

9<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**

It is widely recognized that young women are less physically active than young men and become increasingly so as they get older, in particular as they leave the structured environment of school and make the transition to adulthood (Services 1991; Commission 1999). Gender itself has been shown to be a constraint preventing women from participating in sport and recreation in a number of ways. In a systematic review of the U.K. literature, Rees et al. (2001) looked at young people's own views on physical activity and attempted to explain the significant gender differences which they found in young people's perceptions of physical activity. In general, young men found that physical activity fitted into their leisure time and were more likely to consider themselves physically active (regardless of their activity levels), whereas physical activity was not generally a feature of young women's usual leisure time (Rees, Rebecca et al. 2001). Coakley and White (1992) hypothesised that this may be because the pathways for transition from adolescence to adulthood for young women do not accommodate physical activity, due to a lack of activities through which 'femininity' could be confirmed or reaffirmed.

In Australia, such research has revealed the practices in many physical education classes to be profoundly gendered, producing constructions of young women as weaker, less enthusiastic and less skilled in sports than young men (Evans, J et al. 1996; Wright and Jan 1996; James and Kandy 1999; James and Kandy 2000; Park, Ryan et al. 2000).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom Flintoff and Scraton (2001) found that young women at high school, rather than being disinterested in physical activity as is commonly believed, enjoyed and were involved in a wide range of physical activity both in and out of school. However they also found that girl's choices were made within a negotiation of gender relations and that there are many contradictions and ambiguities for young women in sport. In particular they felt that PE programs were based on out-dated gendered relations and identities.

Young women who have left school but have not yet started a family make up a significant proportion of women in their late teens and twenties. They are population of women who are largely missed in the sport and recreation research unless they are participating in some form of organized sport. Located between two life "milestones", they are a diverse group of women whose lives are complex and busy. They are studying, establishing careers and managing relationships. They have established themselves as adults and are continuing to develop and negotiate new identities for adulthood.

My research therefore focused on young women aged 20-25 (who had not had children) and looked at if and how they chose to fit physical activity into their every day lives. I am interested in their motivations for their choices, and in particular, how gendered ideas around their body and femininity throughout the course of their lives may influence their physical activity participation. I have conducted life history interviews with 19 young women and analysed their conversations for common themes.

### **Constraints to sport and recreation**

Preliminary findings from my research revealed that all participants were active when they were younger, through teams and at school as well as in unstructured activities. Leaving school often marked a decline in general physical activity. For most it was the social aspect of physical activity which attracted them when they were younger (although for a minority it was also the competition and winning as well as the sensation of exercising). Opportunity for social sport and recreation decreased as they became older,

negotiating time pressure and friendship became more of an issue and non-physical social activities (shopping and consumption focused) became more desirable.

Several young women could pin-point a time in their teens when sport ceased to be fun and physical activity became about weight loss and body modification, often connected with a desire to appear sexually attractive. Most of these young women are still attempting to lose weight today, but some now maintain that it is for purposes of health rather than body modification that they now engage in physical activity, and that they do it for themselves rather than anyone else.

Many factors influenced the young women's current sport and recreation choices, they led busy lives, fitting in many different activities and had many competing needs and influences on both their time and their body. Part-time jobs, study, friends, partners, finances, injuries and fears all influenced the choices young women made regarding physical activity.

Nearly all the young women currently (at least intermittently) engaged in some sort of physical activity and nearly half (9/19) did so regularly. The majority of women who were regularly physically active did it for enjoyment or transport (or both). Only two of the young women who were regularly physically active were doing it in order to change their appearance through "body work". Five other women are unhappy with their physical appearance and are intermittently engaged in physical activity for body work, but not at the time of interviewing. Two other young women did not engage in regular physical activity as they felt they had no need to as they had busy social lives and were happy with their body the way it was – they felt the only reason they would need to become physically active was if they started to gain weight.

In spite of the fact that the majority of the young women had enjoyed the sociality of physical activity when they were younger, it was apparent that self objectification and failure to meet hetero-normative stereotypes for the "body beautiful" influenced the physical activity choices that many young women made. The young women who did not

conceive of exercise as bodywork were more likely to engage in ongoing physical activity for the physicality and sociality of the interaction. For the other young women, the work-like behaviour of physical activity could set up resentment about body work that would undermine motivation, or at least generate negative relations to body as a burden to be worked on and consequently affect their enjoyment and ultimately their sustained engagement in physical activity. The young women were aware of this and made some attempt to resist these stereotypes, but still often pursued them under the guise of health rather than beauty but never the less with a mechanical and fairly joyless dedication.

Understanding physical activity decisions in the context of young women's lives and leisure choices is a departure from much of the literature and my preliminary findings reveal that, among other things, young women's participation in sport and recreation is constrained by the way women are positioned in consumer culture as objects of desire. The dilemma is two-fold – many young women feel that physical activity (and therefore sport and recreation) are necessary only for body work. Therefore they either do not feel they need to exercise if they are happy with their body shape and size, or they want to work on their body in order to change it but find the mechanical nature of the work difficult to sustain. The young women who still enjoy physical activity for the sociality and physicality it affords them are more likely to continue to be regularly physically active.

Sport and recreation aimed at young women would therefore benefit from a de-emphasis on the ideas of women as objects and consumer items (boyfriends, clothes, bodies) as measures of success. Encouraging the camaraderie and sociality of sport, as well as the enjoyment of speed, strength and challenge as an acceptable and even desirable reality for young women (other than elite athletes) would serve to remove some of the gendered constraints young women face with regard to sport and recreation.

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