

Senate inquiry into women in sport and recreation in Australia

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Background to RLSSA

The Royal Life Saving Society Australia (RLSSA) is Australia's leading water safety educator - a non-profit, volunteer community service organisation with a Branch in every State and Territory of Australia. Branches conduct courses in water safety, lifesaving, resuscitation, and lifeguarding and provide an extensive range of the highest quality resources. Over one million Australians undertake a Royal Life Saving course or program every year. Over 5 million Australians have achieved their Bronze Medallion since its inception, and over 10 million have learnt their essential water safety skills through Swim and Survive.

RLSSport

In addition to the above, for the past 40 years RLSSA has provided access and opportunities within the sport of pool lifesaving across the nation to all communities through the incorporation of pool lifesaving into the community objectives of RLSSA. All competitions and sport development activities are primarily pool based.

Health Benefits

It is the belief of RLSSA that sport provides the community with fun, health, fitness and social interaction opportunities. The health benefits of women participating in sport and recreation activities are reflected in these issues with professional national research telling us for many years now that weight, body image, and overall long term health benefits (cardiac, cholesterol, osteoporosis etc) are all improved in women that participate. In direct relation to RLSSA, our programs and competitions are accessible to women of all ages, with introductory programs to the Sport beginning at age 7 and continuing to the Masters program with our eldest female competitor at the recent Australian Pool Lifesaving Championships being 68 years of age and a world record holder in her age group.

Accessibility

Saying this however, RLSSA has noticed a distinct drop off in the Masters category of females aged between 25 – 40 years of age. Discussing this with Members of the RLSSA National Sport Committee and representatives of each State and Territory Branch it has been found that the familiar issue of women beginning their careers and / or raising a young family has contributed to this drop out rate. The Sport is still promoted to this age group but the cost and time involved in training for (hours as well as equipment needed) and traveling to State, National and International competitions makes sustained participation difficult.

To increase the participation of females aged over 25 years, RLSSA has implemented a modified Masters program within each State and Territory team with fewer events and some changes in



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the swimming distances. Length of competitions has also been found to be a barrier, as such RLSSA attempts to keep its major National competitions to a maximum of 4 days. The time of year also reduces participation, and as such competitions are conducted within school holidays and second tier events to 2 days over a weekend. In addition, there is a strong education and pathway program within the Sport to encourage the Open and Masters Competitors to continue on through to officiating or coaching once they do not wish to continue as an athlete. Our current Australian Team Manager, Under 19 Team Coach and Under 16 Team Manager are all females who were Open competitors and still compete in some Masters competitions.

In relation to socio – economic strata, RLSSA has recently implemented a Club Development Scheme that in conjunction with its Branches will provide small grants to those members of the community who wish to begin a pool lifesaving club. It is hoped that these grants will assist in the provision of equipment that would be costly on an individual basis and in other areas such as pool hire for community groups wishing to develop the sport of pool lifesaving in their area. In addition, many of the State Branches facilitate the development of new clubs and training squads with equipment for use in training until such time as they are able to acquire their own. Currently most State and National teams are funded through their respective Branch in an effort to ensure that the most appropriate team members are able to participate in the Sport and not just those that can afford it.

All RLSSA programs are open to women of Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically diverse backgrounds. RLSSA provides information to different cultural groups, and we are hoping that this will increase the number of people who are able to safely participate in swimming both recreationally and in competition. However, in terms of current participation in Sport there are only a very small percentage of the participants from diverse backgrounds. It is believed this is due to the nature of the Sport being aquatic and the historical nature of people from diverse backgrounds not having access to, nor a cultural association with participating in aquatics. There are programs currently being run by RLSSA for remote and indigenous communities, Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, and Sudanese. It is hoped that these programs will increase the level of participation from diverse populations. The programs are only in their early stages but a number of junior women athletes and coaches are being recognized as having made the progression from these programs into the Sport particularly in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. We hope to see a gradual increase in these numbers in the next few years.

In relation to 'Grass Roots' level of Pool Lifesaving, RLSSA has a very strong female percentage in comparison to males at a National Level. In the age group of 11-14years it is dominated by females with only 16% of the competitors in this age group at the last Australian Pool Lifesaving Championships being male (refer Table 1) . We are currently not sure why this has occurred and are hoping to conduct some research into this at the next Championships through questionnaires to all athletes, parents, coaches and managers.

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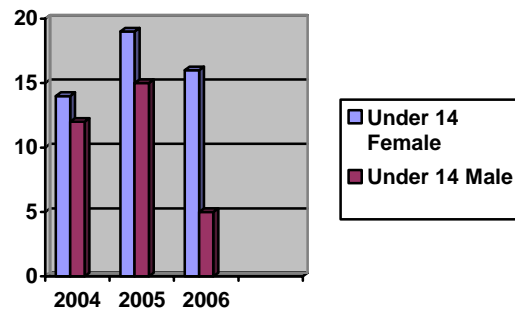


Table 1

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In relation to Open competitors (19-29years predominately) in the Australian Pool Lifesaving Championships, the percentage of women to men is fairly equal and slightly higher in the past 2 years. As stated earlier, in the age group over 25years there is a marked decrease of women however the Open age group numbers are fairly equal (refer Table 2)

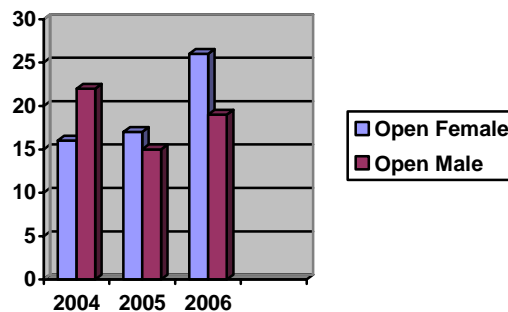


Table 2

The RLSSA National team is currently an equal sex team with either 4 or 5 females and males each depending on the competition being attended. RLSSA provides all women in pool lifesaving the opportunity to gain selection in the National team for these positions. In addition, all members of RLSSA are encouraged to apply for the positions of Team Managers and Coaches. Currently our three representative teams (Under 16, Under 19 and Open) all have one male and one female in the Team Management / Coach roles. This was purely due to the most appropriate persons being elected to the positions at the time. For all Junior or teams with members under the age of 18 if Team Management is of the same gender then a Team Chaperone is also appointed.

RLSSA has an equity policy for all of its programs in RLSSA Policy A001 "Equity and Equal Employment Opportunity". The aim of RLSSA's Equity policy is to promote an environment in which all individuals are treated with respect and dignity. The issues of social justice, equal opportunity and discrimination are important to RLSSA and the awareness of them is promoted throughout the organization. RLSSA believes equal opportunity strategies permit the development of special initiatives designed to overcome the results of long term discrimination



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suffered by certain groups.

Leadership

Currently, the RLSSA National Sport Committee is made up of an equal number of females and males. This is again purely due to the most appropriate persons being elected however we feel that with Team Management and the Sport Committee it shows that the proportion of women in RLSSA in leadership roles is equal to men and in many cases, particularly as officials high. Currently, our Chief Referee for competition and many of our key technical officials are women. RLSSA encourages and supports women to apply for and remain in coaching, administration and technical roles through course development and an increasingly thorough communication process. RLSSA is looking to conduct research into why the numbers of women in key roles look to be higher than men however due to limited funding in this area the research will be limited to a survey leading up to the 2007 Australian Pool Lifesaving Championships and capturing only those currently in the Sport.

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Media

The sport of Pool Lifesaving in Australia as a whole receives very little media attention due to a number of issues including its low profile nationally in comparison to Surf Lifesaving and Swimming and the small number of athletes that participate in comparison to these other aquatic sports. In its current form it is a very new sport originating from Europe and does not yet have the notoriety or public understanding in Australia of similar aquatic sports and there is not enough financial assistance to develop and market the programs for the media and to buy any space which would assist in increasing the profile of the sport. Any media attention is raised purely by contacting media to announce events and programs being launched. RLSSA regards Pool lifesaving as an 'everyone sport for life', and as such does not market the sport in terms of gender (i.e. does not class itself as a men's or women's sport). RLSSA is working towards increasing media attention to attract more competitors via the promotion of a new Grand Prix Event series, as well as highlighting the number of current female world record holders and champions, Sarah Windsor, Rebecca Crack and Barbara Pearce.

Conclusion

RLSSA recognizes that the Sport of Pool lifesaving is a 'boutique sport' that is predominantly run by a group of very dedicated volunteers who have limited time and resources available to them to develop and implement the issues discussed in this paper. RLSSA is continually striving to develop new strategies to improve and retain the numbers of women in coaching, administration and technical roles that allow for personal commitments, socio – economical status and cultural backgrounds. Currently the majority of funding for pool lifesaving in Australia to be able to continue to provide these strategies is self provided through the organization with a distinct lack of direct Governmental funding being provided to the organizations that provide the service. Without more direct funding, RLSSA will struggle to continue in what we see is a progressive organization for Women in Sport.

**Prepared by Penny Hodgers
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On behalf of the Royal Life Saving Society Australia**



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