, most notably in Western Australia.

In Victoria, female apprentice jockeys outnumber men. As a result, women's [riding opportunities](#) are steadily increasing.

But it remains a dangerous sport, [as highlighted](#) by the recent deaths of two female jockeys. In fact, nine of the past ten jockey deaths in Australia have been women,

raising questions about safety

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While these statistics may cause people to hypothesise a link between gender and jockey falls, research remains scarce. Australian racing officials [are warning](#) that conclusions should not be drawn too early, especially about any gender-based implications. □

In addition, the masculinist culture within the sport remains hard to shift. That seems to extend to racegoers too: despite impressive performances on the turf, punters show [significant bias against female jockeys](#)

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However, this assumption is mistaken, with female jockey performances [often equal](#) to those of men.

Following her victory, Payne had a visible platform from which to call out racing's sexist culture. [She said](#)

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It's such a chauvinistic sport, a lot of the owners wanted to kick me off. Everyone else can get stuffed [who] think women aren't good enough. I believe that we [women] sort of don't get enough of a go and hopefully this [her Cup win] will help.

A man's world

[Recent research highlights](#) the sport's persistent gender inequities, which are often played out in inappropriate comments about female jockeys' physical appearance, or unwanted sexual advances. While women and men finally [competing against each other equally](#) and for equal pay is cause for celebration, women's earning potential is often restricted because they tend to ride inferior horses in lower-class races. As American jockey Erica Murray [put it](#)

:

To survive, you have to keep your mouth shut.

For many years, the few jobs for women in horse racing have been in “caring” roles such as stablehands. While women have made some gains as trainers, group 1 racing opportunities remain largely dominated by men.

In 2018, [three of the top six riders](#) in Australia were women. Despite competing and succeeding at this level, few other women made up the top 50.

Some female jockeys attribute disparities of this kind to the [difficulties women can face](#) getting a ride.

[Some trainers refuse](#) to use women as riders.

Jockeys need to be strong but slight. But while women's smaller size might be a natural advantage, within racing circles [they are often considered](#) weaker and so less able to withstand the physicality of race riding.

Where to from here?

Australian racing may be able to learn something from the French example. To create a level playing field, racehorses are given different weights. Put simply, better-performing horses are required to carry heavier loads. In 2017, the French allowed a horse with a female rider to carry two kilograms less weight than those with male jockeys. This year, Japan's Racing Association followed suit.

Since this measure was implemented, the number of female starters in flat racing in France has doubled, with a [165% increase](#) in the number of wins by women.

While similar measures [may eventually be adopted](#) in Australia, some female jockeys remain cautious. When asked if she would go to France to take advantage of the rule, Melbourne-based rider [Linda Meech said](#) :

Riding (and winning) like a girl: female jockeys are more prevalent, but still treated as outsiders

Written by Michelle O'Shea, Lecturer Sport Management, Western Sydney University

You are joking. We can compete with the men without any need for that sort of advantage.

Those opposed to such a measure argue it might entrench the belief that women are somehow less capable than their male counterparts and require an advantage. [For others](#), it is anti-competitive and discriminates against men.

Others in the industry argue that cash incentives might increase female jockey numbers. Some UK commentators go as far as to [call for](#) quota systems as a way to fast-track women.

Cultural change takes time. If the sport had more women not just riding in group 1 races but also becoming trainers and rising through the administration ranks, its entrenched sexist culture would start to change.

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Michelle O'Shea does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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