

6<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

Committee Secretary  
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts  
References Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

Dear Madam/Sir,

### **Submission to the inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia**

In a speech to young women recently quoted in the Courier Mail newspaper, Germaine Greer made a telling comment about the difficulty of addressing issues of inequity relating to leisure participation, 'Women worked and studied too hard and did not spend enough time on themselves. "One of the things I cannot get women to understand is that they are entitled to leisure", she said. "They don't have to justify their existence by working all the hours God sends".' (Stolz 2006, 9th March, p1). Policy reform needs to take into account the social, cultural and political processes that profoundly shape women's opportunities for participation at the individual and population levels.

Numerous research studies within the fields of leisure, recreation and sport studies continue to demonstrate how women still experience a range of gender constraints that reduce their choice to participate and their ability to maintain involvement (Henderson and Ainsworth 2002; Aitchison 2003; Miller and Brown 2005). One of the major issues facing many women today is the lack of control over their own leisure time that results from gender inequities in the division of domestic labour and child rearing, in addition to paid work. In many respects these gender issues relate to men's involvement and support of women's participation.

Leisure participation in a market economy that increasingly requires user pays involvement especially disadvantages women with low incomes who we know experience greater health problems. There is an even greater need for government supported programs and services that enable women from diverse backgrounds (socioeconomic, cultural, sexual identity, disability and age) to access recreation services that are gender sensitive with respect to the provision of childcare, the marketing of female body image, a culture of female participation and leadership provided within the context of a safe environment that is accessible.

#### Health Benefits

Findings from my own research have identified the physical, and even more importantly the mental and emotional health benefits, that leisure participation enables women of all ages (Fullagar and Brown 2003). A health promotion project conducted with two groups of women in a regional area (mothers of young children or over 45 years old) identified the significance of gender specific leisure programs that emphasised wellbeing, participation rather than competition and involved women in

the decision making processes (Fullagar, Gattuso et al. 2004). This project identified the need for gender sensitive community capacity building approaches to working across the health and recreation sectors, as well as support for existing under resourced services such as women's health centres and community recreation centres. What was also significant was the different range of meanings that women attribute to leisure participation that do not necessarily match social norms based upon masculine experiences. This cultural issue of gender meanings and identities is far deeper than the language of gender constraints can adequately capture. In a published article that develops a gender analysis of Australian sport and recreation policies I argue that we need to move beyond positioning (and thus blaming) women as an 'at risk' group for non-participation and instead look carefully at how we might expand our programs to include different meanings as well as addressing the structural complexities of women's lives (Fullagar 2003).

Another research project that has identified significant health benefits from leisure participation focussed on women's recovery from depression (Fullagar, Gattuso et al. 2005). Depression has been identified as one of the most significant issues affecting women's health in Australia and more globally. The rural and urban women in the study we conducted linked their recovery to the positive experiences they derived from leisure in creating social networks, enabling change in confidence and challenging gender inequities and expectations in the home, relationships and work. Many women spoke of the emotional burden of the superwoman ideal as they tried to manage their own and care for the lives of others when they were unable to have time for themselves. Women who lived in low income areas were disadvantaged by a lack of green space, safe parks, community facilities, social groups and affordable childcare services. This lack of community infrastructure and social capital impeded their recovery as much as a lack of specific mental health services.

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