

SUPPORTING FEMALE REFEREES IN MARYLAND AND THE WASHINGTON, DC METROPOLITAN REGION

RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDANCE FROM THE MWSRA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

OVERVIEW

The state of Maryland and Washington, DC metropolitan region have struggled to retain new referees. Consistent efforts have been made to train referees, with approximately 2,800 new referees trained between 2016 and 2018. However, in 2016, 2017, and 2018 respectively, only 2,635, 2,575, and 2,595 referees have registered in the state of Maryland each year.

In August 2016, the Metropolitan Washington Soccer Referees Association (MWSRA) launched its New Referee Development Program, intended to improve the quality and retention of newer referees, regardless of age. A lack of mentorship, development, and support as well as poor spectator behavior are key reasons for the region's struggle to retain referees, and MWSRA is not immune to this regional challenge. As a part of the New Referee Development Program, MWSRA is also making a concerted effort to recruit, retain, and support female referees of all ages. On March 3, 2018, MWSRA developed and distributed an anonymous, four-question, gender-, sex-, and age-blind survey to better understand the challenges and opportunities female referees face. This survey also encouraged other referees and regional organizations to consider the disparities between male and female referees and reflect upon their own experiences as referees. Simultaneously, MWSRA also began conducting interviews with numerous male and female referees, assignors, and administrators.

While equally capable, female referees face a variety of challenges on top of those faced by all referees in general. In fact, sexism (and general bias) was identified as the most frequent challenge that female referees face that male referees do not face (See results from Survey Question 2 below). This report aims to address some of these additional hurdles and perceptions to directly target broader challenges that detract from the experience of female referee. This report is exclusively focused on supporting female referees, who are underrepresented in this profession. However, MWSRA acknowledges that many recommendations are not unique to female referees and do indeed carry over similarly to male referees and youth referees of any sex as well.

The recommendations and information included below were approved by the MWSRA Board of Directors on February 24, 2019. Please contact MWSRA President, Matthew Popkin, with any questions, comments, or suggestions at mwsrapresident@gmail.com.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of numerous interviews with male and female referees, assignors, and administrators, formal discussions, a regional survey with over 175 unique responses, and over 60 years of assigning and officiating in the region, MWSRA recommends the following:

For the Maryland Referee Committee:

1. Develop a system for reporting abuse and/or harassment of protected classes (gender, sex, race, or religion) in Maryland to a state-supported review committee, especially by assignors, administrators, or other referees. Also, develop standard operating procedures for evaluating claims of discrimination, abuse, and/or harassment, strategies to reduce future harassment, policies for reprimanding or removing harassers, procedures for supporting victims of harassment, and protocol for timely reporting to involved parties. (Note: The review committee should be independent from any association, state administrators, and assignors in the event any issues regarding leadership arise.)
2. Include a focused session in each Grade 8 Recertification Clinic and Entry-Level Clinic on different perspectives, perceptions, and approaches to managing coaches, players, spectators, and referees. Field management is typically taught from the perspective of an adult male referee in terms of overall management. For example, a female referee managing male behavior or a male referee managing female referees require different tools, perspectives, and awareness. The same holds true for a minor or youth referee managing adult behavior, especially if the dynamic is between a young female referee and an adult male referee. If we expect referees to behave as equals and professionals, younger referees must not only feel empowered and authorized to address adult referees, but also have the tools to manage this challenging dynamic. We would recommend the creation of a state working group with key stakeholders and a range of referee experience to enhance existing trainings and develop any new sessions deemed appropriate.
3. The state should boost its mentoring program to help retain referees of all ages, sexes, and backgrounds, with a particular focus on early and entry-level mentoring. This may include hosting female referee mentor days and female-instructed trainings to further lead by example and offer role models to up and coming female referees and to demonstrate to male referees that women can officiate as well.
4. Conduct a review of existing toilet facilities at prominent field locations. This was identified by multiple referees in MWSRA's survey as being a barrier for female referees seeking to work longer game sets. For large, commonly used tournament and multi-field complexes, ensure that physical facilities (beyond portable toilets) are available.
5. Strongly encourage and adopt the terminology of "1-ref/2-ref/3-ref system" instead of "1-man/2-man/3-man system".
6. Create a new position for the Maryland Referee Committee to serve as the "State Director of Recruitment". This person will coordinate with the Committee, Maryland referee associations, and other assignors and instructors to coordinate efforts to attract new referees. This will help reduce the shortage of referees statewide, be a proactive means of addressing stereotypes and misconceptions

about who can be a referee and make a concerted effort to reach out to prospective referees regardless of sex.

For Associations & Assignors:

1. Assignors should make an extra effort to communicate with new female referees before and after their first game sets and throughout their first season in particular. This effort can be made directly by the assignor or in partnership with another designated official by the assignor/referee association overseeing mentoring and development.
2. Encourage current referees, especially male referees to better manage dissent by coaches and spectators in accordance with new state guidelines for addressing spectator abuse.
3. Communicate the options (and pros/cons of each option) that new referees have to begin as a center referee or assistant referee to new female referees (and new referees in general) to best align with personality and preference.
4. Share general survey findings with leagues/clients, coaches, and referees to inform all participants in the soccer community (referees, assignors, spectators, players, coaches, parents of participants, etc.).
5. Assignors, associations, and other referee organizations should make concerted and proactive efforts to recruit female referees, especially from local schools, colleges, and clubs.
6. Strongly encourage and adopt the terminology of “1-ref/2-ref/3-ref system” instead of “1-man/2-man/3-man system”.

For All Referees:

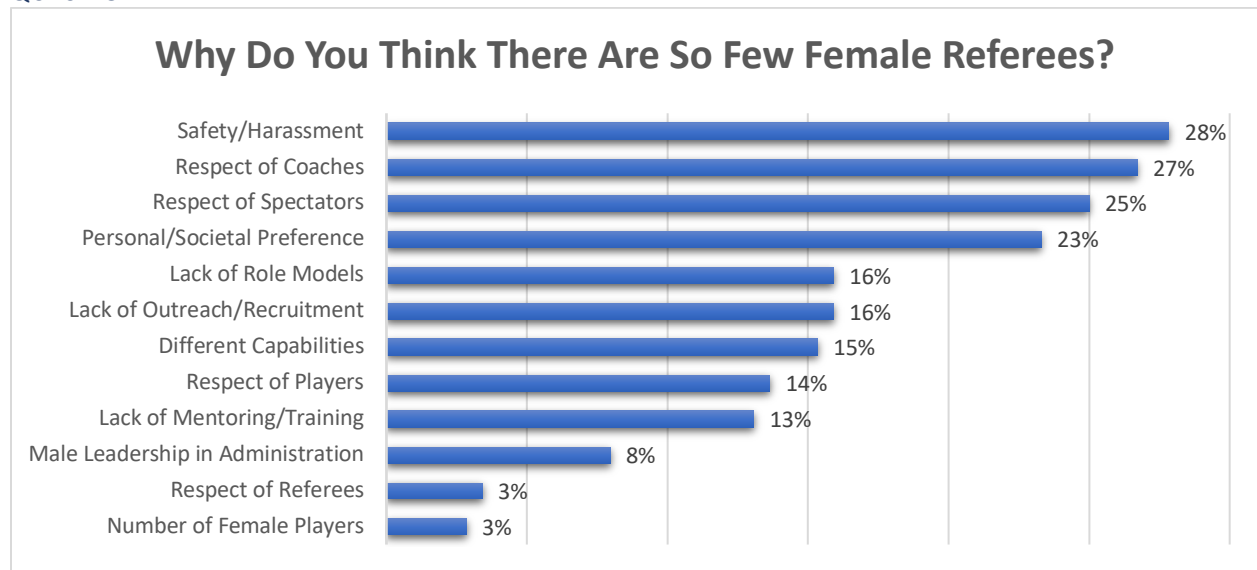
1. Encourage current referees, especially male referees to better manage dissent by coaches and spectators in accordance with new state guidelines for addressing spectator abuse.
2. Communicate to assignors or association leadership if you witness harassment towards another referee from a referee or any individual in a match environment.
3. Strongly encourage and adopt the terminology of “1-ref/2-ref/3-ref system” instead of “1-man/2-man/3-man system”.

SURVEY RESULTS

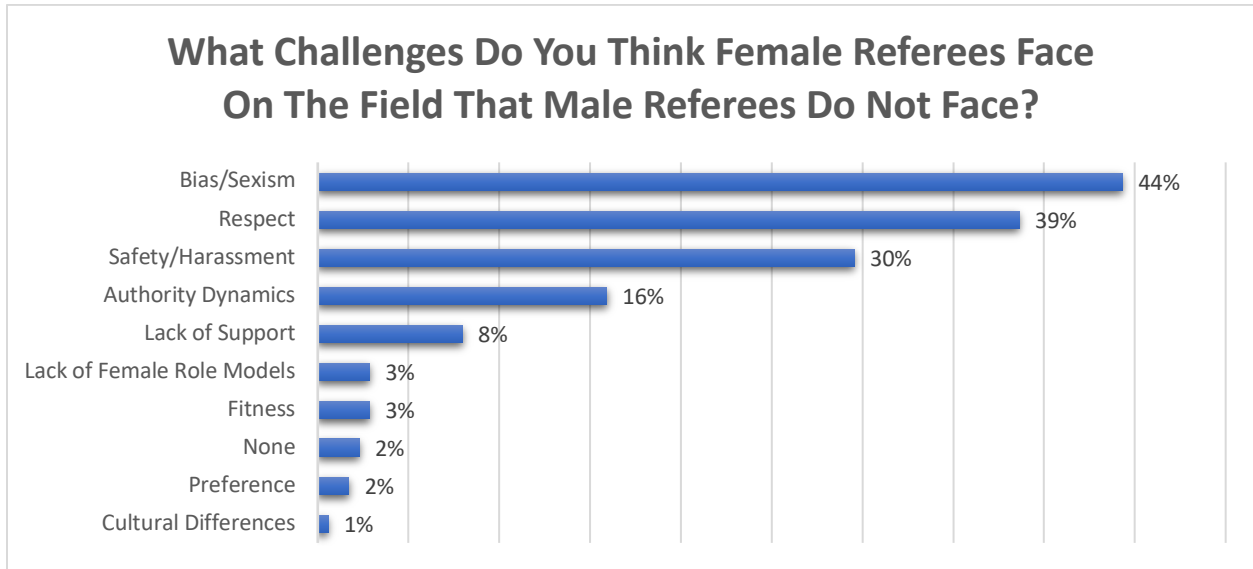
MWSRA surveyed soccer officials in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Northern Virginia. The Google Form survey was distributed through the MWSRA Constant Contact listserv, the CASRA Arbiter listserv, and in two different Facebook groups dedicated to referee development. As of May 16, 2018, the survey had received responses from 176 different referees which have been preliminarily reviewed and categorized below. Categories were not predetermined and were developed after an initial review of the responses. Each response was then categorized, and many responses fit more than one categorization per question.

The results below reflect the percentage of responses that identified topics related to the main categories, and many responses addressed multiple topics. All officials surveyed, in MWSRA or otherwise, are independent contractors and few, if any, are necessarily tasked with or explicitly responsible for the development of other officials. This merely represents an overview of opinions and suggestions that referee associations, assignors, and state administrators should entertain. It is not by any means an authoritative source on behalf of all referees but does offer insight and a range of ideas to help inform next steps.

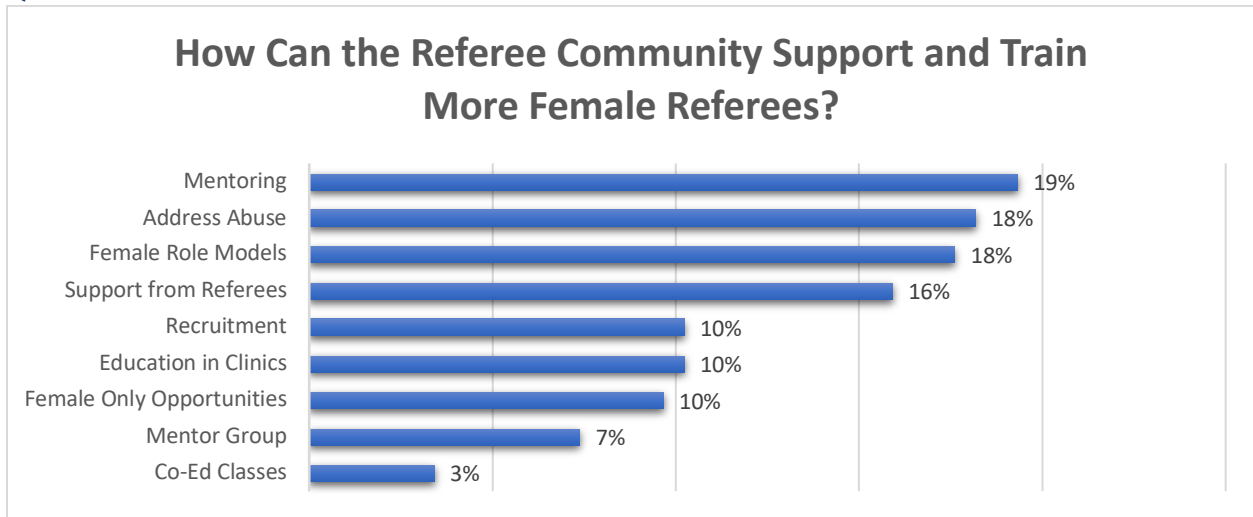
QUESTION 1:



QUESTION 2:



QUESTION 3:



Note: Some responses were categorized as "Other" or "Not Applicable" and are not included in this summary.

NOTEWORTHY COMMENTS FROM THE SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS

- i. *“Coaches, players, and parents don’t consistently show respect for female referees. Regardless of how you look and what you tell people in the pre-game “sir” is constantly yelled at you while you’re on the field.”*
- ii. *“Sexism and misogyny prevail on the pitch as well as in the training. As a female senior referee with almost three decades of experience I have encountered both persistently. That is a primary reason why female referees do not stay with it -- it's just not worth the grief... Finally, the training and formats of referee development are based on what works for males, not what works for females.”*
- iii. *“A lack of good female mentors might play a role as well. I have witnessed some sexism in the men's games when I'm working with female refs. My decisions are respected and hers (or theirs) are critiqued. There is a perception on some teams that women call the game closer than a male referee would. I really don't feel like I can help them out without reinforcing the stereotype.”*
- iv. *“Speaking personally, learning to tell men to "stand down" is very uncomfortable. I have seen some women do this without blinking. For me it has been a long unpleasant process. Men, I am assuming, are already accustomed to telling other men to back off. And so I am guessing that setting that boundary and then continuing to referee without letting the difficulty of being challenged or bullied get in the way of making proper calls the rest of the game is not so daunting. I have had to learn how to do this over the years. And I have driven home from some fields in tears. I have less trouble with female coaches; they are less intimidating to me. I feel that I understand their signals for the most part.”*
- v. *“Female and young refs face a power differential relative to older men participating in the game (coaches, players, and other refs). If the game reports specifically asked about harassment based on gender, ethnicity, and age this could be used to help reduce some of this. If a female ref reports that she felt sexually harassed by another ref that should be taken very seriously.”*
- vi. *“It is pretty intimidating to walk into a room full of guys when you go to get certified, and it might be helpful to have a girls-only certification session.”*
- vii. *“It’s annoying being called “sweetie” and “little girl” when I ref. It makes me not want to do it sometimes.”*
- viii. *“I’ve seen young referees abused by adults. It’s appalling that this happens, but worse that it is allowed to happen. Having league staff on hand at several random games to immediately and publicly identify and expel these abusers would show all young or newer referees that the soccer community is serious about supporting them.”*
- ix. *“Being a female ref is difficult, I have wanted to quit many times in my 10 years, but I have seen improvements... depends on the team and the other refs by your side.”*
- x. *“In some ways, WE are the problem. In my over 20 years I have witnessed too many times male refs wave down.... over rule... ignore... young female AR's calls. Then the peanut gallery/coach/ players*

pick up on it and make it miserable for the AR. Also, I have witnessed some ugliness between adult male and adult female refs."

- xi. "As a [female] referee, it is extremely intimidating to ref men's games, as I am often not given the same level of respect by the players, coaches and parents as my male counterparts. Some of this may be due to my younger age, but I definitely feel like I have to be even better than my male counterparts to get the same level of respect."*
- xii. "One of the biggest problems is the assignors. The assignors need to let the MRC/mentors/SYRA know about these female referees. This is the only way for them to advance to the next levels. But the assignors do not do this because the assignors do not want to lose a good referee that they can keep assigning games to in their area."*
- xiii. "As a father of female referees... we started working games together and as their confidence grew, they worked with other referees as well as by themselves centering younger age groups... They've also received great support from the referees they've worked with. As they're about to turn 17, I've refereed less and less the last couple of years as they've progressed with other referees so that I could continue to watch them and discuss what happened during the game. At this point, I'm confident they can handle negative situations that may arise. But, I can see during the initial years if they were by themselves having a negative experience that would make them want to quit. They have since had the opportunity to referee state cup games and attend the regional ODP tournaments over the last few years meeting other female referees serving as great role models."*
- xiv. "This survey is a good first step. The next step would be a small group of male and female referees who can get together and discuss the issues, maybe work on some solutions to educate referees and coaches locally. This group could also be tasked with outreach to female soccer programs and local high schools to recruit female referees."*
- xv. "I know of one assignor that is a bully and nothing is done with him. It scares all of the new refs away. A mentor program is needed within each ref association."*
- xvi. "Boy's coaches often are extremely abusive, and their players pick up on it and then believe it is okay for them to be disrespectful as well. It is hard as a 18 year old girl to go tell the coach of a U13 boys team that he needs to quiet down, and more often than not they do not listen."*
- xvii. "The game needs more females not only as referees, but also as instructors, assessors, and mentors to younger referees, both male and female. Until the boys, and male referees, see females as role models, there will be a struggle for female referees to be seen on an equal footing to the males. There are male referees who condescend and 'mansplain' even to females who have more playing and referee experience than they do. They need some training and attitude adjustment as well."*
- xviii. "I am a female referee for the last 4 years, I never felt so discriminated until I started working as a referee. I had been insulted, threatened, even physical attack by parents, coaches, players and even male referees. I reported every single incident to my assignor, but I received just one response saying: "Sorry". All these experiences make me stronger and I would like to show everyone that I am capable and not weak. I hope that you have the power to change this a little bit. I wish, in general, all the referees can get more support and the people to make our work really hard has strong consequences. I love soccer, I enjoy referee[ing], I like to run and get money, but I would like to feel safe and secure."*

- xix. *“A lot of female referees are put off by argumentative coaches and parents. (In my experience, these groups are more problematic than players although your mileage may vary.) If a young AR is at a game or a field and sees/hears parents griping at the center, they don't want to put themselves in the center. If they see/hear a parent or coach blow their top, they are (in my experience) more likely to just stop refereeing than to report the incident or otherwise deal with it. So often, referees just ignore this behavior - even if it does not bother them, it creates an atmosphere that female referees are less likely to see themselves flourishing. More experienced referees have a responsibility to convey the "no tolerance" stance on dissent consistently, and leagues and assignors need to handle it VERY seriously when they get these reports or reports of verbal abuse. Referees do not just frivolously send off an email or card a coach. This is my point of view: less-experienced male referees are likely to "laugh off" criticism (even when they make a wrong call) and less-experienced female referees are more likely to take criticism to heart (even when they make a good call). This last point also relates to our referee team - I was fortunate to get tons of great feedback from referees some of whom I consider mentors. But I do think female referees in particular appreciate positive feedback... tell me what I can do better but also tell me what I am doing well.”*