

**Submission to Senate Committee – Environment, Communications,  
Information Technology and the Arts**

**Inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia**

Womensport and Recreation Tasmania Inc (WSRT) is pleased that the Senate is conducting an Inquiry into this topic, and we wish to make the attached points known to the Committee.

This submission was compiled and agreed upon by the Executive Committee of WSRT.

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## Executive Summary

- To address the declining health of the general population, Womensport and Recreation Tasmania Inc (WSRT) encourages programs that engage women and girls in physical activity, be it competitive or non-competitive;
- WSRT currently auspices the operation of the Women's Get Active Program in Tasmania, which assists women to understand the 'drivers' behind making permanent changes to their lifestyle to eat healthily and be active on a regular basis;
- More should be done to promote options and opportunities for spontaneous active recreation, rather than focusing on support for structured team-based sports, to encourage an overall increase in physical activity in the community;
- Success stories of women who have successfully balanced family and work commitments with training to compete at the elite, masters and veterans level should be better publicised;
- As the lack of regulation over television coverage of women's sporting events has resulted in minimal scheduling of these events by television stations, a mandatory proportion of scheduling time should be set aside specifically to cover women's sporting events;
- WSRT is engaged in a number of initiatives to encourage more women in leadership roles in sport and recreation;

## **1. The health benefits of women participating in sport and recreation activities**

Womensport and Recreation Tasmania Inc (WSRT) is aware of the considerable research already available showing that women and girls who are physically active have a significantly decreased risk of contracting chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions, which are related to being overweight. Regular weight-bearing activity, such as running, walking or strength training can also assist in lowering the risk of contracting osteoporosis.

As well, there are considerable mental health benefits to being physically active, and this is particularly of importance to females who have a higher likelihood of suffering from depression than males.

Ultimately, as an environmental health concern, a population that is physically active will be less of a burden on the acute health care system, which is already under considerable financial stress.

## **2. The accessibility for women of all ages to participate in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities, with additional reference to state and federal programs, including:**

- a) The number of women activity participating in organised sport, fitness and recreational activities**
- b) Characteristics of women not participating in organised sport, fitness and recreation activities (including, for example, socio-economic strata, age, women with a disability, Indigenous or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women**
- c) Constraints, including strategies to overcome the constraints that may prevent these women from participating**
- d) The effectiveness of current state and federal grant programs that encourage women to participate**
- e) The retention and attrition rates of grass-roots participation, including comparisons with male athletes at a similar level**

These three matters are best addressed jointly as they are interrelated.

From the *2004 Annual Report on Participation in Exercise Recreation and Sport*, by the Australian Sports Commission, Table 25 shows that for the four-year period ending in 2004, Tasmanian women's participation rates in organised physical activities has decreased from 41.1% to 37.2%. In contrast, men's participation rate over the same period has remained steady at 44%.

While WSRT has not conducted its own studies to ascertain the reasons behind this decrease, informal discussions with our members is that there has been an increase in the demands on women's recreational time, through an increase in part-time employment for those who are parents, as well as increased demands by family members, particularly children, who themselves are engaged in organised sport.

Participation in organised activities brings with it a commitment to be at a certain place at a certain time each week, which is increasingly inconsistent with the demands of a busy family.

It is with this backdrop that WSRT become involved in the delivery of the Women's Get Active Program (WGAP), a 10-week program that assists women in small groups to understand the 'drivers' behind making permanent changes to their lifestyle to eat healthily and be active on a regular basis. Part of the program involves helping women to find an activity that they enjoy and can incorporate into their weekly schedules. Usually this would be some sort of spontaneous recreational activity, rather than an organised team sport such as netball. WGAP has been run in Tasmania since 2004, and information on the program is attached to this submission.

Another interesting demographic change is that an increasing number of Australians are not 'joiners', that is, they are less inclined to formally join a team or another sporting organisation. This has been seen particularly by golf clubs, which for cash flow purposes are restructuring their membership bases by allowing more casual memberships.

In terms of trend analysis, it is of interest that the abovementioned ASC's 2004 *Annual Report* shows that of the top ten activities among the general population, the most popular is walking, with an increase of 41.7% since 2001, while netball has decreased by 7.9% over the same period.

Particularly in a state with changeable weather patterns, Tasmanians seem to decide spontaneously to engage in active family activities, such as bike rides and walks, if the weather for that day turns out to be fine, and WSRT considers that more should be done to support and promote options for spontaneous active recreation, rather than focusing mainly on structured team-based sports, to ensure an overall increase in physical activity.

- f) The remuneration, recruitment, retention and attrition of elite female athletes, including comparisons with elite male athletes**
- g) Retention of athletes competing in senior and open age state and national sporting competition, with possible strategies to retain female competitors in elite and sub-elite competition**

The Tasmanian Institute of Sport (TIS) is currently active in talent searches specifically targeted at girls and women for a number of sports, and it is understood that results have been mixed. Young girls who enjoy sports have tended to participate less once they reach puberty due to their lack of body confidence and other issues of self-esteem. To address this underlying issue, which may have some ongoing benefits to elite-level participation, WSRT will begin running WGAP for groups of secondary school-aged girls.

Below are three Tasmanian examples of successful elite women athletes:

- While working full-time as an accountant, Eleanor Patterson was on the Australian mountain bike team, competing at national and World Cup races. She still competes as an amateur at the masters level, with finishing times comparable to elite women competitors.
- Middle-distance runner Donna MacFarlane took a break from running for a number of years to start a family, and got back into fun runs last year. She competed in this year's Commonwealth Games athletics program and looks set to be a fixture in the national athletics team for a number of years.

It may be a matter of semantics, but the term 'sub-elite' seems to denigrate the validity of masters/veterans/age group level of competition. WSRT considers that some effort be made to encourage women to engage in sporting activities at the masters/veterans level, as opposed to the elite level, as this may well be a more realistic goal for the majority of women, in regard to fitting training time around work and family commitments.

The following are snapshots of successful masters and age-group athletes:

- Riz Wilkinson took up stoke improvement while her children were having swim lessons at the local pool. She is now one of the top ten masters level swimmers in Australia.
- Similarly, Emma Weitnauer, a successful junior ironman triathlete at the international level, has recently qualified as the only Tasmanian (male or female) delegate for the 2006 Hawaiian Ironman age group race after a few years' break and having a baby daughter.

As women respond favourably to role models of their own sex rather than of men, WSRT believes that success stories such as these should be widely publicised to show other women that it is possible to compete at the elite level and be a parent and/or work full-time. In contrast, the message that currently appears all too prevalent in the media is that considerable sacrifices are necessary to be an elite athlete.

**h) The financial status, success and viability of women's National League competitions, including strategies to improve these factors,**

Currently, the most successful and well-known women's national level teams in Tasmania would be its hockey team and rowing sides. The national league basketball team collapsed following a lack of financial support.

The main factor behind success of a national team is its financial viability. This in turn is based on the ability to attract sponsorship, which is based on a perception of value from expected media attention and brand awareness that would be obtained from coverage of that team's sporting events.

Unless the media increases its focus on women's sporting events, it is unlikely that there would be any change to the current low interest among large local businesses in sponsoring Tasmanian national league teams.

**3. The portrayal of women's sport in the media, including:**

**a) The role of the government to regulate and review the coverage of women's sport in the media (print, radio, and electronic)**

*Television*

In regard to television coverage, it is considered that this is one way to address the apparent current perception by advertising buyers and station programmers that women's sporting events in general are not worthy of media coverage (exceptions are mainly swimming, tennis, golf, as well as the Olympics and Commonwealth Games). This would be similar to the legislated radio 'Australian content' regulations, whereby radio stations must broadcast a proportion of Australian music every hour. Federal regulations could be initiated whereby a certain percentage of broadcast time every 24 hours would consist of women's sporting events. To ensure this does not solely take place during the 12 AM to 6 AM time slot, a minimum percentage would need to occur during the day and optimally during the evening.

Once this scheme was in place for a set period, say one year, a review of advertising rates could be carried out to see if there was any perceived increase in the value of viewer numbers to the advertising market. If there was no natural market reaction reflected by an increase in rates charged or bid, then it is proposed that in the public interest this set percentage should remain, as it has for Australian music content for several years.

In regard to local coverage of competitions, the local Australian Broadcasting Corporation channel does televise state women's hockey matches every other week on a Saturday afternoon, in addition to national netball matches during the week.

In television news coverage there is still a bulk of attention given to male athletes, even in fun runs, where the majority of the news item will be about the male winner and other place-getters, with a short comment about the female winner, usually without any 'vision' of who she was.

#### *Radio*

Local radio coverage in relation to sports is principally geared toward male sports, in relation to cricket and football scores.

#### *Print*

It is considered that in the northern and northwest Tasmanian newspapers, the *Examiner* and *Advocate* respectively, women do get additional coverage in the sporting pages, particularly cyclists. The *Mercury* has some coverage of weekend women's league hockey matches and lawn bowls competitions.

It is concern to WSRT that in a number of sporting magazines the majority of women that are featured are bikini models rather than female athletes, and that if a woman athlete is featured in an article it is more of a centrefold spread than treating these athletes with the same respect and legitimacy as the editors would treat their male counterparts.

### **b) The influences of pay television on the coverage of women in sport**

Pay television stations Fox 1, Fox 2 and ESPN show minimal coverage of women's sporting events, with the exception being those events listed under 3(a) above, plus occasional fitness and weightlifting contests and women's cycling races and gymnastics competitions. Other stations such as Fox Footy channels purely show men's football games from past seasons. Eurosportnews has some coverage of women's sporting events, but that channel consists of basically a 'tickertape' briefing of highlights and results.

The bulk of pay television coverage consists of men's football of various codes. As all three networks are programmed in Australia, it is proposed that the minimum female coverage initiative set out under 3(a) above also apply to these stations.

It is of interest that in the USA there are stations specifically geared toward the female audience, such as FIT-TV. It is not known whether Australian programmers have considered featuring such a station. While FIT-TV does not contain coverage of elite events, it would be of interest to women at an entry-level of fitness.

An advantage of women having access to fitness programs such as yoga or aerobics classes in the privacy (and low cost) of their homes helps to promote enjoyable physical activity. This assists women with caring responsibilities, on low income, or not employed and less able to access paid fitness options. We note that there are a couple of aerobics

and yoga programs on both free-to-air and pay television, and would like to see this continue.

**c) The promotion and publicity of women's National League competitions**

It is mainly left up to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to televise national league netball. The proposal under 3(a) could possibly improve this area.

**d) The financial status and success of women's National Leagues**

There clearly is a symbiotic relationship between sponsor interest, media coverage and financial success of women's national leagues. To inject some financial stability into teams, there would need to be one or more sponsors willing to assist in propping up any women's national leagues televised under the proposal mentioned previously.

**e) Strategies to improve the amount and quality of media coverage for women's sport**

Please refer to the proposal noted above. As well, WSRT is looking to appoint one of its own committee members to assist local media in identifying stories on women and girls in sport as role models, and to give exposure to their respective sport.

**4. Women in leadership roles in sport, including**

**a) The number and proportion of women in coaching, administrative and officiating roles;**

WSRT is encouraged by a growing trend of women taking up training, officiating and administrative roles in many local football clubs of all codes, as well as at the state and national level of the AFL.

WSRT is currently looking into implementing two statewide programs to firstly address the shortage of male and female officials across most sports and to address the severe shortage of female coaches. As well, we currently actively support women nominees in the annual awards for coaching, administration and officiating.

**b) The issues associated with women in leadership roles in both elite and grass-roots activities;**

Through its membership of the Australian Womensport and Recreation Association (AWRA), WSRT looks forward to implementing a program that AWRA is currently setting up, which will enable women to gain leadership and management skills through a series web-based training programs.

Our Schoolgirls' Breakfasts with the Sports Stars also draws heavily on improving the profile of women in leadership roles in various sports and recreational activities.



**c) Trends and issues for women in organisational leadership roles**

As community organisations of all kinds are discovering, there is a behavioural switch from large groups of persons wanting to join groups, including sporting organisations and participate actively in them. This is due to an increase in women taking full-time or part-time employment, previously retired persons going back to work on a part-time basis, well as a desire to spend more 'me time', or to engage in activities on a purely casual basis. This has resulted in a lower level of volunteers among non-government organisations generally.

**d) Strategies to improve the numbers of women in coaching, administration and technical roles**

Please refer to the initiatives mentioned previously under this section.

**Other matters**

Although 'recreation' is mentioned in the title of the Inquiry, it is not specifically addressed in the terms of reference, and would not seem to fall within 2(g) in regard to 'sub-elite' competition.

WSRT believes that many women and girls would see themselves as engaging in 'recreation' rather than 'sport' as they do not consider themselves competitive athletes, nor would they aspire to this outcome. As WSRT's objective is to encourage physical activity, regardless of whether it is competitive, we regard recreational activity as a legitimate pursuit that should be promoted to ensure the maximum uptake of women and girls in an active lifestyle, who would otherwise be uninterested in competitive sports.